A Different Approach to Online Learning Communities

For students at a certain competency based online university, self-directed learning is not only the ideal it is a necessity. In order to graduate, students need to prove their competency in multiple learning domains by passing rigorous assessments related to each domain. Students that do not have previously developed competence in these domains must rely on their own self-directed learning as they make their way through the curriculum on their way to gaining competence. Students interact with a Course of Study that identifies various types of learning resources available (including, but not limited to: textbooks, online resources and tutorials, and online learning communities) to help the student gain competence. Students work through the program self-directed essentially in isolation and without vibrant online learning communities the program would be nothing more than a correspondence program. However, since the university does not offer nor teach courses in the traditional sense (neither face-to-face or online), the structure and management of these online learning communities needed to take a different direction from the traditional higher education online learning communities that are usually developed in a course management style setting. These online communities are a sort of hybrid combination of typical higher education online learning communities and online tech support help forums. Instead of using a typical course management system platform, the community structure is run on the ClearspaceX platform from Jive Software which was designed for customer social networking using Web 2.0 tools such as blogs, wiki documents and discussion threads, not unlike an online tech support forum. However, where these learning communities differ from a typical tech support forum is that the purpose is to facilitate student learning through co-construction of knowledge. To that
end, each community has a designated faculty facilitator who uses tools such as blogs, documents, discussion threads, weekly text-based chat or conference calls and instant messaging technology to help facilitate student learning. Each facilitator is a subject matter expert in the domain covered by the community and is intimately familiar with the material covered in the curriculum and is usually additionally responsible for the maintenance of the Course of Study that is provided to students for that learning domain.

This best practices presentation will take a brief look at why this type of learning community was chosen, how these communities were launched, the struggles encountered trying to get all parties to embrace this different kind of learning community and the strategies currently being undertaken to try to help ensure that these learning communities are successful.