chapter
TWO

Recontextualizing Community

To know someone here or there with whom you can feel there is understanding, in spite of distances or thoughts expressed, can make of this earth a garden.

Goethe

M. Scott Peck (1987) makes a powerful statement about community that is often quoted:

> We know the rules of community; we know the healing effect of community in terms of individual lives. If we could somehow find a way across the bridge of our knowledge, would not these same rules have a healing effect upon our world? We human beings have often been referred to as social animals. But we are not yet community creatures. We are impelled to relate with each other for our survival. But we do not yet relate with the inclusivity, realism, self-awareness, vulnerability, commitment, openness, freedom, equality, and love of genuine community. It is clearly no longer enough to be simply social animals, babbling together at cocktail parties and brawling with each other in business and over boundaries. It is our task—our essential, central,

> crucial task—to transform ourselves from mere social creatures into community creatures. It is the only way that human evolution will be able to proceed. (p. 165)

More recent research on the application of community concepts to education support Peck's thoughts. Wenger (1997), a well-known author in the area of communities of practice, notes that the value of education is in social participation and that education should first be addressed in terms of the identities of the participants and the means of belonging to the group. In other words, who we are as social beings drives learning, and the social aspects of learning are the most important. Consequently, those connection points, better known as community, become extremely important in creating a sense of belonging. We further believe that through the creation of a sense of shared values and shared identity, that sense of belonging emerges, and the result is a sense of community in the online class.

Online community has been defined in the literature in many ways, but these definitions often include several common elements or themes, including the ability to build mutual trust, a connection of the spirit, a sense of belonging, a sense of membership, a sense of support, and an ability to share in the educational journey together (Shea, Swan, and Pickett, 2004). More than simply a common meeting or networking space online, such as My Space or Friendster, which have been frequented by younger students (much to the dismay of their academic institutions due to some of the inappropriate activity that goes on there and the mistaken sense that casual connection equals community), the learning community in an online course allows for mutual exploration of ideas, a safe place to reflect on and develop those ideas, and a collaborative, supportive approach to academic work.

Prior to the exploration of online communities, when we thought about place-based community or community groups, the concepts of *differentiation* and *membership* were relevant factors. People seeking commonality and shared interests formed groups and communities in order to pursue the interests that distinguished them from other groups. In addition, communities were generally considered to be place-based, and it was generally believed that to form community, one needed to meet the other members of that community face-to-face. The small town or neighborhood in which you lived was your community. Adherence to the norms of that community allowed you to maintain membership. Expressing your uniqueness as a person was at times problematic because of the need to adhere to those norms (Shaffer and Anundsen, 1993).

Because community is no longer simply a place-based concept, we are seeing it recontextualized and are even applying the concept of place-based communities to online communities. For example, a colleague of ours, Dorothy Ward of Delgado Community College in New Orleans, comments that the creation of community in an online class is much like a neighborhood because the class community would fit within the larger concept of community at the institutional level. In other words, the institution forms the larger community and, when attention is paid to community building in an online class, each class becomes a neighborhood within that community. Wenger and his colleagues (Smith and Doty, 2003) have also used the neighborhood concept in the development of training programs conducted through CPsquare, a site devoted to the study of communities of practice by participating in a community of practice. In CPsquare's training courses, participants enter a community that is made up of smaller "neighborhoods" (or interest groups or domains) and even smaller "households" (small discussion groups). The groups can choose to work around their "kitchen tables" for private discussion, and public discussion occurs on the "front porch." Another example is Second Life, a virtual reality site in which participants or organizations can buy land, build structures, and use avatars, or graphic representations of themselves, to travel around the community and interact with other community members. We find this an interesting way to recontextualize the notion of community online. We return to a discussion of this concept later in the book.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY

Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen (1993) talk about our human yearning for a sense of belonging, kinship, and connection to a greater purpose. Changes in the makeup of our families, neighborhoods, and towns have increased that longing, because we are not as easily able to identify with something we can call a community. Our communities today are formed around issues of identity and shared values; they are not necessarily place-based (Palloff, 1996).

Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) define community as a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people share common practices, are interdependent, make decisions jointly, identify themselves with something larger than the sum of their individual relationships, and make a long-term commitment to well-being (their own, one another's, and the group's).

Because of the requirement, perhaps, to place the needs of the group above those of the individual, some people fear entering into a community because they assume in doing so that they must submit to the will of a group. According to Shaffer and Anundsen, however, the need for connectedness—for community—does not necessarily mean giving up autonomy or submitting to authority in order to become part of a group. Instead, creating a community is a mutually empowering act—a means by which people share with each other, work, and live collaboratively. In the past, we assumed that involvement in community was determined by where you lived (your home town or neighborhood) or determined by your family or religious connections (identification with a country of origin or religious organization). Involvement in community today means making a conscious commitment to a group. Shaffer and Anundsen refer to this as *conscious community*—meaning community that emphasizes the members' needs for personal growth and transformation, as well as the social and survival aspects of community. This aspect is part of what differentiates community from social networking spaces such as You Tube or My Space.

COMMUNITY ONLINE

With the advent of all forms of electronic communication, from the Internet to cell phones, it has become difficult to determine exactly what is meant by the word *community.* Just like the word *family, community* is a word that is now extensively used, perhaps because of the increasing sense of isolation that many people feel in today's world. Communities have spun off into many types, with many varied attributes. Entry into a virtual community, and maintenance of membership in that community, entails a very different process and may, in fact, be more difficult for some people to achieve. Steven Jones (1998) notes that the creation of an online social world is dependent upon the degree to which people use the Internet to invent new personas, to create or recreate their own identities, or a combination thereof.

Jones's early description of online identity refers to what is now termed *social presence*—the person we become when we are online and how we express that person in virtual space. An earlier study by one of us entitled the *Electronic Personality* (Pratt, 1996) supports the notion that one's personality changes when interacting with technology. Introverts, who tend to have more difficulty establishing presence in person, may become more extroverted and establish presence

more easily, whereas extroverts, who easily establish presence in person, may have more difficulty connecting with others online. Our work has shown that for this electronic personality to exist, certain elements must manifest:

- The ability to carry on an internal dialogue in order to formulate responses
- The creation of a semblance of privacy both in terms of the space from which the person communicates and the ability to create an internal sense of privacy
- The ability to deal with emotional issues in textual form
- The ability to create a mental picture of the partner in the communication process
- The ability to create a sense of presence online through the personalization of communications (Pratt, 1996, pp. 119–120)

Thus each person creates his or her own virtual environment, in a sense, that allows his or her electronic personality to emerge. People who are introverts are more adept at creating a virtual environment because they can process information internally and are less outgoing socially. It is more comfortable for an introvert to spend time thinking about information before responding to it. It is more difficult—but not impossible—for extroverts to interact this way, perhaps because they have less need to. Extroverts tend to feel more comfortable processing verbally and in the company of others. "Extroverts choose higher levels of noise in a learning situation and perform better in the presence of noise, while introverts perform better in quiet" (Ornstein, 1995, p. 57). Consequently, the introvert may have less difficulty entering the virtual community, whereas the extrovert, with a need to establish a sense of social presence, may have more trouble doing so (Pratt, 1996). Both of us have personally experienced this phenomenon. Keith, an introvert, is uncomfortable in face-to-face social situations but feels very comfortable entering groups online and expressing himself, whereas Rena, a strong extrovert, experiences just the opposite. As mentioned, this difference relates to the ease with which the introvert or extrovert can establish social presence. The use of online communities such as Second Life for the delivery of online classes may change this picture, however, by providing "noisier" spaces that make use of graphic three-dimensional avatars and voice, as well as the use of text.

This ability to create a virtual space is not without unintended consequences, however. The relative sense of anonymity provided by the text-based online environment may encourage the emergence of aspects of the personality that may not

otherwise exist face-to-face (Pratt, 1996). Because they are not face-to-face with others, people may feel freer to express hostility, anger, or judgment, for example, which can lead to difficulties within the community. Mutually agreed upon behavioral and communication guidelines become critical in community development and also support the emergence of social presence.

THE ELEMENT OF SOCIAL PRESENCE

The concept of social presence is not new. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) defined social presence as the degree to which a person is perceived as "real" in communication that is conducted via the use of some form of media. They felt that the degree of presence developed was attributable to the particular media in use. However, more recent studies of social presence as it relates to online learning have noted that the medium has little to do with developing a sense of presence. Lombard and Ditton (1997) note that the emergence of social presence depends to a varying degree on how well participants fail to acknowledge or are able to ignore the presence of the medium. Instead of media, it is participant behavior online that appears to have a greater impact on the development of presence (Polhemus, Shih, and Swan, 2000). When there is a high degree of interaction between the participants, the degree of social presence is also high, and vice versa (Stein and Wanstreet, 2003).

Social presence is something we rarely consider in the face-to-face classroom. When students can see one another within a physical space, we simply assume that presence will occur; students will develop a sense of who their colleagues are simply by being around them. When active and collaborative learning are part of that face-to-face environment, a sense of social presence is more likely to occur naturally through that interaction. Picciano (2002) cautions that simple physical presence may not be enough, however.

> A student's physical presence in a face-to-face course assumes that she or he has a sense of belonging to the class or group of students enrolled in the course. He or she listens to the discussion and may choose to raise a hand to comment, to answer or to ask a question. Furthermore, the same student may develop a relationship with other students in the class and discuss topics related to the class during a break, at the

> water fountain, or in the cafeteria. However, this is an assumption and not always true. (Picciano, 2002, p. 22)

Online there is greater possibility for a sense of loss among learners—loss of contact, loss of connection, and a resultant sense of isolation. Consequently, attention should be paid to the intentional development of presence. We present strategies for doing so at points throughout this book.

Social presence has been correlated with learner satisfaction online (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997), as well as a sense of belonging to a community (Picciano, 2002). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003) believe, as we do, that in order to form community online, a sense of social presence is required among participants. Although many researchers have attempted to measure means by which social presence can be identified in various media (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000; Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Polhemus, Shih, Richardson, and Swan, 2000; Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976; Tu and Corry, 2002), there has been little agreement on how that might occur. What it looks like and its characteristics, however, are more easily discerned. Polhemus and others (2000) note that some of the indicators that social presence has emerged in an online class include the use of personal forms of address, acknowledgment of others, expression of feeling, humor, social sharing, and the use of textual paralanguage symbols such as emoticons, font colors, different fonts, capitalization, and symbols or characters for expression. These indicators correspond with our own thoughts about the indicators that provide evidence that community has formed in the online class:

- Active interaction involving both course content and personal communication
- Collaborative learning evidenced by comments directed primarily student to student rather than student to instructor
- Socially constructed meaning evidenced by agreement or questioning, with the intent to achieve agreement on issues of meaning
- Sharing of resources among students
- Expressions of support and encouragement exchanged between students, as well as willingness to critically evaluate the work of others

Given the close connection between social presence and the development of the online community, it becomes important for instructors to be knowledgeable

about the various aspects that comprise it. In addition, social presence plays an important role in coalescence and the online community.

COALESCENCE AND BELONGING ONLINE

Just as there is a strong connection between the development of a sense of social presence and the formation of community online, so is there a strong connection between presence and coalescence. As already noted, presence is the ability to present oneself as a real person online. Students in an online class, feeling themselves to be real persons, are likely to want to connect with another real person. Picciano (2001) states, "Students who feel that they are part of a group or 'present' in a community will, in fact, wish to participate actively in group and community activities" (p. 24).

Coalescence, defined as the formation of that sense of group or community, can be sometimes instantaneous, especially if a group comes together with a strong interest, for example a political campaign or a common problem. But it sometimes takes prodding and deliberate action on the part of the instructor and other students for coalescence to occur. For a coalesced community to be functional and exist for any extended period, coalescence must also take place over a period of time.

What many educators are beginning to realize is that the way the online medium is used depends largely on human needs, meaning the needs of both faculty and students, and that these needs are the prime reason that electronic communities are formed. As previously mentioned, Wenger (1999) notes that the social aspects of education are the most important. In some respects, these educational communities may be more stimulating, interesting, and intense for those involved with education because they bring together people with similar interests and objectives, not just people who connect casually, as we find in other areas of the Internet.

Can the community-building process in online groups be complete without the group meeting face-to-face? Although face-to-face contact at some point in the community-building process can be useful and further facilitate community development, it is not likely to change the group dynamic initially created online. It is possible to build community without it. In our own experience, we have found that an initial face-to-face meeting can be helpful to orient students to the online

environment and technology in use. What we did early in our online teaching was to hold brief one- to two-hour meetings to introduce students to one another and the technology. Once the online course started, students tended to quickly forget those initial face-to-face meetings; it was as though they had never occurred. Our experience has shown us that unless the initial meeting extends over a period of days and includes intentional activity geared toward community building, it is not likely to be effective. In fact, having periodic face-to-face meetings throughout the term in a predominantly online course can actually detract from the online work; what tends to happen is that posting to the discussion will drop off as a face-to-face meeting approaches, and then it will take time to build again.

Beginning the formation of online communities without face-to-face contact demands greater attention up front to issues of policy and process. Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) feel that what they term *conscious community* can be created electronically through the initiation of and participation in discussions about goals, ethics, liabilities, and communication styles—that is, the norms by which the group will operate. Consequently, just as norms would be negotiated in a face-to-face group or community, the same needs to occur online. In fact, in the online environment, collaboratively negotiated norms are probably even more critical because they form the foundation on which the community is built. Agreement about how a group will interact and what the goals are, also known as establishment of guidelines or a group charter, can help move that group forward. In a face-to-face group, assumptions are made but not necessarily discussed, such as rules that one person will talk at a time and that a person should ask to be recognized before speaking. In an online group, we can make no assumptions about norms because we cannot see each other. Therefore, nothing should be left to chance, and all issues and concerns should be discussed openly. The following excerpt illustrates how community can emerge in this environment. This particular group had no face-to-face contact until well after their class ended.

> I have never seen anything develop quite like this. Endings, beginnings, break-ups, new-flowering love, blues, backaches, and the wonder of it all! I have been touched by so many of your messages and in such diverse ways that I confess to feeling unable to respond appropriately to each without risking the appearance of insincerity--or multiple personalities. Each response would seem to call for a different emotional driver. *Mel*

Or take another example:

> As a book lover, on one level this seminar is like reading a favorite novel. Each day I pick up the book . . . and join the characters in the evolution of the story. Just as I become emotionally absorbed into the people and ideas of a good novel, I have become absorbed into the seminar. *Claudia*

Numerous discussions and sites on the Internet are related to the virtual community—how it is formed and the elements that compose it. Many agree on some basic steps that must be taken in order to build such a community:

- Clearly define the purpose of the group.
- Create a distinctive gathering place for the group.
- Promote effective leadership from within.
- Define norms and a clear code of conduct.
- Allow for a range of member roles.
- Allow for and facilitate subgroups.
- Allow members to resolve their own disputes.

Taking these steps can foster connections among members that are stronger than those in face-to-face groups. The following excerpt from one author's dissertation journal gives credence to the quality of relationships that can be formed online when these connections do occur. This was written following a face-to-face session concerning the development of a dissertation proposal.

> As I continued to struggle with my concept, I found myself directing my comments, discussion, and attention increasingly toward Marie. It wasn't that she, above the rest, understood my concept any better. It was that I felt confident that she really understood ***ME*** based on our previous online connection. That gave me comfort and the confidence to struggle on.

RECONTEXTUALIZING COMMUNITY

From our discussion thus far, it is clear that the growth of the Internet and its popularity are having a significant impact on how people interact, as well as how they define and contextualize notions of community. Societal and scientific advances

and discoveries, along with technological development, have given us different approaches to issues that are deeply embedded in our attempts to interact. Students from elementary school through graduate school are now using more forms of communication technology than ever before. A recent article that appeared in the *San Francisco Chronicle* (May 14, 2006) notes that adults, who did not grow up with all of this technology, tend to pick and choose what they will do online. However, younger students, who have grown up in the middle of a technological revolution of sorts, have been bombarded with various forms of technology and tend to use them all. E-mail and text messaging are commonplace, especially among younger students. Blogging (or Web Logs), which started out as political journalism online, are now being used by many people for running commentary on their own lives. Blogging sites have emerged on the Internet, allowing people to create Web logs and visit those of others. Sites such as My Space or Friendster are promoting opportunities for younger people to connect online and are being frequented to a great degree by younger students, sometimes raising great concern on the part of adults about what goes on there. But does familiarity with all of these forms of technology assist younger students to form community in online classes? Our opinion is that it does not. Younger students are bringing their casual use of technology into the online classroom, creating a challenge to the academic setting and a need for institutions and instructors to provide instruction and orientation about what it means to use these technologies for academic means and for forming a learning community. Some young people are finding that it is becoming too much for them; that is, too much sharing of personal information online on a daily basis is becoming exhausting for them (Lee, 2006). This does not bode well for the involvement of younger students in online learning communities.

Embedded in the process of communication, whether it is through e-mail, text messaging, or chat, is the fact that we live in and search for community. Many of our attempts to communicate are, at core, attempts at community building—a search for the commonality that connects us. Our basic need to connect on a human level has not only affected the development of electronic communication but, conversely, has also been affected by it. This accounts for the popularity of sites such as My Space, Friendster, and even Second Life. Our relationships are far more complex because of our increasing network of associates and are enhanced by postmodern technological developments. Our communities and neighborhoods are now virtual as well as actual, global as well as local. Our technology has helped

create a new form of social interdependence, enabling "new communities to form wherever communication links can be made" (Gergen, 2000, p. 213).

Linda Harasim (in Shell, 1995), a professor of communications and writer in the areas of computer-mediated communication and distance learning, states that the words *community* and *communicate* have the same root, *communicare*, which means *to share*. She goes on to say, "We naturally gravitate towards media that enable us to communicate and form communities because that, in fact, makes us more human" (p. 1). Certainly, online communication is one such medium. It has helped shrink the globe while dramatically expanding the parameters of what we call our communities. It is important, at this point, to begin to discuss what is meant by *community* and why this is important to the process of education and learning online.

The social-psychological literature is full of material about group development. The literature about the development of community shows parallels to that process. One of the best-known writers in the areas of group and organizational behavior has referred to these stages as forming, norming, storming, performing, and adjourning (Tuckman, 1965). First, people come together around a common purpose. This is the forming stage. Then they reach out to one another to figure out how to work toward common goals, developing norms of behavior in the process. Not uncommonly, conflict may begin as members grapple with the negotiation of individual differences versus the collective purpose or objective (storming). However, in order to achieve group cohesion and to perform tasks together, the group needs to work through the conflict. If attempts are made to avoid it, the group may disintegrate or simply go through the motions, never really achieving intimacy. Just as in face-to-face groups, the conflict phase is an essential element that the group must work through in order to move on to the performing stage. Our work with online groups has shown us that these groups go through the same stages as face-to-face groups and communities, even if they do not work together face-to-face. But how do online groups deal with these phases without the benefit of face-to-face contact? A study conducted by Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1998) compared the Tuckman model of group development to other models in a group of online graduate students. They found that the Tuckman model, with its task orientation, appeared to most accurately describe how the group developed, including the team's ability to engage in conflict online.

> Linda, I love your creative approach to inviting conflict and controversy into the room. I wonder if there is a way to reframe the concepts with different language, as it is my sense that the words conflict and controversy have a negative or repulsive kind of charge to them. I am a huge believer in the generative power of conflict, but notice that whenever I visit with people about it they tend to recoil at the mere mention of the word. I'm not sure what an alternative might be but just thought I'd put that out there as food for thought. *Tim*

Sproull and Kiesler (1991) talk about the difficulties that distributed work groups have in achieving consensus when no face-to-face contact occurs: "When groups decide via computer, people have difficulty discovering how other group members feel. It is hard for them to reach consensus. When they disagree, they engage in deeper conflict" (p. 66). They seem to be suggesting that the conflict is a bad, undesirable thing. Ian Macduff (1994), in his article on electronic negotiation, states that there is greater potential for conflict to emerge in electronic discussion than in face-to-face discussion due to the absence of verbal, facial, and body cues and to difficulty in expressing emotion in a textual medium. However, he sees great potential in the resolution of conflict through the use of electronic media, especially if norms and procedures for conflict resolution are established and used. The study by Johnson and others (1998) noted that conflict in online classes does not seem to stem from the completion of the tasks or assignments in the class. Instead, it seems to stem from an unwillingness to participate, poor group planning of activities or assignment completion, and disagreements between group members. In other words, it is the social aspects of group study that breeds conflict and appears to need attention up front as the guidelines for the class are developed so as to minimize this potentially detrimental effect.

So if conflict is not such a bad thing, and if it is necessary in order to achieve group cohesiveness and intimacy, why do so many fear it and attempt to avoid it, especially in the online medium? And how do we as educators establish norms and procedures for resolving conflict in this virtual community of online learning?

One of the concerns about conflict online is that with the absence of face-to-face contact and cues, many people feel less socially constrained. In a face-to-face situation, people tend to choose a number of options for dealing with conflict.

They may avoid it altogether or confront the situation directly. Although this may be done in anger, it is best done within the confines of what we would consider to be socially appropriate behavior. We see the same conflict choices being made online, but because the conflict is being handled through the transmission of written messages, with the possibility of timing and sequencing becoming a problem, resolution of conflict in this medium takes patience and work. In an online classroom, another member of the group may step in as a mediator to facilitate this process.

In one of our earliest online class experiences, which was devoted to exploring the topic of creating online community, conflict occurred between two members of the group, mainly because of the sequencing and timing of messages. Communication was out of sync, which led to a flaming incident, that is, an angry personal message was publicly posted. One of the group members involved in the conflict responded as follows:

> When I read that last message, my heart sank. That's it. I'm sorry. I can't go on. This is one of those places where this medium simply hasn't sufficient dimensionality for me to express what I want and to feel comfortable that my meaning has gotten across. I feel the need for those subtle physical and psycho-social signs that are so much a part of face-to-face communications. *Mel*

He was opting to pull away from and avoid the conflict. However, another group member stepped in to mediate and offered the following:

> I'm having a hard time understanding all the heat around defining community. . . . .I realize that the purpose of this seminar is to debate issues around community and to define what the intersection is between the "human" and "virtual" communities. I also realize that we will disagree on what those elements and definitions are and that sometimes that disagreement will get heated. That's fine with me. But can we agree to establish a norm that we won't make it personal? I think that if we can, we may move through some of the conflict into some really important ideas about what comprises community. *Claudia*

The working through of this conflict helped create an extremely strong connection among the members of the group, leading to a positive learning outcome.

In a face-to-face classroom, conflict may also emerge as a part of a disagreement over ideas. Generally, opening the classroom environment to the debate of ideas is seen as positive; it provides evidence that students are engaging with the material. And although conflict can become heated to the point that the instructor needs to intervene, for the most part it is manageable in the classroom context. However, conflict is not considered part of a community-building process in a traditional classroom. Although it can contribute to learning outcomes, it is not a critical component of the learning process.

In an online learning community, conflict contributes not only to group cohesion but to the quality of the learning outcome. Therefore, instructors in the online environment need to feel comfortable with conflict; they may actually need to trigger it or assist with the facilitation of its resolution. And they should applaud its appearance.

However, there is a danger in unresolved conflict in this medium. If an instructor fails to intervene or fails to support the attempts by other students to resolve a conflict, students will begin to feel unsafe and participation in the online course will become guarded and sparse. In addition, the direction of communication will change, with students directing their posts to the instructor and not to the other members of the group. We experienced this in one of our online courses. A participant became angry about what she perceived to be a lack of participation by the other group members. This was not revealed online but was told to one of us in a phone conversation. Very quickly we noticed that this student's posts were being directed toward us, without comment or feedback directed toward the other participants. Without naming anyone in the group, we simply restated the group guideline that all students should provide feedback to each other online. The result was a rather surprised message from the student in question containing an apology to the group for not being open with them about her concerns and for withholding feedback from them. Given this unique aspect of the virtual community, let us turn now to a discussion of its importance in online education.

COMMUNITY IN THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

What does all of this discussion of community have to do with education and online learning? If we reconsider our discussion in the previous chapter of the paradigm for learning online, which involves a more active, collaborative, constructivist

approach, the link between the importance of community building and online learning becomes clearer. The principles involved in the delivery of distance education are basically those attributed to a more active, constructivist form of learning—with one difference: *in distance education, attention needs to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful.* The learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs online. Members depend on each other to achieve the learning outcomes for the course. If a participant logs on to a course site and there has been no activity on it for several days, he or she may become discouraged or feel a sense of abandonment—like being the only student to show up for class when even the instructor is absent. Without the support and participation of a learning community, there is no online course.

Instructors who do well online promote a sense of autonomy, initiative, and creativity while encouraging questioning, critical thinking, dialogue, and collaboration (Brookfield, 1995). In a face-to-face learning situation, this can be accomplished through the use of simulations, group activities, and small-group projects, as well as by encouraging students to pursue topics of interest on their own (Brooks and Brooks, 1993). A sense of community in the classroom might be helpful to this process but is not mandatory to its success.

Students in a face-to-face classroom see each other and work together in the same physical space, getting to know each other better through that process. How can we make that happen when most contacts consist of text on a screen? In fact, we cannot make the process happen instantaneously. It must be facilitated. One way community can be developed is through the mutual negotiation of guidelines regarding how the group will participate together. Beginning a course by posting introductions and encouraging students to look for areas of common interest is a good way to start. Instructors in this medium need to be flexible—to throw away their agendas and a need to control in order to let the process happen and allow for the personal agendas of the learners to be accommodated. This may mean that the discussion will go in a direction that does not feel completely comfortable to the instructor. But rather than cut it off abruptly, the instructor should gently guide that discussion in another direction, perhaps by asking an open-ended question that allows the learners to examine that interaction.

We must be able to make space for personal issues in an online course. This should be done deliberately and fostered throughout the course. If this space is not

created, it is likely that participants will seek out other ways to create personal interaction, such as through e-mail or by bringing personal issues into the course discussion. Some participants, however, when finding the personal element missing, may feel isolated and alone and, as a result, may feel less than satisfied with the learning experience. Cutler (1995) notes, "Social presence in cyberspace takes on more of a complexion of reciprocal awareness . . . of an individual and the individual's awareness of others . . . to create a mutual sense of interaction that is essential to the feeling that others are there" (p. 18). To enable the emergence of the personal element, we set up a space in the structure of our online classrooms, a cyber café of sorts, to enable this to happen. (We explore this further when we discuss techniques for building foundations for the course in Chapter Seven.) The development of community thus becomes a parallel stream to the content being explored. It is given its own equal status and is not seen as something that "mucks up" or interferes with the learning process. Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff (1996) state: "Social communication is an essential component of educational activity. Just as a face-to-face school or campus provides places for students to congregate socially, an online educational environment should provide a space, such as a virtual cafe, for informal discourse. The forging of social bonds has important socioaffective and cognitive benefits for the learning activities. The virtual cafe should be primarily a student space and not be directly tied to the curriculum" (p. 137).

But are all online classrooms active, constructivist learning environments? Do all distance education programs use active and collaborative tools and approaches to learning? Unfortunately, the answer is no. We continue to see many distance education programs in which the instructor posts lectures and attempts to control the learning outcomes by directing and dominating the process. We have also seen many instructors who continue to use multiple-choice and true-false exams as the only measures of learning. Many of these instructors are forced to bow to pressure from their universities, which are unwilling to let go of old methods of pedagogy and student assessment or do not understand how that could be done. Many of these universities are also facing pressure from accrediting agencies that do not understand the forms of teaching and learning that work best in this environment. We have heard many online instructors complain about the absence of interaction among their students or about the lack of response to questions they posed online. With further exploration, we usually find that either these instructors were posing closed questions that did not stimulate discussion or the instructors

were dominating the discussion, thus not allowing the process to be learner-focused. (We discuss the differences between forms of questions in Chapter Eight.)

PARTICIPATION AND DESIRED OUTCOMES IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

Clearly, an online learning community cannot be created by one person. Although the instructor is responsible for facilitating the process, participants also have a responsibility to make community happen. We have already established that the learning process in the online classroom is an active one. Therefore, in order for students to be considered "present" in an online class, they must not only access the course site online but must make a comment of some sort. Many course management systems in use today allow the instructor to see whether a student has logged on, where in the course they have visited, and for how long. In other words, if students are "lurking," meaning that they are reading but not posting, the instructor will know and can intervene to encourage participation.

Instructors often establish guidelines for minimal participation, making it more likely that students will engage with their colleagues and to facilitate the community-building process. This expectation of participation differs significantly from the face-to-face classroom, where the discussion can be dominated by one or more extroverted students, giving an illusion that the class is engaged. The ability to think before responding and to comment whenever the student wishes helps create a level of participation and engagement that goes much deeper than a face-to-face discussion might. As one of our students describes it:

> It seems that we as students have been more willing to talk and discuss the issues at hand than we probably would inside the classroom. I feel this is so for two reasons. One is that we have time to concentrate on the question and think, whereas in the class you are asked and immediate response is in need. Two, we can discuss openly and not have to worry about failure as much. If you post something that is not right, no one has said this is wrong but instead we give encouragement and try to guide each other to find the right answer. *Brandi*

In addition, because we are working in a primarily text-based medium, in the absence of visual and auditory cues participants focus on the meaning of the mes-

sage conveyed. As a result, ideas can be collaboratively developed as the course progresses, creating the socially constructed meaning that is the hallmark of a constructivist classroom in which an active learning process is taking place. This ability to collaborate and create knowledge and meaning communally is a clear indicator that a virtual learning community has successfully coalesced.

It is certainly possible, in this environment, to foster the development of a community wherein very little learning occurs but strong social connections exist among members. It is for this reason, among others, that the instructor needs to remain actively engaged in the process in order to gently guide participants who stray, coaxing them back to the learning goals that brought them together in the first place. It is the development of a strong *learning community* and not just a social community that is the distinguishing feature of online distance learning. The desired outcome, then, is the formation of a learning community through which knowledge about the content can be conveyed and the ability to collaboratively make meaning from that content can be achieved.

We have described what the online learning community looks like and how it functions, as well as its importance in the online learning process. We have also discussed the importance of the instructor in facilitating the community's development. However, we have not yet discussed the numerous issues that are likely to surface as that community is forming; neither have we described the need for instructors in this environment to be aware of those issues and to facilitate the discussion about them once they emerge. The acknowledgement and discussion of these issues support the development of social presence in the online community, that is, the ability to portray oneself as a real person and to perceive the same in one's learning colleagues. In the following chapter, we explore these topics in detail, along with the contribution each makes to the development of the online learning community.