

## Building Effective Virtual Learning Communities in MBA Online Programs

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**Abstract:** For years, educators have discussed how to assure successful online course outcomes while increasing student satisfaction and retention. Most literature advocates developing learning communities as the best way to engage students and provide quality online learning.

However, course and program outcomes must be based on individual student achievement. Therefore, to increase retention and create an effective virtual classroom of adult learners, it is first necessary to bring out the best in each student.

It takes time and directed faculty interaction to support each student in achieving his or her best performance and developing self-confidence. These qualities are necessary prerequisites for student participation and building a strong learning community.

For example, first year MBA students usually do not meet standards of online discussion. Besides lacking necessary knowledge, many of them suffer from stage fright. When listening to an online lecture, each student is sitting on the front row as a passive and invisible recipient. But during group discussion and problem solving modules, each student becomes the central figure where the whole group can observe and evaluate his or her performance.

Guided instruction by the professor will help each student develop their academic growth, professional confidences and business communication skills so they become capable of contributing to the discussion which is the basis of any community of learners. Once created, the community will help affirm each other's self-esteem, social recognition and growth.

Therefore, a quality online classroom consists of three major interrelated entities: professor, student, and course content. The dynamic interaction between the professor and each student within the course content will prepare them for constructive business communications with other students in the online forums. Only individuals with independent critical thinking, professional confidence and business communication skills are capable of contributing to discussion thus creating an effective and long lasting community of learners.

**Key words:** online MBA programs, building effective online learning communities, virtual classroom, focus on individual students, guided online instruction

### 1. Introduction

This paper is based on four years of practical experience in teaching online MBA courses and participating in outcomes assessment for cohort-based online programs. A cohort is a group of students who complete a sequence of courses together. Over 200 students have been surveyed after each of the twelve courses and at exiting the program.

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Each cohort of students admitted to the MBA program initially does not function as a learning community. Though students are pursuing the same goal, a wide range of their personal and professional backgrounds does not allow defining the cohort as a community. It takes time and directed efforts to help each student achieve his or her best performance and develop the self-confidence which is a necessary prerequisite for each student to participate in and become an effective contributor to an online learning community.

The second reason why students are not immediately ready to meet standards of online discussion is the fact that most of them suffer from stage fright.

When listening to an online lecture, each student is sitting on the front row, but he or she is a passive and invisible recipient of information. However, in group discussion and problem solving modules, each student becomes a central figure on stage with everyone observing and evaluating their performance.

Introverts were traditionally considered to be the primary candidates for online education. But since they initially do not possess qualities necessary for comfortable performance in the spotlight, they feel overwhelmed when it comes to posting their ideas online.

Shifting the professor's focus and pedagogical efforts to developing each student as a valuable participant in the course makes them feel more comfortable in expressing their ideas and eventually will lead to the creation of an efficient learning community.

## **2. Pros and Cons of Online Instruction**

The shift towards online or blended course delivery and its impact on learning is still one of the most frequently discussed issues in education. Opinions range from considering distance education as more effective than traditional modes of course delivery at the university level to sharp criticism of non-accredited online programs. As a result, some businesses are reluctant to hire graduates who received their MBA degrees from online graduate programs.

Advantages and disadvantages of distant learning have been analyzed in hundreds of books and articles. Online education is being scrutinized by various accreditation organizations (Eaton, 2002), by governmental agencies overseeing the international quality assurance of education, not to mention software and instructional technology publications on this subject. The Student Satisfaction and Reported Learning report by the State University of New York Learning Network found that students were twice as likely to actively participate in online discussion and to ask for clarification as in the traditional classroom. (Shea et al., 2002).

The quality of teaching and learning in virtual classrooms is an important issue for professors and the reputation of their universities. Such aspects of online education as learning and cost effectiveness, plus faculty and student satisfaction have gained attention from the very inception of distant academic education (Bishop and SchWeber, 2002). Research has also been conducted to analyze student performance measures, such as the amount of learning, time to complete a degree, satisfaction, motivation, enjoyment, and participation. The discussion about success factors in online education is still going on as new technology becomes available and more research is done.

Most literature on online learning emphasizes the importance of learning communities as a primary tool for success. The American Council on Education defines collaboration as "Learning enhanced through cooperation and reciprocity among students". The learning process involves collaboration and a social context, where working together helps each student. Sharing ideas in a group setting improves thinking and deepens understanding. Study

groups, collaborative learning, group problem solving, and discussion of assignments can be dramatically strengthened through technologically-mediated learning (Chickering & Ehremannin Eaton, 2002).

Some authors go further and stress the importance of students learning how to collaborate. For example, Alfred P. Rovai believes that creating learning communities could increase the quality of education (Rovai, 2002).

Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt are pioneers in researching effective strategies for building learning communities in cyberspace (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Their research was influenced by the fact of rapid growth of online education and dissatisfaction with the results. Many faculty engaged in online and blended teaching share the following list of distance learning parameters identified by the above authors:

- “The separation of teacher and learner during at least a majority of each instructional process
- The use of educational media to unite teacher and learner and carry course content
- The provision of two way communication between teacher, tutor, or educational agency, and learner
- Separation of the teacher and learner in space and time
- Volitional control of learning by students rather than by the distance instructor” (Palloff & Pratt, 2003).

Regardless of the approach chosen by an educator, all of them agree that successful learning will not happen without an actively engaged student which means much more than creating active discussion forums. The above quoted authors emphasize the importance of creating an efficient learning community in a virtual classroom. The authors provide detailed lists of instructional techniques to facilitate community formation and online instructional techniques to address various learning styles (Pratt, 2003). Though helpful as recommendations for instructional technology, these techniques alone do not guarantee the desired online course and program outcomes.

In their podcast, Rita-Marie Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson, authors of *Engaging the Online Learner*, also treat creating communities of learners as the most important tool on the way to achieving course outcomes (Conrad, 2010). They differentiate between the following stages in creating a constructive learning environment:

- Phase one is “Connect”. Connect with the people in the learning environment.
- Phase two is “Communicate”. Expand the conversation from social to academic.
- Phase three is “Collaboration and Cooperation”. Now the learners are in one phase together.
- Phase four is “Co-Management and Co-Leadership”. We’re all in this together, learner ownership.

Building communities of learners in cyberspace as the primary way to achieve course objectives in reality may detract from the process of establishing working relationships between a professor and each student within the context of the virtual classroom.

### **3. An Online Learner**

Literature on the subject of online education differentiates between a student attending a brick-and-mortar school from that of a student receiving a distance education. It presents a wide range of descriptors of an online student, such as motivation, self-discipline, and clear vision of the goals. I share the author’s statement that an online student should have skills of being an independent learner and feel comfortable “in the realm of textual materials” (Sherron & Boettcher, 1997). Without questioning the list of an online learner characteristics, those of us who have experience in teaching in a face-to-face environments, would probably agree that most of them could be attributed to successful traditional students as well.

Current statistics of online university students proves almost the opposite as far as age is concerned. Younger students choose to learn through electronic media more often than older students. This choice is rooted not only in

the new generation's fluency in electronic communication but in the variety of choices. In many cases a student chooses to reach outside of their university or country to take the best possible course from the best professor regardless of where they live.

#### **4. Unethical Online Education Practices**

Unfortunately, rapid development of online education has opened the door to frequently reported bad practices. In interviews with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and lawsuits filed around the U.S.A., more than a dozen current and former professors from six of the seven largest publicly traded education companies say they were told to dumb down courses, offer lengthy extensions to complete assignments, and change failing grades. They describe a system in which expectations are low, cheating and plagiarism are tolerated, and faculty are under tremendous pressure to keep enrollment up so U.S.A. federal student aid keeps making huge profits for company investors.

"We were supposed to keep students in the classroom by any means necessary," says Lucia Rogers, a former professor at Career Education Corporation's Collins College, who says the college fudged grades and forgave repeated plagiarism — claims that the college denies. "It was all about keeping people in the seats to keep the federal money coming in" (Field, 2011).

Former instructors on Louisiana and California campuses of ITT Technical Institutes have filed lawsuits claiming that they too had been fired after reporting inflated grades or refusing to raise grades.

#### **5. Problems with Some Online MBA Programs**

Since online education has become an indivisible part of higher education reality, graduate MBA degrees have turned into one of the hottest products on the international market. According to GetEducated.com's national survey of online universities, as of 1989, distance MBAs were available from only three accredited universities in the U.S.A. As of 2011, Gradschools.com reports that there were 10,961 online MBA and Business programs available in the U.S.A. (Gradschools.com, 2011). MBAs continue to be among the most popular degrees available online.

The total number of graduate business degrees increased by 47% from 2000 to 2009, according to U.S. Department of Education data. More of those degrees are being offered online. This rapid growth in the United States proves that there is market demand. This demand is growing every year thus encouraging the supply. But market demand is not an objective indicator of a product's value.

There are two distinct trends in the American online MBA offerings. The first trend is development of online MBAs by brick-and-mortar universities alongside with traditional face-to-face delivery. The second trend is rapid explosion of brand new virtual schools based on top-notch technology and powerful databases whose sole purpose is to sell online MBA's. In most cases those schools do not hire the best available professors with a proven success record of research and teaching in traditional brick-and-mortar universities. Because the major purpose of those unaccredited MBAs is their own profit, they have earned the name of "diploma mills".

Numerous articles such as "USA, King of the 'Mostly Online' Diploma Mills" (Hendel, 2011) contain sad proof of this statement. Sham schools continue to operate years after the well-publicized incident of Chester the dog earning an MBA online. These scams pose challenges both for students seeking serious academic training and to genuine, distance-learning programs trying to establish their credibility. "If Chester the dog could get an MBA,

why couldn't I?" is still the question to be considered very seriously (Parry, 2009). "There are now more fake online MBA programs in the U.S. than real ones," says Vicky Phillips, founder of GetEducated.com, a website that evaluates accredited online degree programs and educates consumers about them. Data from the British-based screening agency Verifile Limited illustrates which U.S.A. states contain the most questionable schools and accrediting agencies, with California (134), Hawaii (94), and Washington (87) topping the list. "The database now includes 2,615 known bogus education and accreditation providers [globally]," states Verifile's March 2011 report on diploma mills, "an increase of 48% in just one year.. In North America, Verifile reports there are 1,095 that "operate or claim to operate", a jump of 23%, and the U.S.A. holds the crown for the most in the world at 1,008. These fake diplomas, Verifile notes, are offered mostly online (Hendel, 2011).

The MBA controversial development in the U.S.A. illustrates Vygotsky's statement that individual development is defined and delimited by possibilities available to it in a given culture or subculture at a given point in time (Vygotsky in Campbell Gibson, 1978).

## **6. Effective Ways of Building Online MBA Learning Communities**

Research consistently reports that regionally accredited, distance MBAs are as good as — if not better than — their on-campus counterparts. "One of the biggest misconceptions of incoming students, and the general public as well, is that an online MBA program is easier than a traditional on-campus program." (Poet & Quants, 2011).

Quality online MBA programs bring people together from different paths of life, with different educational, cultural, professional and often international backgrounds. Most of these students choose to earn their MBA online because they live far away from the campus plus their business schedules and family obligations do not allow them to attend a brick-and-mortar school.

Online MBA students who are enrolled in reputable colleges and universities have clearly defined goals and have made a well thought-out decision to adjust their personal and professional schedules in order to incorporate a graduate level program into their busy lives. In most cases, motivation is strong and based on future gratification.

There are a lot of similarities in group dynamics in virtual and on-campus MBA cohorts. A student's character and culture determines their behavior as a learner regardless of how the course is taught.

Furthermore, distant teaching is not distant at all. Students are a keystroke away and accessible 24/7. More than that, they believe that their professor is online 24/7 and expect an immediate response to their questions.

The major difference between a brick-and-mortar and online classrooms is that there is no back row in a virtual classroom — everybody is in the spotlight. Every word is visible and clearly "heard". Students, who would be sitting in the front row in a traditional classroom, are always first to participate in online forums thus creating the feeling of ownership and often dominance. The back row people usually wait for a group to start talking before joining a discussion. Some of them choose to post their individual assignments a few minutes before deadline.

Each professor is a leader in a traditional classroom. Their professionalism and emotional intelligence defines the microclimate in each cohort. The same is true in a virtual classroom. Both virtual and brick-and mortar classrooms are dynamic combinations of the professor and student-students and student-professor interactions aligned with the course objectives and directed towards achieving course outcomes. There is an equal probability that a course will become unproductive or fantastic regardless of whether it is conducted in a traditional face-to-face environment or taught by distant education if the instruction is not centered on each student.

An online MBA cohort can be viewed as a business organization characterized by its transparency and personal accountability. A cohort's organizational culture should be supported by clearly defined rules, non-threatening and respectful environment, as well as encouragement to apply theoretical concepts to resolving or analyzing business issues. It takes time and directed efforts to create an effective business culture. The same is true when creating a dynamic online cohort of students. The professor plays many roles, but the most important is to teach and inspire each student.

This is the main reason why building learning communities through discussions cannot and should not be the first priority in online education. The process takes time, pedagogical skills and patience to lead each student so they develop the skills necessary for participation in discussions and forums.

The second reason why online participation cannot be successfully developed at the initial stage without proper preparation is because in an online classroom each student appears as a central figure. There are no rows of desks or students to hide behind. The stage lights are on each student and everybody is free to observe his or her performance and judge it. Not all students easily deal with public judgment even at the level of an online course. Introverts who were traditionally considered the primary candidates for online education do not initially possess the skills necessary for success in an online environment.

However, eighty percent of MBA students are well-established professionals and many of them hold managerial positions. All of them are proficient in using social media such as smart phones and iPods on a regular basis. My post-course conversations with students consistently reveal that most of them were not comfortable in posting even their answers on the discussion board, not to say anything about expressing their interpretation or referencing their own business experience.

When a hundred and seventy students were asked to list the factors that prevented them from active engagement in a discussion, most of them mentioned fear of being misunderstood and looking stupid as the primary reasons. They were afraid of being visible to every members of their cohort.

Students take it personally if their posts are not commented on by other students. Introverts had more trouble adjusting to the online environment because they are not used to being in the spotlight. Those who considered themselves to be extraverts mentioned that they were frustrated because their postings had not been read attentively and thoughtfully by peers.

This is an excerpt from a student email that reflects many others: "Instructor enthusiasm towards the subject matter ranks among the highest factors. It is true, enthusiasm is contagious. It quickly becomes apparent which instructors are passionate about teaching vs. ones that are just going through the motions... Along this journey I would be remiss if I did not mention that several professors provided that extra encouragement to do a good job. I always felt that I had the individual attention of the professor if I had any issues. ...sincere, caring and positive nature really showed through in your online communications and I really appreciate that."

The inflated value of creating a learning community could lead to setting up a false starting point in online teaching. Formal techniques of creating a learning community developed by researchers could lead to disastrous results which do not have anything to do with course/program outcomes. Adult students learn very fast about their professor's expectations. Discussion boards can be filled with students' posts which formally meet the instructors' requirements and earn "points" in the grade book.

But, in reality, such kinds of discussions are counter-productive as almost all highly structured activities are. They do not contribute to major outcomes of courses such as the development of competencies, encouraging creative growth and self-confidence of each student. The sum of academically correct answers posted on time on

the discussion board will add “points” to the grade book, but will never create conditions for an engaged student or discussion of controversial issues resulting in learning as a process of collective contribution of individual points of view. So, creating a learning community as a group of people moving toward a common goal is a process and requires a complex approach lead by the professor.

Personal accountability is one of the most important business characteristics each MBA student must develop to be a valuable contributor to the team/cohort’s decision making and problem solving skills. An MBA professor’s number one task is the same as it has been for centuries in traditional education — be responsible for each student’s growth. Only a group of individuals where each of them is becoming competent in the subject matter would feel confident in exhibiting independent critical thinking and skills of professional business communication skills. This condition will lead to the creation of a learning community which in turn will contribute to other important goals, such as the affirmation of each student’s self-esteem and social recognition.

As a professor who teaches the final course in the MBA program, I usually deal with a very distinct cohort culture. It could be “formal”: a student complies with all Syllabus requirements, but would never initiate a discussion or express their opinion regarding issues under consideration. It could be semi-formal: two or three students will be pulling their cohort forward to a certain conclusion at the end of discussion period. It could be a combination of explicitly expressed movers and followers. And the best treat for any professor is a cohort that picks up an issue under consideration, analyses it and takes it to the next level by applying it to either a specific business case or individual business problem.

Whatever pattern a cohort has adopted through a two-year graduate program, there is always a “waiting” period at the beginning of each course. Students evaluate their professor based on their initial postings or lectures, and then play the game accordingly.

Competent and confident students can easily create an efficient team working environment when needed. It is each student’s level of confidence that I am always striving to reach in my courses. A student stays in a cohort for two years, and then moves on with his or her life. They should be taught to make decisions individually and take responsibility for their decisions.

Emphasis on developing an individual instead of a “collective learner” helps a person express their own unique and valuable point-of-view which often leads to discoveries and entrepreneurship in business. It contributes to developing self-respect and realistic evaluation of one’s own competencies. A self-confident person is not disturbed by facts they do not know or problems they cannot solve, because they understand the complexity and vastness of knowledge, as well as the impossibility of being an expert in all fields plus the importance of using the cohort’s collective wisdom.

An efficient learning community is built by experienced and invested professors by molding a group of individual students who are striving to achieve their own proficiency without fear and discomfort, but with openness and gratitude for constructive criticism.

Among many tools used to encourage each student’s growth, one of the most important is a professor’s ability to patiently teach a student how to express his or her point of view and clearly convey their ideas. A cohort does not take the time to dig into each foggy posting and usually leaves it unattended. What seems to be ignored could quickly inhibit attempts to communicate in the future.

The ability to see the essence of often long and unclear messages and to immediately respond to them by paraphrasing in a way the rest of the cohort could easily grasp the meaning and respond, is one of the most difficult teacher’s tasks which requires a lot of patience, time and tact. If correctly administered, it does work. If a

student feels appreciated and heard by their professor, the rest of the cohort does not have to invest time in deciphering their disconnected posting. Two or three comments by the professor to clarify the student's response usually correct the problem. All students in the cohort then benefit from learning to express themselves more clearly and professionally. It helps them in the virtual classroom but also translates efficiently into their real-life business practices.

## **7. Conclusions**

The analysis of post-course and exit surveys of 210 successful and not very successful online MBA cohorts confirmed the assumption that it is not a random and temporarily community of learners that determines success or failure of students but a professor who creates a comfort zone for each and every of them. The survey results confirm that success is guaranteed if each student is appreciated and supported in the first place by the professor.

Confident participation in group discussion can be achieved only if the primary emphasis is placed on developing each individual student's competences from the very first online course. Individual student accountability and achievement are the basis of outcomes assessment. Pedagogy should be aligned with outcomes and facilitate professor-student-students through guided participation within the context of an academic course. Educational technology should support the student – professor – course objectives and provide appropriate tools to support development of each student's academic growth.

There is an old saying: "Elementary school teachers love their students; high school teachers love their subject matter; and college professors love themselves". It is my sincere belief that in order to be successful, an online professor has to possess all three qualities.

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