

Using Personal Narrative to Grow Strong Online Learning Communities

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Abstract

This paper asserts that online learning communities using email listservs, or threaded forums, are more successful if members exchange personal narrative. Personal narrative is the short stories of our lives, the things we do during the week, and talk about with friends and partners.

Currently, many educational listservs and threaded forums are just wastelands of dry posts mandated by assignments and requirements, instead of vibrant learning communities.

Study of successful online communities like The WELL, Echo, MicroMUSE, and Craig's List reveal that personal narrative abounds on the most successful online communities. Research on communities, on and offline, supports the need for establishing identity in the online world, where our bodies are not ourselves.

The author's experience with growing online communities is also used to back up this assertion. The author has co-designed and staffed a technical Help Desk for online graduate students, started and facilitated a well known San Francisco Web developers email listserv, and is currently working as a host for hire in Netscape Inc. Professional Connections.

Introduction

"We need to know how people do the ordinary things, not the extraordinary." writes the famous narrotologist. Roger Shank (1990).

extraordinary, writes the famous narrativeologist, Roger Shank ([1999](#)):
I believe the sharing of personal narratives is the most important part of any online learning community. It is the sun that makes communities grow. Personal narratives are the little stories of our lives, the things we tell our mate when they ask, "How was your day, Dear?"

Education, especially online educational, is using listservs and threaded forums more and more. But the growers of these online learning communities do not always adopt the lessons learned from the most famous and successful online communities. Often they flounder as a result, becoming a wasteland of dry postings driven by assignments and deadlines, rather than a vibrant community of learners.

One of the ways to make online learning communities stronger and educationally vibrant is to encourage the sharing of personal narrative.

This belief comes from my study of famous online communities like the WELL, Echo, and MUDs, as well as my personal experience. I have grown a listserve for distance learners on a university [Help Desk](#), as co-founder of the [NoEnd group](#) on San Francisco, and am currently working for Netscape Inc. as a host in [Professional Connections](#).

Personal Narrative's Role in Online Learning Communities

Who am I? Identity Issues on the digital plains

Personal narrative is vital to online learning communities because it creates identity in a world where our bodies are not ourselves. Personal stories and experiences add closeness, and provide identity, thus strengthening online communities.

But why? Because as Shank ([1990](#)) explains, "Human beings are collections of stories. They accumulate stories over a lifetime, and when they are given the opportunity, they select an appropriate story and tell it."

Stories anchor identity for humans, and identity is critical to the formation of any close group. But online you have no identity by merely existing and being seen, as we do offline. As Judith Donath ([1997](#)) points out in her recent dissertation on the design of online communities,

"We need to know each other's identity in order to form affiliations, interpret communications, and establish responsibility and reputation. Yet identity online is problematic. Cues are missing, it is malleable and ephemeral. The body, which anchors identity in the real world is absent."

Thrown into the non-corporeal world of online communities, people tend to float around like gray drones with no identity. All over the Net we can see fabricated online communities waiting to be filled. They are dark with the absence of real individual humans with identities all their own. Vibrant and

absence of real individual humans with identities all their own. vibrant and warm communities, like The WELL, ([Rheingold 1993](#)) or the successful online learning community MicroMUSE, ([Dykes-Woodruff & Walkdorf 1995](#)) are rife with personal narrative, characters, and the identity and closeness they bring.

Peter Kollock, at the UCLA Center for the study of online communities, outlined three basic features required of successful online communities, "Ongoing interaction, identity persistence, knowledge of previous interactions" ([Kollock 1996](#)). But do features like this apply to educational settings?

Yes. Educators need to help students form identity online because people in any group need identity for it to be a group. Imagine a classroom, anywhere, where students had no identity of their own.

Identity is not only needed by members of a learning community, but the community itself needs to have an identity. The WELL's identity as a liberal, highly educated, supporting environment is famous ([Hafner 1997](#)).

Building Identity:

Online communities at this time are made up of mostly words. To build identity using words people need to share experiences about their life. These are personal narratives, the stories of our lives that give our digital bodies, our words, form, shape and footing on the plains of the Net.

When Wired Magazine did a feature on the WELL in 1995, it opened the story with an account of a famous WELL member saying goodbye to life on the WELL ([Hafner 1997](#)). This was no accident; The WELL has several famous stories and characters and is to this day very human and personal. Howard Rheingold, writing about an early WELL conference on parenting, said:

"There is a magic protective circle around the atmosphere of this particular conference. We're talking about our sons and daughters in this forum, not about our computers or opinions about philosophy, and many of us feel that this tacit understanding sanctifies the virtual space." ([Rheingold 1993 pp. 17](#))

In an educational setting personal narrative is just as important in creating identity. One of the reasons MUDs have been successful online learning communities ([Dykes-Woodruff & Walkdorf 1995](#)) is that they let students make fully fleshed-out characters.

Without a classroom wherein students can all see, smell and hear each other, judge the clothes they wear, the moods they go through, identity is lost. When identity is lost, trust and comfort goes with it, because the group ceases to even exist.

Educators growing online learning communities must not only ferret out the personal narrative of their students, but also create an identity for the community as a whole by sharing their own personal narratives.

The "How was your week?" Technique

As Shank ([1990](#)) explains, "Human beings are collections of stories. They accumulate stories over a lifetime, and when they are given the opportunity, they select an appropriate story and tell it."

I borrowed the technique of asking people how their week was from support groups like AA and used it when I started [NoEnd](#). The foundation of the NoEnd group was in-person meetings that involved going around a circle and having each person tell the group how their week was. Once the NoEnd listserv was started, this tone carried over onto it. A few of 300 to 900 (depending on the year) people on the list frequently posted writings about wild weekends, trips, movie reviews, poems, thoughts, essays and rants. This built the identity of the list itself, and encouraged people to post their personal narratives. As we've discussed, most lists have a large number of lurkers that only read. But the effect of reading personal narratives on the lurkers is that it builds a sense of identity to the list as a whole.

Because of the success of this technique, I've started a thread on [Netscape Professional Connections](#) with the title "How was your week". To Netscape's surprise this thread is in the top five most popular threads. People from all over the world are logging in and stopping by and writing about their week before they go on to the specific discussions. Here's a typical post:

How Was Your Week?:

#44 of 98 by (xx xx) Sat 18 Apr '98 (03:56 AM)

My week was a nightmare. I'm glad it's over. Short week 'cos of Easter, 3 week old baby ensuring no sleep, a three-day workshop to run/present on Adult Learning, and a major proposal to write and deliver Friday. Summer doesn't want to end, the hottest Summer in New Zealand 'since reliable records began in 1880'

On the [Help Desk](#)'s student listserv, we frequently sent out leading letters asking the students how things were going. But we didn't just ask; we also told them how we were doing, how our weeks were going. This combination made for a vibrant and supportive listserv that helped students organize student sessions and exchange ideas and ways of completing assignments.

Never underestimate the simple act of asking a person what has happened in their life lately. This is very different from asking what that person does for a living. Communities must care about their members to be strong. Caring how someone's week is the best way I've found to do that.

Personal Narrative on listservs:

On listservs people should be encouraged to introduce themselves after subscribing. Listmoms (the leader of a mailing list.) should frequently post short messages about how they are doing to build identity and respect for their role, as well as encourage others to post similar postings. Key students should be asked to share how they did assignments with the list.

Personal Narrative on Threaded Forums:

Start a topic in every class forum that is named something like, "How was your week?" or, "What's going on". It is also common to have an "Introductions" tread in most treaded forums. Further, pictures can be posted in some forums and should be encouraged as much as possible. Hosts of educational based threaded forums should post short leading questions like, "How did you do that?"

Conclusion

It takes leaders to grow good learning communities full of real people with character. In education, these leaders are teachers.

As we gallivant off into the pixelated sunset to build online learning communities, let us remember online learning communities are made up of people, and people are made up of stories, and these stories need to be shared to make the community strong.

Appendices

Appendix A: A Brief report on an online Help Desk.

Help! It's an online learning community

What worked and what didn't on a Technical Help Desk for Distance Learners at

SDSU Department of Educational Technology

Help Desk Web site: <http://coe.sdsu.edu/help/index>

Dates and Goals

January, 1998. Educational Technology Department, San Diego State University. The faculty hires graduate students Caleb John Clark and Chris Haddock to design, build, and staff a technical help desk for 25 online graduate students, enrolled in EDTEC 540 -- Introduction to Educational Technology, and EDTEC 541 -- Introduction to Multimedia Production.

The primary goal of the Help Desk was to help online stoutness with technical problems; such as, opening attachments, FTPing files, using the class materials sent on disk, accessing chat rooms, or completing their Director projects. For traditional students, these questions would be answered by the Instructional Media Lab Staff, but online students directed these questions to the professors.

The secondary goal of the Help Desk was to design and build a prototype Help Desk that could be expanded for use by all graduate students in the

Help Desk that could be expanded for use by all graduate students in the Department of Educational Technology.

Time Line

Week	Activity
0-2	Designed and posted Help Desk Web site Opened Help Desk email account. Answered students' email questions within 24 hours
2-3	Set up and manned Chat Room and Forum from 3:00-4:00 M-TH.
4	Created listserv for all online students

Results

Email provided the bulk of the technical support. Online students sent 120 technical questions between February. 4th and May 18th. We believe that our informal tone was largely responsible for success of the email (and listserv). Each letter started with a person's first name, followed by a greeting. We deliberately attempted to make a personal connection with each student.

The student listserv was very successful in building an online learning community. 22, online students sent 172 messages to the listserv between March 2nd and May 18th. Again the Help Desk staff set the tone of the listserv with messages such as, "How's everyone doing?" Posts included stories, poems, descriptions of the students physical surroundings, cries for help, venting of stress and family issues. Caleb and I were able to measure the "pulse" of the class by monitoring the listserv relating that information to the professors. The online students "officially" took ownership of the listserv when they coordinated their own study group and chats. As with most listservs, a core of about 10% of the users were responsible for 90% of the posts, with the remaining students lurking.

The Web site was the third most useful area of the help desk, with Job Aids being the most useful part of the site.

The chat area was used for a few weeks during a mid-semester crisis, but was otherwise empty. The treaded forums were not used at all despite postings by the staff. This could be due to the fact that both classes had threaded forums and chat rooms that the students were required to use.

Telephone contact was made with three students after email and chat failed to solve their problems.

Appendix B: Help Desk Subscribe and Unsubscribe Messages:

Subscribed message:

From: macjordomo@etbeach.sdsu.edu
Date: Sat, 16 May 1998 20:56:36 -0700 (PDT)
Subject: Your message to macjordomo@etbeach.sdsu.edu

(You might want to keep this message for future reference.)

You're now subscribed to student! Welcome. We're glad you subscribed.

This is a listserv for students taking distance courses at SDSU in the spring of 1998. It is a student only listserv.

To send a message to all the students on this list, send a letter to:
"students@etbeach.sdsu.edu"

***To keep the signal to noise ratio high, and to keep it as human as we can, please read the following words.

This list is for distance students to share information, gossip, and do what being at a distance makes otherwise impossible. Consider this list your hallway, or campus cafe. Some ground rules.

*No posts that incite flames

*Respect the words of others

*Be responsible for your words

*Give, as well as take, information.

* Use accurate subject headers:

Example: "URL: great design" "POEM: flowers" "INFO: Flash/Java" "HELP: Video?" "JOB: Netscape"

*Reply privately whenever possible.

If you need to unsubscribe to the list please send a message with "UNSUBSCRIBE student" to: macjordomo@etbeach.sdsu.edu.

You can get a list of the commands and the options that this listserver accepts by sending a message with "HELP" in the body of a message to: macjordomo@etbeach.sdsu.edu.

Questions?: et_help@mail.sdsu.edu

Unsubscribe message:

From: macjordomo@etbeach.sdsu.edu

Date: Sat, 16 May 1998 20:46:44 -0700 (PDT)

Subject: Your message to macjordomo@etbeach.sdsu.edu

You are no longer a subscriber to student

Thank you for your words while you were here.

If you would like to give us feedback, please email to "et_help@mail.sdsu.edu"

Thank you.

Appendix C: NoEnd Group (www.noend.org. See a story on NoEnd in Wired News at: <http://www.wired.com/news/news/culture/story/9749>)

NoEnd was co-founded by Caleb J. Clark and Paul Vechier. It started as a group of Web developers that Caleb organized to meet in a local cafe in San Francisco in January of 1996. The goal was to humanize technology. The main point of meeting was to go around to each person and see how their week of Web developing was. Word of mouth spread to all the isolated Web masters in San Francisco and within months there was a very active listserv that grew to 900 subscribers from around the world. Postings on the list ranged from Web development and social planning to the all-important poetry and personal essays. Face to face meetings took place in a warehouse with guest speakers like Apple, Macromedia, Salon magazine asking to present. These meetings still involved going around the circle to see how people were doing and were still very, very, informal. After the first months of growth, Paul then took over running NoEnd and does to this day with Caleb acting as "spiritual leader." From the beginning Caleb posted his personal essays on the list and was encouraged to keep doing so. Eric Wolfram has been the listmom for over a year and also writes personal essays that are very popular. The listserv has gone through wild times, surviving a cut from 900 members to 300 members by changing the address and passing the new one out only at meetings.

NoEnd has been very insistent about not publishing information about the

listserv in the press, so very little information exists about the group [besides the Wired News story](#) and the Web site. The attitude is, if you want to get on the list, come to a meeting.

Suffice it to say that the group is made up of some of the best Web developers in the Bay Area and the signal to noise ratio is stunningly low. The NoEnd list is still characterized by posts about people's experiences, poems and personal essays.

Appendix D: Netscape Professional Connections

(http://form.netscape.com/directory/community/html/pc_main)

I was hired to be a host, and to be part of the building of, Netscape Inc. Professional Connections in December of 1997. Professional Connections is an effort by Netscape Inc. to create online community using Well Engaged threaded forum software. Having gone through a productive Beta testing cycle, Professional Connections is now open to the public with discussions ranging from Web commerce to product forums about commercial software. I host the Issues and Ideas forum.

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