

Strategies for Collaborative Learning

Building e-Learning and Blended Learning Communities

Soren Kaplan, Ph.D.
Managing Director, iCohere

How many times over the past few months have you heard that “communities” are the wave of the future? And how many times have you wondered how this common but ambiguous concept might actually apply to *your* organization? If you answered *more than once* to either of these questions, you’re definitely not alone. In a recent survey of almost 2,000 learning professionals, “online community” was ranked as one of the top three most important components of e-learning portals¹.

Our goal here is twofold. First we will cut through the ambiguous term “community” by sharing a model that describes a number of practical applications for including community as part of your learning strategy. Second, we will outline specific strategies and approaches for building learning-focused communities.

How does “Community” Relate to Learning?

According to *Webster’s Dictionary*, a community is “any group living in the same area or having interests, work, etc. in common.” While communities have existed since the beginning of humankind, the growing interest around the concept today is largely a result of the breakdown of the geographic assumption underlying this simple definition. Most communities – whether online or off – share a number of qualities and characteristics: they are held together by distinct operating norms; members are distinguished by their formal and informal roles; trust must be built to ensure quality interactions; and a shared sense of purpose serves as the glue that bonds the community together. Communities focused on learning, in our opinion, are only “communities” if they possess these characteristics and engage people in a learning process *over time*.

Arguably, the term “community” has become an ambiguous buzzword. In many instances, the concept has become synonymous with online discussion boards and chat rooms. When put into a learning context, however, community can be a vehicle for connecting people to other people’s stories, experiences, and mentoring, which results in accelerated learning and the sharing of “tacit” knowledge² within an organization.

Here are three reasons why you should consider building community into your overall learning strategy:

- Approximately 70% of what an employee needs to know for success is learned *outside* of formal training³ (e.g., on the job, through mentoring, etc.). ***Communities extend learning by creating a structure whereby people can learn from “informal” interactions.***
- Tacit knowledge – the informal knowledge about “how things really get done around here” and ultimately, how to be successful in one’s job – is extremely difficult to capture, codify and deliver through discrete learning objects and traditional training programs. ***Communities are a way to elicit and share practical know-how that would otherwise remain untapped.***
- Creating and structuring opportunities for people to network, communicate, mentor, and learn from each other can help capture, formalize, and disseminate tacit knowledge, and thus accelerate learning and organizational effectiveness. ***Communities become a boundaryless container for knowledge and relationships that can be used to increase individual effectiveness and a company’s overall competitive advantage.***

For most learning professionals today, the question isn’t *if* building communities will deliver value to the organization, but rather *what kind of community* is needed and what are the steps involved in building it.

Types of Learning Communities

For communities to yield results, they must be integrated fully into one’s core learning strategy – from creating e-learning content that connects to community technologies and processes to extending face-to-face training into blended learning solutions that include pre- and post-event online community-building. From our experience working as employees of large corporations, as external consultants, and as learners ourselves, we have identified two forms of learning communities – e-Learning Communities and Blended Learning Communities. Within these, there are five ways to apply the community concept to foster collaborative learning.

e-Learning Communities

e-Learning communities are groups of people bonded together entirely through technology. These communities never convene physically – their interactions and learning begin, and are carried out entirely through technology (on the web, through conference calls, via video conferencing, etc.).

e-Training Communities

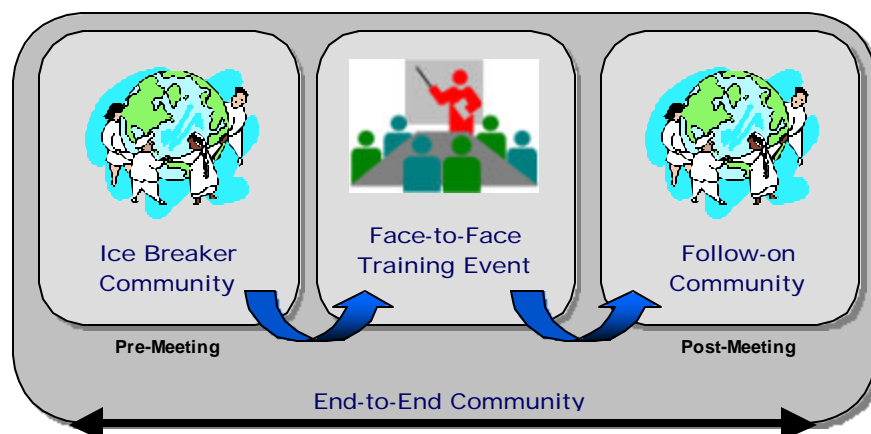
e-Training communities promote virtual collaboration that is focused on addressing a specific topic area, usually supported by one or more online learning tools and media. For example, a group of learners may be assigned to a cohort that meets together in a one hour web conference, are assigned to view an interactive CBT sometime during the following three days, and are then facilitated through a process whereby they work together online to address questions and issues raised by the CBT, and learn from each other's own stories and experiences.

Online Conference Communities

Through integrating live web conferencing, streaming video, narrated PowerPoint presentations, and facilitated discussions, it becomes possible to deliver a "conference", entirely online, over several days or even a several week period. Just like face-to-face professional or industry conferences, when facilitated artfully, online conferences allow learners to receive compelling content from presenters, ask questions, network with other attendees, and obtain practical resources and information. Unlike face-to-face conferences, however, people can attend from anywhere and at anytime that fits their schedule, which is ideal for a geographically dispersed group. The overall costs of an online event are far less than its physical equivalent, especially when factoring in travel time and related expenses. Online conference communities typically have life spans of a few days to a few weeks.

Blended Learning Communities

Blended learning communities integrate online learning and face-to-face meetings. There are two core assumptions that underlie approaches to building blended learning communities: (1) that the deeper the personal relationships between learners, the richer the collaborative learning experience; and (2) that relationships between learners may be strengthened through structuring group interactions (using technology) before and/or after an face-to-face training event.



“Ice Breaker” Blended Learning Communities

Ice Breaker Communities involve pre-event activities to “break the ice” prior to a face-to-face meeting. Many consultants and trainers facilitate “warm-ups” or “ice breakers” to kick off meetings, the goal being to establish norms, ground rules, and an esprit de corps among participants. From a group dynamics perspective, ice breakers accelerate a group’s ability to *form, storm and norm* so that they are able to more quickly and effectively *perform* the given task at hand⁴. By engaging learners in structured introductions and pre-work through web conferencing, online discussions, and conference calls prior to a face-to-face training, it becomes possible to accelerate openness, sharing, and collaborative learning when participants finally come together in-person.

Follow-on Blended Learning Communities

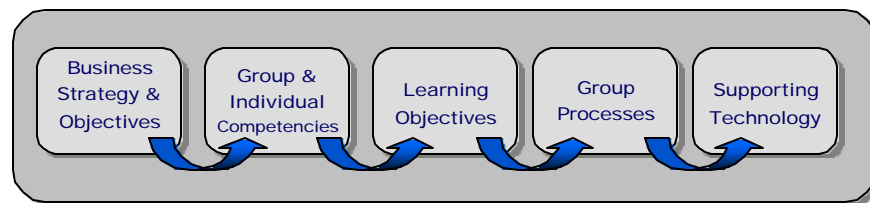
Follow-on Communities extend relationships and learning following a face-to-face training event. Rather than end the learning experience when participants walk out the door, a structure and process is provided to keep people engaged, connected and productive for a designated period of time. Follow-on communities can serve as vehicles for sharing group projects, discussing findings from field research, and receiving mentoring from peers and instructors. Here’s an example: A group meets for a two-day technical course where a substantial amount of information is shared. Individuals leave the course feeling a great deal smarter, but many questions arise when they get back to their jobs and try to apply their new knowledge. A follow-on community provides peer and instructor feedback and support for six weeks after the two-day training event – questions are answered, coaching is provided, and learning is captured and shared across the group.

End-to-End Blended Learning Communities

End-to-end communities include both Ice Breaker and Follow-on learning activities. Some having likened the end-to-end community to a “digital sandwich⁵” since the face-to-face meeting is typically “sandwiched” between group interactions supported by e-learning and collaboration tools and technologies. A leadership development program, for example, might include an ice-breaker community to provide pre-work and introduce participants, a face-to-face experiential workshop to help clarify and define individuals’ development objectives, and a follow-on community focused on coaching and mentoring to overcome challenges as participants work toward achieving their development objectives.

Creating Collaborative Learning Communities

When creating collaborative learning communities, community builders should consider much more than just technology. Ideally the conversation begins by clarifying the business' strategic objectives and how these translate into group-level and individual competency requirements. From there, learning objectives may be defined that support competency gaps. Group processes to achieve the learning objectives then become clear, along with the appropriate technology to support these processes.



While differences between online and in-person facilitation definitely exist, many seasoned trainers and facilitators discount their skills when it comes to online community building. Just as any trainer might facilitate introductions, set expectations, and ensure equal participation, these same activities (and other common group processes) can and should be applied in the online world. A number of approaches can help engage learners in collaborative online learning environments. We have categorized these under the broad headings of *people*, *group processes*, and *supporting technology*. While not all of the following design principles may apply to a given community, our framework is intended to serve as a basic starting point when creating e-learning or blended learning collaborative environments.

People

Clearly Define Roles – Describe the relationship between the different roles in the community (including the instructor, subgroups, group leaders/facilitators, and individual learners) and outline their responsibilities and interdependencies.

Create Sub-Groups – Create sub-groupings of learners that have their own online space for small group learning activities and group project collaboration.

Support Individuality – Provide a way for learners to create personal profiles that contain their photos and salient information to the topic at hand (e.g., for a course on marketing, for example, a profile item might include something fun such as “favorite innovative television commercial”).

Group Processes

Establish Operating Norms – Provide guidelines for online (and offline) etiquette and obtain agreement on the behavior that will lead to successful group and individual learning outcomes (e.g., everyone logs in three times a week, everyone posts one question and one response on the discussion board, etc.).

Foster an Environment of Trust – Establishing and aligning learners’ expectations around shared objectives, including how individuals’ contributions contribute to the broader success of the group, helps create an environment characterized by sharing and openness. Explicitly and collaboratively defining the common values and behavior that will contribute to achieving the shared goals of the group also builds trust.

Create a Buddy System

Keeping learners engaged and participating in an online environment can be challenging. By creating a “buddy system” whereby pairs or groups of learners are responsible for joint participation and contribution (co-development of a case study, alternating postings in the discussion area, etc.), a support structure can be created to keep people engaged.

Technology

Provide an Integrated and Easy-to-Use Collaborative Learning Environment

Online learning environments come in many shapes and sizes. Some typical features of these web-based environments include:

Synchronous Tools	Asynchronous Tools	Content Integration	Document Management
Audio Conferencing Web Conferencing Video Conferencing Chat Instant Messaging White Boarding	Discussion Boards Calendar Website Links Group Announcements Messaging / E-mail Surveys & Polls Decision Support Tools	Interactive CBTs Streaming Audio & Video Narrated Slideshows Web books	Resource Library Document Collaboration Version Tracking & Control Permission Based Access

In addition to features, simplicity and ease-of-use are the most important attributes to consider when creating or selecting an environment. The goal of technology should be to serve the community through its transparency – learners’ time should be spent learning about the topic at hand, not about how to use a given technology. Ideally technology should be transparent to the instructor as well – no technical knowledge should be required to customize or manage the environment.

Conclusion

As workgroup collaboration, knowledge management, and learning technologies and processes converge, “communities” of all kinds will become increasingly prevalent. The challenge facing learning professionals is to link business strategy to learning strategy in ways that seamlessly incorporate community as a means of capturing the informal or tacit knowledge that exists within the organization but is not accessible through formal training programs. Whether creating a community for e-learning, or one that supports a blended learning approach, community builders must consider a variety of factors related to people, group processes, and technology, if they are to design and orchestrate online environments that inspire collaborative learning.

About the Author

Soren Kaplan, Ph.D. (soren@icohere.com)

Soren Kaplan is Managing Director of iCohere, a software a consulting firm that helps teams, groups and organizations use collaboration software, groupware and knowledge management tools to create communities of practice, build learning communities, and deliver online and blended e-learning programs. Soren provides overall leadership for iCohere’s strategic direction, including business development, marketing and client services.

Prior to founding iCohere, Soren held numerous positions at Hewlett-Packard Company. Most recently, he served as Manager of HP’s internal strategy consulting group where he led a team that assisted leadership across the organization with strategic planning and organizational development. Soren also served as Manager of HP’s Process Innovation Lab, a business process R&D group that utilized behavioral science-based theory and methods to develop leading edge approaches for managing organizational change.

Prior to joining HP, Soren was a consultant with Cambridge, MA based IdeaScope Associates and consulted to global 500 companies—including Kodak, Siemens, Nestle, Avery Dennison, and 3M—in the areas of new opportunity identification, strategic innovation, and creating innovative organizational cultures. Soren has also consulted independently, working with both large and small for-profit and non-profit businesses including Bank of America, AT&T, the City and County of San Francisco, and other organizations. Soren holds Master’s and Ph.D. degrees in Organizational Psychology. He has presented at institutions and universities, including the Creative Education Foundation and the Harvard Business School, and has written and published a number of articles.

¹ Learning Portals: Rate of Adoption (2000). Learning Decisions Interactive Newsletter, The MASIE Center.

² Manville, Brook, & Foote, Nathaniel (1996). Strategy as if Knowledge Mattered, FastCompany, April 1996.

³ Henschel, Peter (2001). Understanding and Winning the Never-Ending Search for Talent: The Manager’s Core Work in the New Economy, LineZINE, Fall 2001.

⁴ Tuckman, B.W. (1965). Developmental sequences in small groups. Psychological Bulletin, 63, 384-399.

⁵ LaBranche, Gary (2002). Meetings & Expositions, American Society of Association Executives, February 2002.