Community in Online Classes – a Model of Practice

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Both higher education and k-12 professional development are changing, as classes and workshops are moving online. Online professional development is a rapidly expanding field, as organizations across the country provide opportunities for educators to join together to talk and learn from experts and from each other. Mailing lists (such as DEOS, WWW-EDU, and others) contain frequent messages to let educators know about these opportunities, and online community meeting places such as TAPPED_IN provide places for educators to meet and discuss. A challenge is to acquaint teachers with these opportunities and to prepare them to become active participants in these and other online communities. Online classes, for both preservice and inservice teachers, provide an opportunity to meet this challenge.

This paper will present a model, grounded in literature and in practice, for developing community among preservice and in-service teachers in online classes, as a way to foster learning and to extend it beyond the end of the course. Feedback from students during and after participation in online courses will be shared, as they evaluate their role in the creation, development, and maintenance of learning communities in various online classes. Students have compared the presence of community in online classes with that in traditional face-to-face classes, and these findings have implications that may suggest ways to increase the sense of community in all classes.

Communication is key to the development of communities, online or otherwise, and methods of communication will be discussed in the paper and demonstrated in the presentation, where we will connect to a course management system and talk with current graduate students via chat, review some of their WebBoard postings, and provide a WebBoard which session participants may use to ask questions of or share ideas with these graduate students after the session.

The paper will include descriptions of this model and of activities to promote the development of community. Comments from students will also be included. This paper (and session) should particularly benefit those individuals who are interested in developing, teaching, or taking online courses, workshops, or other professional development activities, and in preparing preservice and in-service teachers to do the same.