In the Classroom 57
Building Online Learning Communities

SEE THE SHOW NOTES AT: *http://tubarksblog.com/itc57*

Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, but you're hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it. If I sound like I have got a cold, well, I have a cold, I apologize ahead. I tried to work it out, but it seems that it wants to linger on, but let's get into our topic of the day.

This week we're going to look at building online learning community or building communities in your online course. If your course does not have a human presence where people are exchanging ideas back and forth, pretty much you have a correspondence course. It is the human aspect, especially dialogue, which ties it all together. I think it's absolutely essential to have this in an online course. Otherwise, folks are feeling isolated, they're disengaged, and that's not really what we want.

Why did I choose this topic for this particular time? One, I've been asked to write a chapter for an online book dealing with online learning communities and I thought this would be an opportune time to also share what I'm finding with you at the same time. The other reason is I have witnessed countless courses that are nothing but correspondence course and it's a shame having been a student who did most of the work online, I can tell you that these courses are just slogs to get through.

I would very much rather be engaged in dialogue as part of the course rather than just read, take a quiz, do an assignment. Read, take a quiz, do an assignment. The dialogue piece is what pulls it all together and also increased online community in a classroom, results in increased retention, reduction in isolation, and increase student satisfaction with the course, especially with online courses.

That's why I decided to pop this in right at this moment. How I've pulled this together is really framed around the community of inquiry. I'm using that framework to pull it all together and this was developed by Randy Garrison and this idea of this community of inquiry framework. It says social constructivist model for learning and it works very much in online and blended learning environments, but it has three primary elements. I'm going to tell you a little bit about each of those elements.

The first is teaching presence. Teaching presence's absolutely critical to these online courses. It focuses on the design of the course and you've heard me talk, if you've listened to past episodes of the importance of good instructional design and building online courses, and this is one of those starting points is that having that teacher presence where they have shaped the course where it's logically arranged and they present the material in a logical manner where students- it helps students get it.

The other part of teaching presence is that the instructor is focusing on facilitating the course in the activity. That it's not so much sage on the stage where they're upfront and lecturing, but really introducing the different elements and keeping everybody on track and moving in the right direction. That also means that the instructor must be an active participant in the course.

Students note when an instructor is absent, they also know when an instructor is present and they much prefer to have the instructor as part of the course. The idea of an online course is not something that you're just going to build, turn it on and walk away. That's not the idea of an online course, not a good online course, a good online course, the instructor is also involved. Self-directed learning, that is something entirely different.

When you're building standalone courses, that's something entirely different. If you're building an online course where you have a cohort of students working their way through it, then the instructor also needs to be present. The instructor is basically the orchestra leader, guiding the students through the content that they have pulled together. That is teaching presence.

The second part is social presence. This is the human element. This is where you get students and the instructor, everybody basically engaged in dialogue where there's open communication, there's group cohesion, there's trust-building, and you're basically making connections. This is where the dialogue really takes place. Then finally you have the cognitive presence.

Through the cognitive presence. This is where students are building meaning around the content and they're doing it through reflection and dialogue. Learning happens through dialogue. It's either dialogue with fellow students, dialogue with the instructor or dialogue with the content, but it's all about this idea of dialogue. Those are the three elements of this community of inquiry framework. Teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence.

What I'm going to do is we're going to talk about some strategies on how you can use or how you can put those different presence or networks into action. A lot of this is built on the back of universal design for learning. I've also the quality rubric that I talked about Oscar, that this has this all weaved into it. You may hear some things that we talked about before when we talked about universal design for learning as well as quality review. Let's get to it.

Strategies for building an online community. Let's focus on the teaching presence. In the teaching presence, one of the first things that you want to is you want to welcome students to your course. You want to do it in a variety of ways. You want to do it in text, but also in video where they can see you, they can get a feel for who you are as a human. Part of that is also providing them with an orientation through the course.

They know how to navigate it, that they're comfortable with the course, how it's laid out, what your expectations. You're doing that and the teacher's present. Part of that is spelling out learning objectives and learning outcomes, making sure that they're clear and measurable and that you're aligning the activities in the course with those

learning objectives and make sure that you're also spelling them out, that each of the modules should spell those things out, let students know what they're learning in each of the module.

You also want to make sure that your course is logically created, logically arranged that students won't get lost and won't get frustrated and making sure other things that you want to do is make sure that your instructions are well-written. If you are referencing something, suppose you have more detailed instructions on how to do the discussion, make sure that you have a link to those in your discussions as you're creating them so you can link back to where those more detailed instructions are.

Other things that you want in the teaching presence is to make sure that expectations are clear about feedback, about how to submit assignments that when an instructor will provide feedback. Speaking of feedback when you do pro provide feedback, text is always a good way to do this, but you may also want to experiment and use audio tech feedback or video feedback.

This is shown to be very powerful in getting your messages across to students, but also, once again, it adds that human element to it. In your course, you need to provide frequent and appropriate ways that you can assess student mastery of content, but also give them opportunities to practice. That should be part of your course. As I mentioned, multimedia, use it as much as possible. Just mix it up. Not the same thing over and over. Read text, take the test, read text, take the test, but include images, include audio and animations or video to build that up.

Make sure that in this teacher presence that you also show off your unique capabilities. What makes you unique? It's your research, certain things that you're doing about research. There's also other things. I've gotten to know faculty and in their bio's they talk about the love of hiking or reading or gaming or what have you. Make sure that you pull that into your course when you are sharing things. Share those little anecdotes. At the beginning of this episode, I mentioned that I was kicking a cold around. Well, that is letting you know that I'm human, that I'm suffering from these things too.

When your dog or cat jumps up on your lap, that adds to it. That's part of that idea of being human. When you're building a course, also establish and enforce netiquette rule and netiquette basically those are the rules of engagement in a discussion. Now you don't want somebody to bully somebody else. You set some guidelines and parameters where students, they know how to respond and it's always great to model this behavior that you should like, for example, introductions.

One of the things that we're going to talk about is having an icebreaker, some introduction of students. You also should participate in that. Let them know who you are and things that you enjoy, but also model how you want them to respond. Making sure they have the right collaboration platform. Now, very often we have a learning management system that is presented to us. That doesn't mean we always have to use it. If you find out Slack is a better place to go have collaboration, then you go to Slack or if you go to create a Facebook group, create a Facebook group and have collaboration there.

Find the right platform for you and your students. Make sure that you are available to your students, that they have a way to get hold of you so they are not stuck and it's important that you respond back to them. They are one of your prime responsibilities during that period of time. Then also lastly for teacher presence, use announcements as a way of encouraging and setting reminders so you can keep students on track.

The teacher presence, like I said, was really about setting the design of the course but also facilitating the unfolding of the course as it's going along. That's the teacher presence. Moving on, we are going to talk about ways, strategies for building community using social presence. Tied in with the teacher presence is having a welcome and get started content that you're basically setting the pace, having an introduction right up front to help guide students along.

One of the other things that I strongly recommend that you do is have the students update their avatar. Now they don't necessarily have to have a picture of themselves. That's always nice, but something that you can differentiate them from the other egg heads. Typically, it looks like a little egg that are in the course, so have them create an avatar. This helps with mapping out who is involved in the discussion.

It works really well in your mind. This is a tangent here, but high-rise buildings, one of the things that they do in order to reduce confusion when you go to all the different floors is to have different artwork and plants on the different floors. You know visually that you are on the appropriate floor. If everything looks the same, people tend to get confused. The same thing happens in a discussion. If everybody has the same icon for their avatar, their pixel representation, then you get confused on who is saying what.

One of the other pieces that's really important is having students or students having opportunity to get to know their instructor as a person, what their likes are, what their dislikes are, having students be able to do that. Anytime that you're communicating, if you can weave in just a little glimpse of yourself in those that is useful for students. It comes out in your discussions that based on your research, this is what you found or everyone has an agenda. When we create a course, they're not just sterile objects. We bring experiences to it, we bring our agenda to it.

This podcast has my agenda weaved all through it. The things that I like, the things that I don't like that I will mention. Well, that's part of being human in a course. Part of your course should have activities that build a sense of class, community, and support open communications and get to know people and establish trust. Having an icebreaker, having an introduction forum where students can introduce themselves.

Raymond Wlodkowski, he talked about this, the importance of students being able to talk about their expertise in accord. Another thing that you may want to consider is offering virtual office hours. In episode 53 I talked specifically about virtual office hours and some of the best practices for that but just offering them. When you are holding normal face-to-face office hours, turn on Zoom and have a virtual office hours that you let students know.

Not everyone can physically meet during the office hours that you attend. One of the things that I do when I'm grading at night, I'll turn the office hours on and students have an opportunity to come check-in. For each week, ideally, you should have- that you create a video or announcement, something that you recap the course that you talk about what- maybe review the content, the highlights, the key points, talk about what's coming up, anything that struck you as great or needs to be improved.

That's something they get to once again, another opportunity to see you, especially if it's in video. When in the discussions, we want to tap into the individual, the more that you can tap into what an individual's experiences are, the stronger the link it will make to the material that you're talking about. The discussions that I have in my course, I want to know what they're thinking, how it relates to them, how can they apply it. They get an opportunity to share these anecdotes and experiences and what they believe.

As much as possible, use the student's name, not to the point where it becomes artificial and fake, but definitely use the student's name when you're referring to their contributions and tie back to them. In addition to your normal discussions, another discussion you may want to create is a student lounge. This is a place where they can just go develop community, ask questions among themselves, share ideas. That is something I always put in my courses. I also create another one for questions and answers that I prefer that they ask questions in a public format as opposed to personal.

Naturally, if it's private, I'll take it personal, but ideally, more than one person is having the same question. Asking it in a more public format, I can address more people at one time and they're contributing to the community. For your online discussions, ideally, you probably don't want to get past 10 to 15 students in an online discussion. It can become overwhelming.

I've received comments in previous courses that when the discussion group was too large, it was unmanageable and students got frustrated. Reducing it down to 10 to 15 students at the most is quite useful. If you're going to do group projects, group activities, you want to reduce it even further down to four to six students. Before I mentioned that you tried to use the student's names when referencing their contributions. Also, if you can get to know your students, your learners, have them fill out a survey, take some notes regarding what they've commented on in their introductions. That way you can also weave it in and make it more personal.

Then finally in the social presence area, make sure that you include everyone. Don't touch on something everybody says throughout the discussion. That doesn't mean you have to respond to every post. That becomes overwhelming, especially for the instructor because you could have hundreds and hundreds of posts. Make sure that while you're going through there that you're not leaving somebody out.

All right, so getting down to the last part, the cognitive presence. The cognitive presence as a reminder, this is really talking about the content and getting students to reflect on it and to dialogue about it in order to help them build meaning, construct their knowledge. Things that you want to do is make sure that you have a variety of engaging resources that can help them learn about the content.

Different ways that you're delivering the content, different formats that they're receiving it, different ways that they can engage. Just try to find- kind of mix it up. You're tapping into everyone. Part of that universal design for learning, if you can create a text track of your content, that is great. Also create a multimedia track. That gives students an option of which track that they want to follow or they can jump back and forth.

Part of this cognitive presence is you trying to develop higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. You want to get in activities that allow the different students in the groups to analyze and critically reflect on them and work as a team to work through the problem. You want to try to build things that are very interactive and require a lot of collaboration. Ideally, you want to identify these big ideas you want students to take away from your course and so you're going to build major activities so you can assess those things and to be able to grab those.

Start at the end and work your way back. At the end of the course, what do I want them to know? Then build activities that will require them to get to that point. That way you'll know that they're on track, but also consider these ideas where you're going to want them to be able to collaborate and interact and that they have frequent opportunities for testing their own knowledge and getting feedback from you.

The big things are multi representations of the knowledge. This is really focused on the content and making content that gives them something to think about and they can build that knowledge as they're discussing it with their classmates.

A lot of different tools that can help you get there. Here's some tools for building community. First is a video. I'm just going to list these tools. Each has their how to use it. That's beyond what this episode is about, but different tools. One is creating video. Camtasia. Camtasia is a great program at a good cost that will allow you to create some professionally designed videos that are well within an individual's range for building videos. I like Camtasia, I use it quite a bit.

Screencastify and GoVideo are browser add-ons, extensions that allow you to rapidly create a video, allows you to do a screencast of something, or you can just capture the gist of capturing the webcam. I use that quite a bit. Providing feedback. I'll walk students through something, so I'll just-- If they're confused, I'll do a screencast and get them back on track.

For some classes, you may want to bring them in all at one time. So, a synchronous opportunity. The tool of choice that I use is called Zoom from zoom.us and that allows me to bring all the students in at one time. I've also done this on Skype, but I prefer Zoom and then other ways for multimedia collaboration. Just with the written word, Google docs, any of the Google applications allow students to work together on projects as a team. I think that's a really powerful tool. Allows you to make comments but also allows you to work real-time.

There is an add-on to that I just learned about, it's called Kaizena and it allows an instructor to go in and put an audio note into a Google doc. I have to go experiment with that, but that sounds pretty cool to me. Then finally, VoiceThread. VoiceThread is a tool where students can collaborate in a multimedia fashion by adding audio and

video and imagery and to give their input. I know a lot of instructors at my college are using VoiceThread with great success.

Well, that is ways that you can enhance or build an online learning community. Like I said, I focused it around the community inquiry framework, which talks about teacher presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. I would encourage you to take a look and weave some of these ideas into your course. Great place to find those ideas. Once again, quality review will open you up to a lot of those ideas, but also universal design for learning has a wealth of different ways that you can enhance your courses that really focus on these different elements. With that, I'm going to tell you about my book.