

Creating learning communities online

It's a Small World After All!

— Part 2 —

by Chip Donohue

Part one of this article (*Child Care Information Exchange*, September/October 2002) explored key questions about the role of technology in early childhood training, continuing education, and professional development, and identified some of the issues and challenges of teaching and learning online. In Part two, the focus is on specific strategies and effective practices faculty and trainers can use to create a community of learners online. In the companion piece, Sue Bawale, Laurie Todd, and Betty Jones focus on the experiences of adult learners in an effective online learning community.

A Learning Community Begins — It Really is a Small World!

"In the days prior to the 2002 World Forum a new and futuristic community bravely came together to begin the creation of a new mode and communication avenue. An online International community was born through the Early Childhood Faculty Institute . . . Members of this inaugural early childhood community span the globe and have mutual directions and interests. The difference in this community comes with their commonality of a dream to create an effective, meaningful learning community with the challenging tools of a computer and the Internet, irrelevant of where the

community residents call home."
Selena Fox, New Zealand

In April 2002, an international group of early childhood faculty and trainers gathered for the first annual *Early Childhood Faculty Institute on Teaching and Learning Online*, held at Kings College in Auckland, New Zealand in conjunction with the World Forum on Early Care and Education. Our challenge was to create a community of learners while exploring the possibilities and opportunities for creating a learning community online. I have included quotes from the Institute participants to illustrate the ways in which each of us came to the conclusion that creating community was

essential to the success of an online course for early childhood professionals, and that not only could it be done, but that it was possible to create a rich environment for teaching and learning.

"I am really grateful that I was given this fantastic opportunity. It was not just the learning experience. It was the community that was born — the international online community. Those four days opened up a wealth of information from different participants, from different parts of the world."

Radha Nirmalanathan, Sri Lanka

Taking Your First Steps

In Part one you were encouraged to:

- **Know the Questions** — Understand the role of technology and be intentional in your choices
- **Know Yourself** — Understand who you are, how you teach, and your own technology skills
- **Know Your Learners** — Understand the challenges of creating a high tech learning environment for low tech/high touch students, and recognize the barriers of access, affordability, literacy, and technology skills
- **Know the Technology** — Understand what the technology can and

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EC eTeaching Institute for early childhood faculty and trainers in conjunction with the World Forum on Early Care and Education in Acapulco, Mexico.

can't do and the implications for tech training and support, instructional design, content conversion, and course delivery

■ **Know What You Know** — Begin with your content expertise, factor in your knowledge of the learners, build on your technology skills, and see yourself as a teacher and a learner

"I attended the Learning Institute to find out how online applications work and see and experience a practical, working example. The challenges for our particular College include community building for geographically isolated students; and dealing with practical components and application of theory into learning and assessments."

Cheryl Gea, Australia

Obstacles and Opportunities

Key issues for faculty and trainers is the fit between teaching style and preferences, the course content, and the technology. The level of training, tech support, and instructional design assistance needed from the institution must also be considered. Teaching online also raises issues of increased time demands, class size limits, course load, promotion and tenure, and accountability for student outcomes. Institutional issues include online student services and 24/7 tech support, copyright and intellectual property issues, articulation of online courses to degree programs, and the accreditation of online certificate and degree programs — whew! By now you're probably asking yourself, "Why bother?"

"I came to the Learning Institute with a distrust of online technology as a means to effect real learning . . . the opportunity to interact with students in the United States and some of the faculty members demonstrated that it was possible to create a community of learners whose communication was enhanced by the use of the technology rather than restricted by it . . . Having our wider

online community, which began at the Learning Institute . . . is a real bonus as we share our diverse experiences, with a common beginning and commitment."

Anna Johnston, Australia

If you've already made the decision to teach online — or if someone else has made the decision for you — you need to develop some strategies to help students succeed and to build a learning community at a distance.

Tools for Developing Online Learning Communities

When asked, early childhood professionals express a strong preference for face-to-face training and courses. They like to get together with others and share ideas, and they tend to be skeptical and cautious about technology as an appropriate means of delivering training about the art and science of teaching. They wonder if it is possible to learn how to hug and hold a baby online; and they raise serious concerns about their level of computer skills, having regular and reliable access to a computer and the Internet, and being isolated from the instructor and other students.

In my experience, the key to success in an online course for early childhood professionals is to create a sense of community that encourages active participation, meaningful contributions, and an open exchange of ideas and resources. Let me share some of the strategies I use to create and support a learning community in my online courses.

Pre-Course Checklist

Before the course begins, make sure that you have thought about and addressed the following issues:

- Be sure students know what learning "online" means (technology, Internet access, time commitment, etc.)
- Provide a simple questionnaire such as, "Are Online Courses for Me?"

- Have students complete a Browser Test and check hardware compatibility
- Verify e-mail addresses by having each student send you an e-mail
- Verify the name or number that will be used as the course username, password, or login ID
- E-mail a "Welcome Online" message and provide directions for how to log in and navigate
- Provide a *get acquainted* period to look around, practice using the tools, and identify any problems
- Create introductory activities that encourage the students to explore the learning environment and courseware such as an Online Scavenger Hunt, Online Guided Tours, or Virtual Field Trips
- Expect these common problems no matter how much preparation you do
 - Logging in (username, password, login ID)
 - Using e-reserve (accessing articles on electronic reserve at the college library)
 - Document sharing (sending attachments or using course functions to send and receive assignments)
 - Timing out on their ISP (slow transmission rates may make it difficult to download large files)

Once the Course Begins

Now that you and your students are underway and you all have successfully logged-in to the course at least once, you can provide a variety of activities and experiences that encourage the development of technology skills so that the focus can be on the course content, not just on fighting with the technology.

- Use an online "Ice Breaker" to help the students get to know one another
- Build a personal relationship with each student
- Provide a variety of opportunities for interaction (instructor-student and student-student)
- Create opportunities for students to exchange information and ideas, and exchange resources

- Model effective discussion skills and good *netiquette*
- Identify the linkages between students' comments, ideas, roles, responsibilities, backgrounds, and programs
- Emphasize collaborative learning — discussion forums, chat rooms, student hosted guided tours, resource sharing, group projects, case studies, and post individual and group work for review and discussion
- Offer Expert Hosted Discussions — bring the world of early care and education to the students
- Encourage reflective practices — electronic journal writing

"After my experience in online distance education, I saw many possibilities to connect participants at academic and non-academic training sessions with each other and continue the dialogue, connections, and conversations that begin during face-to-face professional development opportunities . . . I am working on developing a web page with a discussion board so that participants in any of the training sessions I conduct will be able to continue to dialogue for a set period of time after the training ends. It is just a baby step in increasing the effectiveness of my work with teachers, families, and managers, but I think it is an important one."

Kay Albrecht, United States

The Discussion Forum

In my classes the weekly discussions are the heart of the online experience for the students and me, and it is in the discussion that the learning community comes together and best expresses itself. To make the most of the online discussion, students need to learn how to participate and how best to share their ideas with each other so instructors need to provide clear directions and expectations, model good "netiquette," and encourage active participation and meaningful contributions.

I provide my students with an Online Discussion Checklist that includes these tips:

- **Participate often!** Check the discussion frequently and post messages and comment to other students.
- **Speak up!** If you tend to be quiet in class, now is your chance to be heard.
- **Personalize!** Address your question or response to another student by using his or her name, for example, "Felicia, thanks for your suggestions on professional development opportunities for directors."
- **Identify yourself!** Always "sign" your message by including your name.
- **Talk together!** Keep the tone conversational — this is meant to be a discussion, so "talk" to each other.
- **Offer ideas!** Messages that include "the answer" tend to end the discussion. Messages with "an answer" or "this is how we do it at my center" invite discussion.
- **Name it!** Always put a simple, understandable title to your message in the subject box.
- **Be specific!** Identify what issue or topic you are asking about or responding to. For example, "Hi Angelina, this is Toshiba. Your comments about reflective practice reminded me of an experience I had . . ."
- **Keep it short!** Keep your comments brief and to the point — no more than two or three paragraphs at a time. Short answers encourage others to read what you have posted and to post their questions and comments.
- **Keep it simple!** Post responses that address one topic or break apart the issues you want to discuss and post several shorter messages that are topic specific. It is hard to answer a question like, "I was wondering what you thought about infants in child care, the latest brain development research, and what to do about toddlers who bite." Better to ask a specific question about one of these broad topics to start a "conversation."

■ **Make connections!** "Hi, this is Laura again. I'm following up on the comments made by Delechia and Maria about infants and toddlers with special needs."

■ **Invite a response!** End your message with an open-ended question to invite others to respond to you. For example, ". . . so that's what we do at our center. What has worked for you?"

■ **Use good netiquette!** Many lists of netiquette for online courses, chat rooms, and discussion forums are available on the Internet like The Core Rules of Netiquette at www.albion.com/netiquette/corerules.html.

"The experience of the Institute has given me a realistic perspective on the potential role of technology in overcoming geographical barriers to access and participation on education and training. I now appreciate that communities of learning are not bound by physical space and that there is an exciting future of collaboration now available to all of us who are inspired and enthused by the goal of quality experiences for all children. There is no doubt that utilizing new media will present huge challenges and a great deal of hard work!"

Maresa Duignan, Ireland

Success Depends on Creating a Learning Community

The success of online courses, certificate programs, and degrees for early childhood professionals depends on our ability to create a community of learners that encourages the open exchange of information and sharing of ideas and resources.

"Another positive outcome from my community is the quite powerful feeling of being part of a bigger picture — I so enjoy communicating with people from India, Ireland, Australia, the United States, all of whom share my interest. It is a warm, comfortable experience that I hope I can one day provide to my students in remote areas."

Debby Barnes, Australia

And as instructors and trainers we have to continue to explore what is, what can, and

what should be the role of technology in early childhood professional development.

"I think we need to be up front about what online education can and cannot do. It cannot make you a more skilled artist or potter. But students can meet the mastery of knowledge requirements inherent in university class attendance. I think it is a great way to bring information and ideas to people, but I'm not sure that it can take the place of everything that we go to school for."

Nancy Netherland, United States

To be successful you will need content knowledge, technology skills, and a *never say die* disposition. It all begins with your vision of how technology tools can help you reach out to students in powerful ways and provide new methods for delivering training, continuing education, and professional development.

"In early childhood, as in all areas of teacher education training, pioneers of new and yet to be researched modes of study should not turn their backs on the powerful tools of technology. Instead we need to question, debate, and create new and visionary communities of learning with different qualities and traits, always with the betterment of opportunities for children and the educators who work with them at heart"

Selena Fox, New Zealand

When you create a community of learners online it really is "a small world after all."

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Special Thanks

Thanks to my "Cyber buddies" Kay Albrecht, Jack Amouzandeh, Lina Ashar, Debby Barnes, Maresa Duignan, Cheryl Gea, Anna Johnston, Nancy Netherland, Radha Nirmalanathan, and Selena Fox for their contributions to this article and for making the First Annual Early Childhood Faculty Institute in Auckland, New Zealand, such a wonderful community of teachers and learners.