

# Techtalk: Online Learning Communities

By David C. Caverly and Lucy MacDonald

In this year's "Techtalk" columns we have compared types of asynchronous conferencing when teaching an online course. In type 1 discussions, students ask questions of the tutor or instructor, but no interaction is provided between students. Giving individual attention to students is beneficial but time consuming for the tutor or instructor, and it does not necessarily create student independence or higher levels of thinking. In type 2 discussions, interaction is encouraged between students, but the discussion is controlled by the teacher. Although the teacher can lead students to higher levels of understanding, there is, again, little chance for student independence.

In this column, we'll explore type 3 discussions to foster higher level thinking and create independence within asynchronous online courses. Here, instructors create an online learning community (OLC) via a threaded discussion in which students can collect, evaluate, and create their own learning strategies.

## Creating an Online Learning Community

Learning communities have been shown to be effective for almost 20 years (Luvaas-Briggs, 1984; Tinto & Russo, 1994). Recently, these learning communities have been adapted to the online environment for graduate students as they reached higher levels of understanding (Moller, Harvey, Downs, & Godshalk, 2000). Much of the success of OLCs comes from productive, online threaded discussions. Aviv (2000) has reasoned that these discussions are productive because of both the think-time students are given in order to reach higher levels of understanding and the cooperative grouping inherent in a threaded discussion (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

In a research study with undergraduates, Aviv (2000) found asynchronous threaded discussions, when orchestrated appropriately, created a group orientation as individuals helped each other reach a goal; encouraged students to invest energy to support each other and to have a high value to achieve; and created positive interpersonal relationships as group members engaged each other for assistance, encouragement, acceptance, and caring. He concluded that this rich learning environment occurred through four educational processes coordinated by the instructor but accomplished by students in groups. These four processes provided the foundation for an OLC.

First, **response processes** move students from nonresponding, to responding only to the instructor, to responding to other learners. We reviewed these in our previous "Techtalk" columns.

Second, Aviv (2000) advocates promoting advanced **reasoning processes**. In a developmental classroom, these processes require students to move from *simple clarification* by which they identify the problem or issue—such as how to find a main idea in reading—to *deep clarification* by which they identify details and beliefs/assumptions about these problems/issues. Next, students move to *inferencing* as they attempt to solve the problem/issue via induction, deduction, or algorithms in a guided practice environment. Here, they also move to *judgement*; at this level group-based decisions are made, appreciated, and evaluated and content is criticized. Finally, they move to *strategy*

*production* in which a plan is generated during independent practice in other college reading tasks.

Third, Aviv (2000) proposes encouraging **supportive interactive processes**. These occur when every member helps each other, gives feedback on processing, reflects on the effectiveness of the community, and advocates effort. Develop these social skills by initially having warm-up exercises for students to get to know each other, to develop the ability to communicate unambiguously, to accept and support each other, and to constructively resolve conflicts. Early on, lead students to assess each others' talents and time commitments as they learn who in their OLC can help when problems of prior knowledge, skill, or technology arise.

Fourth, Aviv (2000) argues **social processes** occur. These provide group cohesiveness which moves students from being educational outsiders to insiders as they become part of the academic community (Wegerif, 1998). Arrange this in an OLC by providing activities which encourage *positive interdependence* in which the individual student succeeds if the group succeeds, assignments are group projects, labor is divided, learning tools and information are shared, roles are assigned, and a group reward is given. Still, individual accountability is necessary: Every member has responsibility for completing their share of the work, documenting their contribution to the discussion, and being individually tested.

To develop these social processes, Brown (2001) has found three developmental stages. The first stage is *community building*. Group members need to make acquaintances by finding similarities in location, academic background, commitment, motivation, and circumstance. They also need to feel their personal and academic needs will be met and provide help to allocate time appropriately as they balance the requirements of an online course against family and job demands (Ragan, 1998). A second stage is *community acceptance*. Here the group confers a sense of membership through validating individual members' opinions and ideas as being worthy information resources. Encourage group membership by providing an extended threaded discussion on an important issue through which all group members can demonstrate their competence and knowledge. The third stage is *camaraderie*, occurring after a long-term, intense association between group members. This often occurs after several online courses taken as a cohort group and through interactions outside of class through personal e-mail and even face-to-face meetings.

Brown (2001) suggests this process is a movement from novice to veteran in both cognitive strategy and time allocation. To foster this growth, provide experiences for novices to initially master the technology so it becomes invisible. Sending and receiving the first response to the threaded discussion alleviates much anxiety, and identifying group members or help desks with technology expertise aids as well. Next, students must become comfortable with learner-centered pedagogy and the responsibility being placed on them. Activities that move novices along are structured classes; short assignments and brief deadlines; frequent interaction and validation from the instructor; as well as assignments that require them to discuss expectations, individual goals, and life and professional experiences. "Foregrounding"—which provides an early discussion of what an OLC is, what can be gained from it, how it is built, how they can benefit from people resources, and how they can support each other—assists this growth. These metacognitive awarenesses should be built again at midsemester and at the end of the course. Providing frequent and meaningful feedback and validation for novices creates better collaboration (Ragan, 1998). Veterans, on the other hand, must allow novices to join the group by providing support, encouragement, and modeling expected behavior. Care must be taken to reduce the inevitable cliques that veterans drift into.

## Online Developmental Learning Communities

One way we have built a developmental OLC draws from the work of Duffy, Dueber, and Hawley (1998). After assigning students to groups and moving them to a level of comfort with technology and the task demands of learner-centered pedagogy, we begin with a prompt to each group to engage their prior knowledge about a particular reading strategy: for example, recognizing main ideas. Next, we model a learning strategy for identifying main ideas through webpage demonstrations and textbook explanations. All students in the groups then apply what they understand about the strategy in a freshmen-level text with explicit main ideas.

Students are then assigned to 4 roles within their OLC. The first role is the **proposer**: A student posts a response to the threaded discussion board "proposing" what he or she understands about the strategy and initiating a dialogue among peers using questions as catalyst (e.g., Describe in detail what you did as you applied this strategy? Overall, how effective was this strategy for satisfying this task? Where did the strategy not work? What did you do to adjust the strategy to get it to work?). If the discussion lags because certain members are not participating, the proposer's role is also to encourage these members to join the discussion.

The next role is the **opposer** in which a student posts a response playing "devil's advocate" and questioning everything that is said by the proposer (e.g., Where is the proposer confused, not practical, or incomplete?). The opposers' role is to make sure everyone in the group understands and accepts the strategy application.

The third role is the **monitor**: A student reads the responses from two other groups and posts to the home group what other groups have come to understand about the strategy. The monitor helps the group understand when they are "on-target" as well as what is different between groups: the relationship between their answers and the answers of the other groups.

The fourth role is that of the **summarizer**: A student posts a response summarizing the conclusions of the group at the end of the week and evaluates the effectiveness of the discussion, the participation of the group members, and the quality of the discussion. The summarizer posts a response to the discussion board requesting the group's validation. Finally, the summarizer posts to a General Discussion Board for the other groups to read.

Finally, all students are required to apply the strategy to a required reading in an independent practice activity, adapting it to their own needs. Each then posts a response to a content-specific discussion board, sharing how the strategy works, explaining any adaptations that were made, and evaluating its effectiveness.

The roles are rotated each week, guiding students through applying the strategy with a study group and discussing their understanding as they attempt to apply it. To encourage efficiency, each role player completes their postings according to a predetermined schedule that allows the other group members time to complete their tasks.

Through the OLC, students construct their own understanding of how strategies work. They come to understand how to adapt the strategy to fit different learning tasks as learning communities are built. Using these research-based pedagogical strategies, OLCs can be created that allow students to assist each other toward learning strategy competence.

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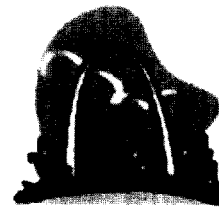
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