

The Collective Distance Learning Online Community

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Link to site: <https://dward88.wixsite.com/thecollective>

The *Collective Distance Learning Online Community* is a community of professionals who directly or indirectly work with online programs, faculty, technology and students. The community's platform provides members opportunities to collaborate on numerous topics related to online programming while including all essential stakeholders in the conversations. Additionally, members will have access to relevant virtual and in-person meetings and relevant resources to aid in the development, growth and maintenance of online programs at educational institutions.

This community brings together all professionals together to discuss best practices for providing a positive, fulfilling and high-quality experience for college-level online learners. These professionals include: instructors, administrators, advisors and technical support staff. The online community provides opportunities for collaboration within specific topics/forums, interact with professionals outside of their areas (to understand the implications of their work on online learners) and work with those within their own fields to discuss ways to improve the quality of online learning.

Institutions' administrators are most often concerned about the retention and graduation rates of all learners, including online students. Online courses typically have a 10-20% increase in failed retention rates compared to traditional face-to-face learning environments (Bawa, 2016). Administrators can be informed of the precursors of low retention rates by collaborating with existing clusters at their institutions. It is equally important for advisors, technology support personnel and online educators to understand the implications of the work of their colleagues in order to understand the success of online learning environments. Resnick, et al. (2010) explain that online communities should determine the scope of the community by deciding on "the kinds of people to attract as members, the activities to support, and the purpose of the community" (p.

232). Online communities exist for online instructors and designers, but these communities do not include members from other silos which are often left out of important conversations (administration, advising, technical support, etc.); the *Collective Distance Learning Community* will fulfill this need.

Online Community Design

The *Collective Distance Learning Online Community* is comprised of several components: website, social media, and discussion board forums. The *Digital Platforms for Online Communities* (DPsOC) design theory framework was used to design this online community. DPsOC incorporates collaboration, information sharing and collective action into its design framework (Spagnoletti & Lee, 2015). The website, discussion board forums and social media presence allows for community members to collaborate and share pertinent issues and solutions to known issues related to online learning. These mediums also allow for the community to collectively contribute to scalable strategies to tackle posed obstacles.

A simple design, without an overload of content and images, was used throughout the site. The “Three Bears Approach” was used to incorporate “just the right amount” of content to keep members engaged and not overwhelmed with resources which could make it difficult to navigate the site (DiMauro, 2014).

The website incorporates an online chat tool in order to contact the community’s moderators regarding membership-related inquires and for additional information on the organization’s purpose and mission. Membership applications are reviewed by the community moderators to ensure that approved members are affiliated with professional areas associated with online learning. The free membership, which can be acquired by completing an online form on the site, provides members with access to logistical information pertaining to topic-related

events and webinars. Members have access to resources to fuel fruitful and effective conversation in the discussion forum platform which is integrated in the website.

The discussion topics are related to online learning and all members are encouraged to participate by contributing their experiences, questions and possible solutions to posed scenarios. Discussion topics include: Gamification, Mobile Learning, Online Course Templates, Collaboration Online, Video Integration, Integration, Institutional Support, Advisors' Roles and more. Additional topics are added as needed and at the request of community members. The purpose of the forums is to provide members with a structured venue for: connecting members with similar and connected goals, develop, capture and share best practices, promote partnership amongst members, influence student and institutional outcomes and to promote innovative solutions for challenges related to online learning (Serrat, 2017).

Social media platforms, including LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter, are used for marketing the mission of the online community and as an additional tool to advocate for members' working projects, accomplishments and upcoming events. Ngai et al. (2015) states that the public "prefer to obtain different types of information (i.e. informational, relational, and recreational) from various social networks and that social ties have a significant impact on consumer decision processes..." (para. 14). In order to conform to the needs of the public, these various social media platforms will be used purposely to target the appropriate population of professionals affiliated with online learning.

The community requires that members abide by the norms and netiquette explained in the "Participation Guidelines" page. Mack Web Solutions (n.d.) explains that a policy allows a community organizer to "[address] basic dos and don'ts, confidentiality reminders, and simple etiquette" p.135). During the application process, prospective members will agree to these rules.

Similar Online Communities

Various online communities exist related to online learning environments. The *Quality Matters' Instructional Design Association* is an online community which utilizes a dedicated website for only instructional designers (Quality Matters' Instructional Designers Association, n.d.). The community is structured adequately as it focuses only on the work and experience of instructional designers as opposed to *The Collective Distance Learning Online Community* incorporates members from various facets of online education per its mission.

Instructional Design Central (IDC), similar to *The Collective Distance Learning Online Community*, incorporates social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, in order to foster collaboration amongst its members; IDC membership is restricted to instructional members in order to maintain the integrity of the community's mission (Instructional Design Central, n.d.). Both online communities foster collaboration between community members related to their purpose and appropriately utilize social media platforms and websites to protect, market and share relevant ideas, resources and materials.

Conclusion

Each page and piece of content in the "Collective Distance Learning Online Community" was carefully constructed in order to provide members with ease of use, opportunities for development, networking and sharing professional experiences, and to learn more about professionals in the same and connected fields of work. Appropriate technologies have been incorporated throughout the community which allows members to critique and participate in various conversations. Members are provided with opportunities to address the missions of their own professional careers within higher education.

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