

# The Human Side of Online Learning

When we discuss community building online, we are really concerned with humanizing a “nonhuman,” technological environment and creating a learning community in the process. As we attempt to build an online community, human issues will emerge, whether we expect them to or not. In a traditional classroom setting, an instructor may not know that a student is struggling with the end of a relationship or a chronic illness in the family unless the student volunteers that information. In the virtual classroom, however, in order to create community, it is critical to make room for the personal, the mundane—in other words, everyday life.

Certain issues surface time and again as we build learning communities while delivering classes online:

- The need for human contact
- Connectedness and coalescence
- Shared responsibility, rules, and norms
- Roles and participation
- Shadow issues (those elements we choose not to face) and other psychological issues

- Ritual as the psychological expression of community
- Spiritual issues
- Culture and language
- Vulnerability, ethics, and privacy

This chapter addresses each of these issues in turn. We include excerpts of dialogue written by our online participants as they dealt with these concerns.

For example, among the numerous psychological issues and questions that emerge, what is the impact of electronic communication on our perceptions of others? How well do we establish social presence and how well do we project ourselves as real people who happen to be communicating through text? How do we negotiate the ways in which we will communicate? What happens when personal boundaries are crossed? How will we know if we have crossed personal boundaries, what can we do about it if that occurs? Discussions about psychological issues and particularly spiritual issues are often considered controversial and even volatile when they occur in a face-to-face classroom, let alone in the online classroom. In presenting the psychological and spiritual issues embedded in the online community, we are not suggesting that instructors need to become counselors or spiritual advisers for their students. We are suggesting, however, that our participants' attempts to connect in the online arena will cause these issues to surface. We need, therefore, to acknowledge and recognize psychological and spiritual issues when they emerge, as they are core issues in the formation of community.

We value rugged individualism in our culture. But our intense holding of this value may be part of what causes emotional and psychological distress (Peck, 1993; Ornstein, 1995). So our search for community and the solace we find there is in part our need for connection, interdependence, intimacy, and safety—psychologically and spiritually speaking. Fear is what keeps us from experiencing a high level of connection with others—fear that we will lose ourselves in the process, that we will be rejected, that we are fakes, that we are just not good enough. Our isolation is a major contributing factor to psychological and spiritual unease or illness (Peck, 1993). Connection, through community, friendships, therapy, and so forth, is a means to achieve well-being (Shaffer and Anundsen, 1993). Being accepted and supported for who we are is the psychological and spiritual benefit of community.

Engaging in online community does bring with it some complications, however. Sproull and Kiesler (1991) state: "When people perceive communication to

be ephemeral, the stakes of communication seem smaller. People feel less committed to what they say, less concerned about it, and less worried about the social reception they will get. . . . By removing reminders of a possibly critical audience, electronic mail induces people to be more open" (p. 42). The up side of this is that "social posturing and sycophancy decline. The disadvantage is that so, too, do politeness and concern for others . . . reduced social awareness leads to messages characterized by ignoring social boundaries, self-revelation, and blunt remarks" (p. 39). Craig Brod, a psychologist, takes a particularly pessimistic view of the impact of electronic communication on a social-psychological level. He feels that as our computer use increases, we are "diminishing and altering our sense of self and of others, creating new barriers to what we long for: intimacy, continuity, and community" (Shaffer and Anundsen, 1993, p. 133). As we previously established, however, direct attention to community building online can break down these barriers, allowing for a new sense of intimacy and connection.

It is difficult but not impossible to convey feelings online, especially anger. Depending on the kind of community developed and whether it involves both face-to-face and virtual contact, expectations about how messages are received are somewhat different. In other words, when both face-to-face and virtual contact occur, participants assume that since they have met one another in person, others will understand the intent behind their words in exactly the way they mean them to be understood. So to some degree, participants are less cautious about what they say in print because they think everyone knows and understands them. Further, in completely textual communication, the relative anonymity of the medium, as noted by Sproull and Kiesler (1991), tends to loosen the sense of what is acceptable in communication and creates a sense that all is fair game. This delusion can cause pain and conflict, as it is impossible for people we have met only briefly or only virtually to truly know us and what we stand for unless a deep level of connection is promoted and sustained and a commitment made by members of the group to work through differences.

Virtual contact offers many advantages to the shy or reclusive person, who can sit at the computer and interact with people without all the "hassles" of making physical or visual contact. People desiring virtual isolation can simply refuse to respond or interact with other participants. Certainly, this can become a problem when options for socialization are limited to contacts made through electronic communications or when expectations are that a student will participate in an



online class. However, we have found that those of our students who are shy in social settings learn something about social skills by interacting in an online course. We have seen this increase in social skills begin to carry over to face-to-face classrooms. One of us had the experience of working with a student both in an online and a face-to-face class during the same academic term. Describing herself as shy and reclusive to the online group, the student also noted that it was becoming easier for her to interact with members of the group when she met them in other social or classroom situations. Her participation in the face-to-face class increased as she continued to interact with the online group and receive positive feedback for her contributions to the course.

## THE NEED FOR HUMAN CONTACT

The removal of visual and verbal context cues in online communication can be both beneficial and detrimental. Textual communication is a great equalizer, promotes a sense of relative anonymity, and can prompt us to be more thoughtful about what we say online or, conversely, can free us up to say things we might not say face-to-face. But the issue of isolation can also be a factor when communicating online. Although we create connection while online, the risk of isolating ourselves from face-to-face contact in the process does exist.

Students who do not do well online attribute this to not being able to see their instructor or classmates, hear what they have to say, or actively engage in verbal conversation. They describe “missing” this form of contact. The advent of virtual classroom technologies that allow for synchronous, real-time interaction as well as the ability to use voice-over in those settings or to add an audio or video file to an asynchronous online course helps to some degree to mitigate this problem. However, in the absence of audio and video, which are not yet widely used for a number of reasons that we discuss later in the book, paying attention to those students who seem to be having trouble making contact is important. Reaching out to the more “silent” students online and inviting them into the conversation can help. The longer a student is absent from the conversation, the more difficult it will be for that student to connect. Sometimes a phone call or an e-mail is all it takes to bring someone back in.

I “hear” “tones of voice” in messages I read, from either strangers or friends who communicate in this medium. In some cases they are remem-

bered tones of voice (those I “know”), in other cases they are imagined tones of voice (those I don’t know). *Mary Ann*

We have had more than one student post an introduction in an online course but then we hear nothing further, leaving the other students wondering what happened to him or her. One student, who had dropped out of a course with no explanation, finally contacted us to say that her expectation after she posted her introduction was that the others would respond to her personally and make comments about what she had said about herself. When that did not happen, she became discouraged and disappeared, reluctant to respond even to our inquiries about her intent to continue. This was an important lesson to us as instructors, and since then we have learned that the one place where we respond to every student post is at the beginning of the course as students are introducing themselves. In so doing, we welcome them into the newly forming learning community and model that behavior for the other students. We do not want to see someone leave the group because he or she felt unacknowledged.

However, the same phenomenon can occur in face-to-face groups. People simply drop out or away for whatever reason, and a core group continues. Usually in a face-to-face group situation, although perhaps not in a classroom, people who leave are asked to come back and say goodbye to the group or may be asked to send a note or e-mail to say goodbye. The physical presence or absence of someone in a face-to-face group is noticeable, whether they participate verbally or not. In an online setting people can disappear more easily; their absence is noticed but is easier to ignore than an empty chair would be. It is also easier to be a silent member in a face-to-face group. People know that you are present even if you are not speaking. In our online groups, however, silent members just are not there. As instructors, we can use the software to track their presence; however, if they are simply “lurking” in the course, they are not contributing to the development of the group or the exploration of content.

**When members do not participate or respond to messages—it might be they are too busy, overwhelmed, ambivalent, apathetic, or whatever, but it can be construed as a mode of control in the sense that we don’t know why they aren’t joining us. *Cyd***

Beaudoin (2001), in his study on student lurking, noted that it is still possible for students who lurk to do well on course assessments such as tests, quizzes, and

papers. Picciano (2002) asserts, however, "Students who feel 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). It is important for instructors to pay close attention to which students are posting messages and which are not. Because the success of the course depends on participation by all members, instructors should remind students about their responsibility to participate, either by posting messages to that effect on the course site or through individual contact.

We have been in online learning situations where people were "listening in," whether or not they made their presence known. Participants simply ignored their presence, which is easier to do when the listener is unseen. An observer in a classroom is noticed by the students attending the class; an observer in an online classroom is easily ignored because he or she does not participate in the discussion and, hence, is not "seen."

We have found that even when students know they are being observed in the virtual classroom, their willingness to share on a deeply personal level is not affected. One of us was teaching a class where students were sharing openly their concerns about the program in which they were enrolled. Unknown to them or to the instructor, the chair of the department began observing in order to evaluate instructor performance. Once this information was shared with the students, it did not alter their participation or the nature of their contributions, although they did share some concern about how they might be received. Nonetheless, it is important for instructors to provide an explanation to participants when someone will be listening in but not participating in the discussion and to allow discussion of this issue if it makes anyone uncomfortable.

Participation is essential if we are to learn of and from each other. It isn't simply a matter of arbitrarily choosing to participate or not-this is a collective, or better collaborative, effort REQUIRING conversation and reflection. To be truly collaborative, we must all participate. Cyd

## CONNECTEDNESS AND COALESCENCE

As we have discussed, connectedness and coalescence of the group in the online classroom does not happen instantaneously; time and encouragement are needed from the instructor. Although it can begin with the discussion of mutually agreed upon guidelines for the course, the need for connectedness does not necessarily



mean giving up autonomy or submitting to authority or to the group. Instead, connecting should be a mutually empowering act. This sense of connectedness and coalescence can lead to an increased sense of knowing one another, or social presence, through the shared experiences of struggling with course material and the medium together; connectedness also comes through conflict and through learning to learn in a new way.

I'm not someone who connects easily with "strangers". Small talk is my downfall. I wrote in my article "An Introvert's Guide to Networking" that I need a reason to call my mother. So I find reasons. I suppose in some ways you could say I have a phobia about face to face contact. Until I have some reason to connect, something to connect about. I may have passed each of you in the [university] "halls," but without SOMETHING that connected us, probably just said hello. Now we have a common experience to talk about. *Theresa*

As students struggle together to navigate the online course or to understand the content, coalescence happens. It is a gradual understanding that they are experiencing something larger than themselves. It is greater than the sum of the parts and creates a stronger whole that is a learning community.

This has been a delightful course. Through whatever serendipity was operating, the participants brought together a lovely spirit of engagement, mutual respect, love of learning, and great professional and personal diversity. This was most evident in the virtual collaboration involved in constructing our group handbook project. Everyone and everything seemed to fall together in a natural and positive way—though in my experience such teamwork is not 'natural'. It comes through the maturity, wisdom, and selfless commitment of each participant to the greater whole. So I am deeply grateful for my colleagues and all that they brought to the course. *Barrett*

## SHARED RESPONSIBILITY, RULES, AND NORMS

Our model of the online learning community and how it develops pays attention to the topics of shared responsibility, rules, and norms. These elements compose the purpose of our work together, the policies through which we will accomplish

our work, and the processes by which we will work together. We share the responsibility for the development of the group through participation. The rules need to be fluid, and in fact, there should be few actual rules; instead, there should be guidelines by which we will interact with one another and some boundaries around that interaction. For example, there should be guidelines about professional communication (or "netiquette"), how often students will participate, and possibly even due dates for when that participation should occur. The only real discussion many of our groups have had around ground rules was regarding participation and norms, specifically how much and how often. Our groups did not always agree on this. It seems, at times, that we as facilitators have different expectations for participation than the group does. Consequently, it is important to openly discuss these issues when the group first convenes. This can be done by sharing a set of faculty guidelines or expectations at the start of a course and then asking students to comment on and agree to them. This forms a contract for learning.

Norms emerge in these groups as the process moves along. Frequently, we find groups discussing issues of openness, honesty, and safety as norms we commonly hold and that need to be reinforced. As a group, we may also discuss our goals, communication styles, and the liabilities of this type of communication. These discussions help create a community that evolves emotionally and spiritually and that provides a safe, intimate, and cohesive space in which we can openly share our thoughts and feelings while learning from each other. Few norms of this sort are mandated or established at the beginning of our classes; participants usually agree to norms of openness, honesty, and confidentiality. Norms around levels of participation will be established up front by us and discussed by the group. The other norms emerge as the group progresses.

Communicating interactively needs tools, processes, and roles/responsibilities to synthesize a variety of opinions, to seek out the silent voices, and to keep it all moving. It has been a challenge for [our university] as it seeks to do more [electronically]; it is a challenge for business; it will be a challenge for our towns and government. *Claudia*

It is very important to establish a virtual environment with norms, purpose, and values. In that sense I don't think it is any different from establishing a healthy human environment. It needs to be seen as safe for everyone to enter and participate. The voices must be heard, the individuals respected. *Claudia*



## ROLES AND PARTICIPATION

As for roles, the instructor as designated facilitator serves a number of functions, from organizer to cheerleader to imparter of information. Participants, too, take on roles. The literature on work groups interacting through technology suggests that task and process roles do emerge in these groups (McGrath and Hollingshead, 1994). We have found in our groups that there is always a participant who attempts to keep things moving when the discussion lags, or one who attempts to mediate conflict or who looks for other members when they have not been present in the discussion for a few days. The emergence of these roles is an indicator that community is developing, that members are beginning to look out for one another and to take care of the business of the course as well. (We offer a much more extensive discussion of roles and their importance in online learning in Chapter Six.) In a traditional classroom, leadership will emerge from one or several students in the group. This, too, represents a way in which students connect and look out for each other.

I can see how the groups in this virtual class are being created already. Of course, we have our formal groups but certain informal groups are being formed. We have all started to develop roles, too. Who are the ones that have a lot to say, who are the ones that just comment on what the other people say and add insight, who are the ones that get a lot out of the book, or the ones that have personal experiences? *Carmen*

## SHADOW ISSUES:

### THE ISSUES WE SIMPLY DON'T WANT TO FACE

Community can provide all of the psychological benefits we have been discussing. But speaking from a Jungian perspective, community also has a shadow side—elements that are “buried” and unconscious—elements we do not want to face. Some of those are a tendency to promote “groupthink,” that is, the subtle and not-so-subtle pressure to conform in thought and action. This kind of oppression can be devastating on a psychological level. When one is experiencing that kind of pressure, the result can be feelings of unease, not belonging, not feeling safe—feelings of being an outsider. There is a tendency to keep quiet and just feel uncomfortable when a loud, vocal group is speaking for the community or group. After a while, one may speak out and risk ostracism or leave. If this is occurring in an online

classroom, some students who are uncomfortable will simply drift away and possibly drop the course whereas others may become very vocal and angry. A Native American student with whom one of us was working in an online class was struggling with traditional academics and questioning his ability to do academic work. A very capable student, his frustrations became "louder" as the term progressed, prompting other students to contact him offline via e-mail and also to contact the instructor. Reaching out to him individually was important; it did not solve the problems he faced in a university setting, but it did calm things a bit for him and the other students by allowing him another channel of expression of his concerns.

It may be difficult for an instructor to reengage students who feel they cannot share their thoughts with a very vocal group. When this occurs, it is important for the instructor to intervene and make space in the process for more silent members. Just as an instructor may call on a quiet student in a face-to-face setting, the same may be necessary in the online group, particularly to support a student with a dissenting opinion.

Another shadow issue in community is the relative anonymity that the medium provides. Because students cannot see reactions through facial expression when something is said, they can sometimes be less cautious about what they say and how they say it. Somehow, this creates a sense that they are only communicating with their computer and are not responsible for what they say. Although we have mentioned that this can be a good thing from the standpoint of the introverted student, it also can create a situation in which the usual and customary rules of behavior go by the wayside. One of us was teaching an online class in which a fairly dominant student became confused and frustrated. She lashed out publicly on the discussion board, and when the instructor attempted to intervene with her, she refused any attempts at private conversation. Finally, she was removed from the class until she was willing to work out her differences. In another example, in a class on social change, a student got into a heated discussion with another student regarding gun control. The exchange seemed to be a simple difference of opinion until the student who objected to gun control posted a picture of himself in the course depicting him with all of his guns surrounding him. He then challenged all of the students in the group to comment on his picture. The instructor intervened privately with him to let him know that this behavior was inappropriate and that the picture needed to be removed and apology made to the group. He had not even considered that anyone would get upset with this behavior and complied imme-

diately, stating that even his wife hated that picture of him. In a face-to-face classroom, neither of these incidents would have been likely to occur. The student who was upset with the instructor would probably have approached the instructor after class and discussed her issues. The person who objected to gun control would probably not have brought his guns to class for “show and tell”—at least we hope not! These examples show, however, that because students are unable to see the reactions of their peers, it is possible that, for some, inappropriate behavior may result. When this occurs, it is important for the instructor to intervene so as not to reduce the level of safety that other students need to feel in the learning community.

## OTHER PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES

From a technological point of view, psychological well-being may depend on the hardware and software environment. If a person feels comfortable with those two components, then the environment is likely to feel safe and secure. But the opposite could be true if the hardware or software environment changes or is difficult to navigate. This can also cause physiological problems, such as eyestrain, back problems, headaches, and stress, all of which can have psychological results. We have known class participants who, because of the hardware or software being used, felt frustrated and unhappy with the entire online experience. We have also experienced software changes at various universities and saw attrition from courses and programs as a result. This is not to say that software changes should not occur. Instead, it is important to plan and prepare for these changes by introducing students to them in advance and offering training and the chance to ask questions prior to implementation.

Risk taking for the purpose of connecting with others appears to be the main psychological issue facing those in communities, whether online or face-to-face. Consequently, instructors must be cognizant of the psychological issues that could affect the success or failure of an online class. Just as in the traditional classroom, attention must be paid to students who seem overly stressed or who express a significant degree of painful emotion in their posts. Although instructors want to encourage students to take risks and to post ideas that might be considered different or controversial, it is important to strike a balance and intervene if a student appears to be in psychological trouble.



I find myself now part of the [group] and psychologically involved. And yet, I feel the walls and bounds between us. Out of courtesy and respect, we don't probe each other too much. We often take safe positions. I read that some of you are going through some pain, yet I don't know how to reach out through this medium. I feel safe in communicating with you all, yet I do not (yet) feel a strong individual connection with any one of you. I know you are out there and willing to support. But, we each have to be responsible for taking the first step—to ask for help, to share a problem or an achievement. I suspect inclusion and a psychological connection come only when we each decide to jump in and get involved. There are some interesting questions here about personal responsibility in community. *Claudia*

## RITUAL AS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPRESSION OF COMMUNITY

Phil Catalfo (1993) wrote about his experiences on the WELL (Whole Earth 'lectric Link), one of the earliest attempts at online community. He related a story about John Barlow, who was the lyricist for the Grateful Dead. Barlow was apparently doing an interview on "small towns, real and virtual" and said that "cyber-space villages like the WELL would never become real communities until they could address sex and death in ritual terms. Marriages and funerals are the binding ceremonies in real towns . . . but they have a hard time happening among the disembodied" (Walker, 1993, p. 169). Phil Catalfo disagreed, and so do we.

On more than one occasion we have had to deal with the death of a faculty member or student as an online class was in progress. Participants have created a mourning ritual that included a forum through which feelings and memories could be shared. When possible, we have, with the consent of the group, printed those postings and shared them with the families of the group members we lost. Through these forums, we clearly celebrated in ritual terms what it means to be human. In addition, it is not uncommon for students to post regarding the illness or death of a loved one. The response is usually an outpouring of support for the community member. The following was posted in response to the death of a faculty member:

The night I read about Ari's death, I sat and stared at the computer while tears flowed down my face. His death came less than a week after I lost

a close colleague. It hit me hard. I felt a sensation of disbelief flow through me like a lightening bolt. Though I will later suggest that computers themselves do not embody a spirit, they certainly did during that mourning period. I could not have gotten through Ari's death without the [online] "memorial." *Theresa*

As a result of the sudden death of a student participant at the start of one of our classes, we created a memorial forum online. The posts were printed and read at the student's funeral by one of us and were given to her family, who were amazed at the depth of feeling being expressed by her student colleagues. The following is an example of one of the posts to the memorial forum:

For the past week or so, I have contemplated how the loss of one of my classmates will affect me or if it even would. I have a hard time dealing with death whether it be somebody I never met before or someone that was extremely close to me. I lost my father a year ago and one of my best friends in August. I'm not sure if these have an effect on the way I feel about the loss of Pam or not but this is how I feel. . . . Pam was a challenge to me. She was not a student that accepted what a professor said and took it as the truth. She challenged every idea to the fullest. I remember that in most of my classes if we were discussing something then Pam would always bring in articles from the Wall Street Journal or somewhere that she had read about the issue. I can only imagine how hard it is to try and be a non-trad student, to get along with all of these teenage or older kids that try and blow everything off (the things that seemed so important to Pam). Although I never tried to reach out and meet Pam, I learned two things that I feel were very important to her. First of all, I truly learned how important Pam's degree was to her. Especially from the lecture our class got the first day in HR Admin. and the way she applied herself to everything, I knew that Pam was proud of the fact that she was at school and accomplishing something that she wanted to do for herself. Secondly, Pam lived and loved for her daughter. There were many times in classes that she discussed something about her daughter or just related about her in a story. She posted about her in her biography in this class. I could just tell that she was always thinking about her and cared for her so much. Death is a tragedy no matter how it occurs. I am saddened by the loss of a classmate that I had in all four of my classes this semester and

thankful for the simple lessons that my short occurrences with her taught me. God works in mysterious ways and although sometimes his plans confuse me, I am going to bed praying tonight that Pam rests in peace happily by his side. Who knows, maybe she is meeting some of my past and learning something about me. Rest in Peace, Pam. *Carmen*

It is also important to celebrate accomplishments and positive occurrences in ritual terms. For example, members of the university's track team participated in one of our online courses. When they won a significant victory, we celebrated online by acknowledging the win and encouraging others to do the same. We have also celebrated marriages, births, and other significant achievements during the course of an online class. Celebrating these rituals is an important expression of community.

## SPIRITUAL ISSUES

The importance of ritual in an online class is related to spirituality because part of the expression of the human spirit is through ritual. When we first thought about spirituality and online learning communities, it almost seemed like an oxymoron. However, we do feel that spirituality enters the online community in more than one way and thus enters the virtual classroom.

First, given that online communities are essentially human communities, they are also essentially spiritual. One of the key words here is *essentially*, as we feel that the spirit is the essential energy that drives and connects us all. That is, it is an unseen force that is greater than all of us and works through us. Everything we do as humans, including our interaction with technology, is spiritual. John Decker (1997), in a special focus issue of *CMC Magazine* devoted to spirituality online, stated that "if we confine our study of CMC [computer-mediated communication] to only a perspective which assumes a technological, social, or cultural basis for phenomena [we] will miss part of the essence of human experience online" (p. 1).

Although we are not specifically referring to religion in this discussion, the spiritual nature of the online learning community does prompt some students to discuss their religious beliefs as they relate to the course. We had one student who began to quote from the Bible to support his posts in a class. As an instructor-



facilitator of this process, it is important to accept and accommodate this as a dimension of the spirituality of the medium and the online group. As we have consulted with and trained faculty for online work, concern has been expressed as to the appropriateness of quoting scripture or the Bible in an online course. Although it is not a concern for religiously based institutions, this can become a concern in public or private institutions that do not have these affiliations. Religiously based institutions will consciously incorporate religious ritual into an online course, such as through the use of prayer to kick off the week's discussion. We teach in institutions that do not have religious affiliation, but we have allowed the use of Bible and scripture quotations if they directly connect to the course. In a course on mind-body healing in a nonreligious institution, one of us allowed students to create a prayer circle at their request. The use of the circle was completely voluntary; students could post a request for prayer for themselves or for friends or family who were ill. They supported their request by citing recent research studies supporting the use of prayer in healing. Since this aligned with course content, it seemed appropriate, and other students did not object.

Spirituality and consciousness are closely intertwined. Our spirituality helps increase our level of openness and awareness. The increasing openness with which participants communicate in an online class is spiritual. We find the power of groups, whether face-to-face or electronic, intensely spiritual. For us, the experience of spirituality goes back to connectedness. The connection between people, however that may happen, touches a spiritual core.

This seminar will be long over and we will all be off onto other tasks. It feels sad to me. If part of being in community is a sense of caring and interest in each other, then, for me, a piece of that is already here. I may not have a visual picture of all of you to draw on, but after reading several messages from each of you, there is a sense of personality and spirit that comes through. *Claudia*

Again, it is important for instructors to make room for the spiritual in an online course, although its emergence is likely to vary depending on the course content and nature of the course. Students frequently express a sense of wonder and amazement at the depth and nature of the interaction that occurs online. In so doing, they are commenting on the spiritual nature of their connections with one another.

## CULTURE AND LANGUAGE ISSUES

An instructor must be sensitive to the variety of cultures in today's online classroom. It is not uncommon to have students from all over the globe in one class, whose varying needs and concerns must be accommodated. In some cultures, it is considered inappropriate for students to question the instructor or the knowledge being conveyed through the course. The co-creation of knowledge and meaning in an online course, coupled with the instructor's role as an equal player in the process, may prove to be a source of discomfort for a student from such a culture. Conversely, a student who is part of a more communal culture, where group process is valued, may feel uncomfortable in a course in which independent learning is the primary mode of instruction. This student may actually feel more comfortable with the creation of a learning community in the online class. Culture also relates to the issue of spirituality. In some cultures, the expression of spirituality is well accepted, whereas in others, it is a private matter. The instructor's job, then, in responding to the cultural needs of a diverse student population involves seeking out, to whatever degree possible, materials that represent more than one cultural viewpoint or, when this is not possible, encouraging students to bring such resources to the online group. Creating flexible assignments and task completion structures can also assist with this process. Asking students to share from their cultural perspective assists not only that student but also increases the cultural sensitivity of the group. Recognizing the different ways in which students might respond to instructional techniques online and being sensitive to potential cultural barriers and obstacles are means by which the online classroom, and thus the online learning community, can become more culturally sensitive.

Language is also a concern, particularly when students such as Soomo, whom we introduced in Chapter One, are uncomfortable with their language skills. This is particularly true of nonnative English speakers in courses in which English predominates but is also true of those students who are not comfortable with their writing skills. The instructor needs to pay close attention to these students, refer them for writing assistance when necessary, and take care not to correct their writing in public. We would not necessarily correct a student's spoken contribution in a face-to-face classroom, and this situation would be the equivalent. It is important to make space for all contributions to the online community.

## VULNERABILITY, ETHICS, AND PRIVACY

Any social interaction—any attempt at connection—involves making ourselves vulnerable. We risk rejection, pain, and misunderstanding when we reach out to others. But as we have established, the benefits of connection far outweigh the risks. Privacy is a major issue in community. How much do we need to share about ourselves in order to connect, and how much can we legitimately retain without jeopardizing the essence of community? To some degree, this is an issue of personal comfort, but some guidelines around sharing personal content should be established. In a recent online faculty development session, an ice breaker activity was introduced by some of the participants. The result was some deep personal sharing on the part of some of them. Although we were very comfortable with the level of sharing and did not feel that anything inappropriate had been disclosed, it made a few participants uncomfortable, and a discussion of this issue ensued. The end result was an awareness that the instructor needs to establish his or her own sense of boundaries and communicate that to students so as to help them set boundaries around what they share in class. This can be done publicly if it will not shame the participant for sharing, or privately if a boundary has been significantly crossed.

For me, it appears in postings that discuss frustration with the process, frustration regarding timeliness, lack of response to request for negotiation, and request for revisiting norms. For me, personally, part of it is navigating this on-line environment—how do I build relationships when we're not face-to-face? How are group members perceiving me and am I getting my points across effectively when I can't see body language? Is it okay for me to be vulnerable and really let group members see who I am? Will I be accepted? (This last part is becoming less of an issue for me, but still exists to a small degree.) *Shelli*

Privacy issues emerge in community in other ways. For example, in face-to-face or telephone interaction, we can have relatively private conversations. We can also feel somewhat sure that a message sent directly to someone's mailbox in e-mail communication is relatively private. However, there are no assurances of privacy when we communicate in the virtual classroom. Several writers have noted that people communicating on bulletin boards frequently act as though



their contributions are private and are shocked and hurt when they discover the reality. It is similar to holding a cell phone conversation in a public place. We never know who might be listening. Often we advise caution to both students and instructors online. One suggestion that is often made is to avoid posting something you would not want your mother to read or that you would not want to see on the front page of the *New York Times*. Although that suggestion is made in jest, establishing norms of caution in an online class is nonetheless important. In addition, it is often appropriate to establish norms of confidentiality. We both teach in a program in which corporate executives are students. They often discuss a norm of confidentiality relative to their posts, because they do not want private company information shared outside of the group. Some have taken to providing a pseudonym for their company in order to further protect privacy.

The question of ethics opens an area of discussion that is frequently controversial. Because this area is so new, the ethics around how communication happens are still being debated. There are many places, both in the online classroom and around the Internet, where the notion of ethics comes into play. Those who have used e-mail systems at work probably have many stories about both ethical and unethical uses of e-mail. Increasingly, we see articles appearing in journals, newspapers, and on the Internet discussing this subject, along with discussion of e-mail monitoring in the workplace and spyware programs that allow others to see what websites someone is visiting online. University administrators are being pressured to confront these issues and set standards around them because of the increase in unacceptable and even illegal uses of e-mail on campus (McDonald, 1997). Mary Sumner (1996) categorizes the social and ethical problems in this medium as abuse of public computing resources. Included in her list of abuses is tying up open-access workstations, disk space, network printers, and other shared resources; invasion of privacy, such as gaining unauthorized access to other people's electronic mail by breaking passwords or spoofing; and improper use of computer systems, including harassment, commercial use of instructional facilities, and misrepresentation of user communications. We revisit these issues in Chapter Four as we discuss practical considerations for online interaction.

Sexual issues are another unavoidable concern in electronic communication. Common abuses in this area may include someone posing as a person of a different sex, sexual innuendos in textual communications, and sexual harassment. One instructor reported to us some of her experiences with online courses, one of which

was interrupted by a “peeping Tom.” Students who were participating and sharing some fairly personal material were angry and felt violated when this person revealed himself to the group in an inappropriate way. Although course sites are generally password-protected, it is possible for an intruder to enter. Despite the fact that observers may be present or others may be able to access the site, the group constructs an illusion of privacy, which allows them to continue to share openly with one another (Pratt, 1996).

No online classroom is truly private. Usually, system administrators, department chairs, deans, and directors of distance learning have access to the site in order to work with technical or other problems that may arise. As part of a peer review system or training program for new faculty who want to teach online, many institutions have asked faculty to shadow one another in an online course. Finally, another student can hack into a course, as the student just mentioned was able to do. Consequently, instructors and students need to think carefully about what to share or encourage in an online class, and strong norms must be established for those who have legitimate access to courses for what materials can be carried out of the course without the consent of the participants. The goal should be to establish a balance between open dialogue and caution. If an instructor feels that a participant’s posts are too personal or too open, it is important to contact that student confidentially to discuss the issue. In addition, it is important for instructors to report any breaches of security in the system immediately so that the integrity of the course is maintained. Finally, material posted by students in the course should not be used by either the instructor or the institution for any reason without the express consent of the student. The student’s intellectual property, which takes the form of his or her contributions to an online course, must be respected.

The encryption of messages is the most reliable means of assuring privacy online, but it is rarely employed in an academic setting. When the issue of privacy is addressed directly, the vulnerability of participation becomes evident, as uncertainty remains about how and whether contributions will be used by others. Although this uncertainty should not stop instructors and students from using the Internet for educational purposes, it does raise fairly significant issues that must be addressed as a virtual community is developing. Members must know that their communications are not secure and that they must use good judgment in what they share. Boundaries, therefore, may be more important online than they are face-to-face, and they must be adhered to and enforced.

Guidelines for the appropriate use of course material should be posted at the beginning of the course with a request for clarification and discussion to ensure that participants understand the importance of this issue. Inappropriate use of materials, e-mail, or access to the course must be addressed by instructors quickly and directly so as to maintain the norm of safety and acceptance within the group. If an instructor or a participant becomes aware that information posted to a course site has been quoted elsewhere without permission, for example, this breach must be directly confronted. If it comes to the instructor's attention that a member of the group is being stalked by another member, this must also be confronted and stopped, even if it means removing a student from the class. If a student drops the class, access to the course site must be denied through deactivation of his or her password. These are concerns we rarely have in a face-to-face classroom situation, but they become critical to the creation of a safe course site that facilitates the development of an online learning community.

Privacy is an interesting topic to me. I am a very private person in person. Yet I have been conversing with you about my fears and insecurities and life choices. And though I do intend my words for those who have been responding, I am aware that this is a public place where there are silent readers who now may know me a lot more than I know them. *Theresa*

Privacy, ethics, vulnerability, and boundaries are all closely related issues in the online community. Attention to these issues helps create a foundation that supports the purpose for being there and the purpose of the work together, as well as reinforcing the creation of a safe and secure environment in which to work. In the next chapter, we look at these and other issues from a practical standpoint.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

Online education requires more than a software package that allows an institution to offer coursework online. In any setting, whether academic, organizational, or corporate, it is *people* who are using the machinery that makes the course go. The human element, therefore, will inevitably play a role in the electronic classroom, particularly as we work toward the *purpose* for being together online.

Human concerns should be welcomed into the classroom, not feared, and should be worked with as they emerge. The human issues in a developing online



learning community create a level of challenge to the instructor that might not be present in the face-to-face classroom. The physical distance between members in the community pushes instructors to be creative in how they cope with difficult students who are not participating or those who are violating the privacy of the group. The fact that the course is being conducted online does not limit the instructor to resolving all of these issues online. All means of communication, including the telephone and face-to-face meetings, need to be employed in order to address concerns and deal with problems. The lack of face-to-face contact means that the sense of group in an online learning community can be fragile, especially as it is forming. The group can disintegrate quickly when problems occur.

Consequently, what is most critical for the instructor, even when playing a facilitative and nondirective role in the learning community, is to stay abreast of developments within the group and to act decisively and quickly when necessary. In the next chapter, we reconsider these human concerns plus two more practical elements that affect the people and the work of online distance education: time and group size.