On Community Building In Distance Education

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Abstract: Research shows that community building is very beneficial and important in Distance Education. In this article we discuss some aspects of community building in distance education. We explain the benefits of community building in distance education. We also discuss various means of building a community in distance education.

Index Terms – Community Building, collobaration, peer group support, institutional efforts towards building a community.

I. INTRODUCTION

Last few decades have seen an exponential growth in distance education with affordable and portable communication devices like mobile phones and tables. According to [1],

"Enrolment for online education between 2021 and 2022 grew 170% and while open and distance learning grew by 41.7%."

However, the higher dropout rates, as compared to the conventional system is a problem that exercised the distance educators.

There are several reasons for the dropout rate. Many of the distance learners join distance education courses for gaining knowledge and not academic credentials. They may drop out after their purpose is fulfilled. However, there is another reason for higher dropout rates, namely the feeling of disconnection[2] or due to isolation, distraction, and lack of personal attention[3]. Tinto[4], stressed the importance the role of community in decreasing the dropout rate. Also, according to Paloff and Pratt[5] 60% of the students felt that online discussions made them feel more connected to the Course material. According to Wehlage, Rutter and Smith[6] that traditional schools with very good dropout prevention programs gave importance to building communities. Research shows that comm community increase persistence in courses and the flow of information among all learners, availability of support, commitment to group goals, cooperation among members, and satisfaction with group efforts.[7][1]

Also, communities also improve academic performance. Students who participate in online communities tend to have **higher GPAs** (Grade Point Averages) than those who do not[8]. 70% of students report that online discussions help them better understand the course material.[5] Students who participate in online communities are **more likely** to complete their coursework and achieve their academic goals.[9]

The student satisfaction was also better among the those who are part of communities. **90%** of students report being satisfied with their online learning experience when they feel connected to their peers and instructors. **80%** of students report that online discussions help them feel more supported in their learning.[8] Students who participate in online communities tend to report **higher levels of satisfaction** with their online learning experience.[9]

In this article, we will discuss community building in distance education. We first begin with a brief introduction to community building in distance education. We give a brief history of community building in distance education. We then outline how institutions can build communities of students.

II. COMMUNITY BUILDING

Community building in distance education has a long history spanning many decades and we can divide this history into several epochs. We now begin with a brief history.

Early Years (1960s-1980s)

1. Correspondence Courses: In the beginning, Distance education took the form of correspondence courses. In this form students received course materials by mail and interacted with instructors through letters.

2. Audioconferencing: In 1970s and 1980s audioconferencing was introduced and this enabled real-time communication between students and instructors.

Emergence of Online Learning (1990s-2000s)

1. **Online Courses:** In the 1990s the widespread use of the internet lead to the development of online courses, which enabled students to access course materials and interact with instructors online.

2. **Discussion Boards:** Discussion boards and online forums were introduced and this enabled students to interact with one another and with instructors in a more asynchronous manner.

3. **Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs):** Virtual learning environments such as WebCT and Blackboard were developed. They provided a platform for instructors to create online courses and communities.

Social Media and Collaborative Tools (2000s-present)

1. **Social Media:** Social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, became popular. These platforms have enabled students to connect with one another and with instructors in a more informal and social manner.

2. **Collaborative Tools:** Collaborative tools, such as wikis, blogs, and Google Docs, were developed. They have enabled students to work together on projects and share resources.

3. **MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses):** The development of MOOCs has made large-scale online learning and community building possible.

Current Trends and Future Directions

1. **Personalized Learning:** By the use of data analytics and artificial intelligence instructors are able to create personalized learning experiences that cater to individual students' needs and interests.

2. **Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR):** With the integration of VR and AR technologies, it is now possible to create immersive and interactive learning experiences that simulate real-world environments.

3. **Community-Driven Learning:** There is an increasing focus on community-driven learning, where students take an active role in shaping their own learning experiences and creating learning communities.

By **Community building in distance education** we mean the process of creating and fostering a sense of connection, belonging, and collaboration among students, instructors, and other stakeholders in an online or distance learning environment.

III. IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY BUILDING.

1. **Reduces feelings of isolation:** Community building helps to alleviate the disconnected feelings that Distance learners can have towards their peers and instructors.

2. **Increases student engagement:** If students feel connected to their peers and instructors, they are more likely to participate in online discussions, complete assignments, and stay motivated. Students also participate actively in their learning, thus improving their academic performance and satisfaction. Due to enhanced motivatioin arising out of a sense of belonging, students engage more deeply with their course material.

3. **Improves learning outcomes:** Building learning Communities can lead to better learning outcomes, as students learn from one another, share experiences, and collaborate on projects. Collaborative learning is made possible allowing students to learn from one another, share diverse perspectives and engage in problem-solving together. Students can also provide academic and emotional support to each other, leading to a deeper understanding of the course content.

4. **Enhances student retention:** Communities of students can help reduce student dropout rates, as students feel more connected to the institution and their peers. Community support networks provide support systems that help students navigate challenges, making them more likely to complete their programs.

5. **Increased Student Satisfaction:** A strong sense of belonging provides a more holistic, fulfilling and enjoyable educational experience leading to higher levels of student satisfaction.

6. **Innovation due to diverse perspectives:** Communities enable students from diverse backgrounds to interact with each other leading to exchange of ideas. This leads to development of novel perspectives and innovative approaches.

7. **Stronger Faculty-Student relationships:** Faculty who actively participate in community building develop strong relationships with their students. This improves the effectiveness of teaching and student support.

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IV. STRATEGIES FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING:

1, **Discussion forums:** Creating online discussion forums provide a platform for students to interact with one another and with instructors.

3. **Video conferencing:** Using video conferencing tools facilitate live interactions between students and instructors.

4. **Collaborative projects:** Assigning group projects that require students to work together and collaborate.

5. **Social media groups:** Creation of social media groups or online communities where students can connect with one another and with instructors.

6. **Virtual events:** Host virtual events, such as webinars or guest lectures, to bring students together and provide opportunities for interaction.

There are several technology tools that enable building of learning communities. Let us look at some of them.

V. TECHNOLOGY TOOLS:

1.**Learning management systems (LMS):** Utilisation of LMS platforms, such as Moodle or Blackboard, to create online communities and facilitate interaction.

2. **Video conferencing software:** To facilitate live inetractions, use tools like Zoom, Google Meet, or Skype.

3. **Collaboration tools:** Factilitate group work and collaboration using tools like Google Docs, Trello, or Asana.

We have briefly discussed the benefits of community building in the introduction. We now discuss the benefits of community building in greater detail.

VI. BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

Community building in distance education offers numerous benefits for institutions, enhancing not only the student experience but also the overall effectiveness of educational programs. We now discuss some key advantages:

1. **Improved Retention Rates due to persistence:** It is known that involvement in a community helps the student to persist in her studies. The more the students interact with other students, the more likely they are to persist. The involvement could be social or academic. Strong involvement is possible in closely knit student communities.

2. **Stronger Institutional Reputation:** The institutions that provide supportive and engaging learning environments attract more students because of positive student experiences. The alumni of the institutions are more likely to recommend their institutions to others, thus enhancing the reputation of the institutions.

3. **Continuous improvement due to feedback:** The feedback loop involved in community building provides valuable data from the students regarding their difficulties.

4. **Improved utilisation of resources:** Communities with high levels of engagement are able to leverage institutional resources more effectively and find creative ways to utilize available tools and support systems. The faculty is also able to share their teaching resources

VII. CONCLUSION

Community building is very important, particularly for distance education to reduce the students feelings of isolation and separation. They also help in enhancing the overall learning experience. By being a part of strong communities, students develop the capabilities to collaborate harmoniously with others and come up with innovative ideas due to close interaction with students from diverse backgrounds. The levels of student satisfaction achieved due to strong community building enhances the reputation of institutions leading to increase in enrolment. Thus, building strong learning communities is important for the institutions because they confer many benefits to both the students and the institutions.

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