

AlphaRoute Café

The development of an online literacy learning community
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Why a Community of Learners?

Recent research in on-line and distance learning suggests that learning communities made up of peers can significantly benefit learners. The support and feeling of belonging to a group appears to be a powerful motivator for learning, not just any group, but a group with a common objective. It could be argued that learners working on-line on-site, within a literacy program already have peer support in the form of fellow on-site learners, why then would an on-line learning community be worthwhile?

A community of learners whether on-site or on-line would presumably have the same affect, but Palloff and Pratt (1999) found that on-line environments can help learners, especially introverted learners be successful in their studies. One reason given is that the social pressure that often exists in a face to face environment is absent and therefore the environment is a more accepting place for learners, especially those learners who may be shy, lack confidence or who are generally quite in face to face situations. With this in mind, presumably some on-site learners could benefit from participating in an on-line learning community.

Other benefits of a learning community worth mentioning are that learners are able to explore knowledge and content in a way that wouldn't happen outside of an on-line environment (McDermott, Snyder, Wenger, 2002), and knowledge in this environment tends to be generated and not transmitted (AlphaPlus, 2003)

Most of us have had some experience with C-learning (or classroom learning) and whether those experiences were good or bad, we have preconceived notions of how we are expected to learn in such an environment. As e-learning is new for many, these notions of how we learn can be challenged in this new environment. As comfort level on-line increases, collaborative learning with other community participants will most likely be explored, especially in a distance setting where there is no alternative other than to work alone. A recent study by AlphaPlus found that most learners prefer to work with others, either directly or indirectly (AlphaPlus, 2003) and this is not different in an on-line environment. As learners work together, exchange opinions, invite others into their conversations, validate and be validated, a sense of community emerges and the knowledge that is generated is actively generated and not passively received.

As learners begin to experience collaborative learning they may find that there is more to gain by joining in than staying isolated in their learning. Maria Mylopoulos calls this Symmetric Knowledge Advancement, and this occurs when participants are able to advance their own knowledge by helping others advance theirs (Mylopoulos, 2003)

Literacy learners across Canada have been engaged in the use of technology for learning purposes for a few years, but mostly this has been with software. A pan Canadian literacy learning community had yet to be established, especially a community on-line. With this in mind, AlphaPlus, leaders in the use of innovative technology for literacy learners and practitioners, set out to build this community of learners. However, this could not have been accomplished without the help of learners themselves, literacy programs and funders; the Ministry of Training Colleges and Universities in Ontario and the National Literacy Secretariat.

Fostering A Learning Community through the AlphaRoute Café

AlphaRoute is an on-line learning environment, managed by AlphaPlus Centre, which provides adult literacy learners with an opportunity to increase their literacy skills in an on-line, learner centered, non-threatening environment. There are four AlphaRoute sites serving the Deaf, Native, Francophone and Anglophone community of learners primarily in Ontario, but also in other provinces and territories across Canada. AlphaRoute was originally developed as a distance learning tool, but is being used both at a distance and on-site. All learners have the option to be supported by a mentor who is available face to face, virtually or a mix of both.

AlphaRoute provides self-paced learning activities, enhanced by an area for learners to interact with other learners. The Café, features a number of interactive tools that learners can choose from, including a chat room, themed discussions, interactive games, and a monthly Cyber Search activity. Learners are encouraged to use the interactive tools and take advantage of the learning community fostered by the Café.

One of the goals of the Café is to give learners a place where they direct their learning, they are free to explore discussions, activities and games that interest them and hopefully through the support and encouragement of mentors, facilitators and other learners they feel connected to a larger community through the use of these tools. Currently, 2500 learners are registered in AlphaRoute.

The Café launched in September of 2003 with 8 Anglophone and 6 Francophone literacy programs piloting the tool. This was only the beginning; the work to build this on-line community was just beginning.

Engaging learners- The process of developing a Learning Community

Prior to the development of the AlphaRoute Café, information on how other learning communities or communities of practice, were developed, and the best practices in the development of these communities were used to inform the development of the Café. Although there was a plethora of information, we knew that each community was unique, and a literacy learner community was no different. Accommodations would have to be made to serve the needs of the target group. The following represent elements commonly recognized as best practice and which were found to be appropriate for the target audience.

Define the purpose of the group

AlphaRoute has been in use over the past five years with most learners in Ontario, but slowly over the past two years from provinces outside of Ontario. Even though there were thousands of learners on AlphaRoute there was no way for them to connect except through e-mail. E-mail communication is normally used for an intended purpose and addressed to a specific person, therefore e-mail alone was not seen as an effective tool for fostering a pan Canadian literacy learning community where issues and topics of interest could be freely discussed. The AlphaRoute Café was developed as an area where learners could interact and communicate with other learners. The Café is not only a fun place to be, but a fun learning environment.

The purpose of this Café is to provide literacy learners access to a safe environment where a community of both learners and mentors are available to support the academic, social and mental aspirations of fellow learners.

Create a distinctive place for members to gather

The Café, which includes a chat room, three discussion, interactive games and CyberSearch activities, as well as e-mail were developed for the AlphaRoute environment with literacy learners in mind. Many of the tools were modified to present a simplified version of what you would find

on the Internet. The idea behind this was to introduce learners to no-threatening, easy to use, supported tools that would help them build the skills that they would need to use these same tools on the wider web. Many literacy learners are not comfortable on computers and this is often their first exposure to computers. Support in the area of computer literacy needs to be taken into consideration and the foundational computer skills are recommended before expecting a learner to be successful in an on-line environment. No one foundational skills curriculum is used, and most programs have developed their own curriculum for this area of study.

As on-line communication tools developed specifically for literacy learners are not common, The AlphaRoute Café was pushing the limits of what has been done and therefore with no model to work from, feedback from the field, from both mentors and learners, was very important and helped to shape the tool.

Promote membership and participation

Building the tool does not mean that learners or mentors would be rushing to participate. The delivery team recognized that targeted promotional work would need to be done before the Café became a dynamic communicative tool. Promotion of the tool as both a fun and safe environment as well as an effective learning tool was important. Both learners and mentors needed to be convinced that the Café was worth their time and effort. The following steps were taken to promote participation:

- Information about the launch and an invitation to pilot the tool went out to all AlphaRoute mentors and learners.
- Moderators were hired to moderate the French and English discussions. These moderators also joined mentor discussion to promote and give suggestions on how to use the discussion with learners.
- After the pilot a virtual launch party was held in the Café with virtual coffee and donuts for all.
- Messages went out to mentors and learners via e-mail about specific features of the Café or events being held in the Café.
- A learner volunteered to promote the Chat room and raise awareness amongst learners.
- A holiday Chat event was planned
- Designated chat times (morning, afternoon and evening) were posted so that learners would know when to expect other learners in the chat room.
- A moderated on-line discussion was carried out over a three week period to help mentors learn more about the Café and how to use it effectively

Promote leadership from within

Most recent literature on the development of a community of learners suggests that leadership come from within the membership. The importance of this is that community building requires buy in by all members in order to maintain participation. Buy in by community members may be more likely if the members see themselves as pushing the agenda and building the community, rather than an outside force (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002).

In order to foster a sense of community and get buy in, AlphaPlus tried to involve the literacy field in the development and maintenance of the Café. As many learners may not be completely comfortable on computers, mentors were involved to support learners.

- Chat room greeter

A learner who was well known to AlphaPlus and who we knew to be a champion of computer literacy and communities of learners volunteered to be the Chat room greeter. This learner made herself available at certain times to talk to new Café learners in the chat room, to welcome them and to support them in any way she could. She also took the initiative of promoting the Café and the AlphaRoute environment to other learners face to face or through virtual communication.

- Literacy programs as discussion moderators

During the pilot phase an outside moderator was used to facilitate the discussions, and for various reasons the discussions did not develop into an active learners space. In response to the lack of participation, once the pilot phase was over, a call was put out to the literacy field asking for mentors and learners to consider moderating the discussions, and a small monetary incentive

was given. Two programs responded to the call and took turns posting their learner's work on the Writing Club discussion and responding to other learners' work. This approach generated a lot more meaningful discussion and moved the locus of control away from external motivation toward internal membership and motivation.

Create awareness of computer etiquette

Communicating with people you have never met, or that you cannot see can be a daunting task even at the best of times. Computer chat rooms, discussion boards and e-mail have resulted in the development of norms that are not always clear and not always readily available to refer to. For literacy learners who may be working on communication skills or self-management, and for most first time users computer netiquette is a skill that needs to be taken into consideration.

It was clear that Café netiquette was important, but the issue of who was responsible for teaching the skills and monitoring the Café was not so clear. It was decided that support would be provided for learners and their programs, and moderating the Café discussions and chats would loosely be done by AlphaPlus, but the teaching of skills would be left up to programs. Support provided included:

- *Computer netiquette activity*

An activity was developed as part of an interactive newspaper to address issues of computer etiquette and safety on-line.

- *Program code of conduct*

It was suggested to programs that as part of their computer literacy program, a code of conduct be drawn up and enforced

- *No such thing as complete anonymity*

Although learner usernames did not give away their true identity, they were traceable by AlphaPlus and at any time a program could report on the use of foul or inappropriate language or conduct and as long as the username was reported, the learner could be contacted. Few incidents were reported, but in each case the program was contacted and made aware of the offence and asked to handle it at their end. It was made clear that further offences would result in loss of Café privileges.

Allow for a range of member roles

Anyone who has participated in chat rooms or discussion boards knows that people will participate in a way they are comfortable with. Not everyone wants to moderate or lead discussions, and most of us know that lurking on a discussion, reading posts but not contributing, can be just as satisfying as posting messages. By recognizing the different roles members may take, a true measurement of the dynamic nature may be taken. For example; many comments have come in about the AlphaRoute Café discussions from mentors and learners who in looking at the posts never contribute. To hear them discuss a piece of writing or a message outside of the discussion holds as much weight as if the discussion were taking place in the Café.

Roles identified as contributing to the AlphaRoute Café discussion include:

- mentors
- learners
- writers
- lurkers

One phenomenon that frequently occurred in the Café Chat room was that learners in programs were chatting to each other virtually, but in reality they were sitting next to each other on different computers. Not all the discussions taking place, in either the chat room or in the discussion were between learners at a distance. This occurrence of virtually talking while sitting in close proximity came up in the AlphaPlus study, *What difference does it make?* (2003), showing that 73% of learners would prefer to have others around when using AlphaRoute. We have seen this in the lively discussions that happen in the chat room between learners of the same program; and these discussions are not exclusive to the program, other learners are a part of the discussion as well, and in many cases encouraged to join in.

One explanation for this is that mentors may request that a group of learners participate in the chat room at the same time, and that this may account more for mentor interest in the chat room than learners. Not enough info is available at this time to present concrete conclusions.

Promotion of subgroups

Along with facilitating individual membership roles, subgroups of participants are encouraged to participate. These subgroups may be made up of mentor designated groups, such as the Thursday Night Thinkers, a group of learners who together write poetry to post on the Writing Club discussion and who also respond to other messages posted in the discussion. Groups can also consist of learner designated subgroups, such as learner committees, or pen pals. A number of learners have connected through the chat room and the discussion and carry on using these tools or the tools available in the e-mail feature of AlphaRoute.

Getting Mentors onboard

As mentioned, most virtual communities that have been developed can attest to the fact that a community does not develop simply because it was built. However in the case of the AlphaRoute learning community it is not only the learners who were the target audience, and it wasn't just their buy in that was critical. Early on, Mentors were recognized as an important component of developing the community of learners and for ultimately getting learners on-line. The AlphaPlus study, *What difference does it make?* (2002) found that 90% of learners felt that having a mentor available to support them was very important. We can assume that this support is important for the Café area as well. In trying to engage learners we found that engaging mentors had to be the first step.

Pilot Sites

As one way of engaging mentors a call was put out for programs to participate as pilot sites. These sites agreed to use the Café with learners and provide feedback on it. Eight programs chose to participate, but only five ended up fulfilling their agreement. During teleconferences with mentors it was often heard that the chat should only be used as a reward or the chat is just a fun place for learners to meet other learners. Although the chat can be a fun place to meet other literacy learners from across Canada, few mentors acknowledged the learning opportunities these tools made available to learners.

Professional Development for mentors

One way to try and address this issue was to provide opportunities for mentors to come together, learn about the different tool available in the Café and explore ways they could be used as effective learning tools. A teleconference was first planned with mentors from the pilot project, and facilitated by the discussion mentors. Feedback from this teleconference suggested that mentors were interested in learning more about using the Café as a learning tool. Three months later an on-line discussion and chat workshop was developed and delivered over a three week period. The workshop looked at both research and practice focusing on practical applications of the tools for learning purposes. Topics covered over the three weeks included:

- Research on the importance of Learning Communities
- Practical and effective ways of using the Café Discussion Board, Chat room and CyberSearch activities with learners.
- Guided exploration of the tools
- Fostering a Learning Community

Outcomes

Although it would be difficult to consider the three week discussion a success, it was a start. 40 messages were posted and out of those, 17 were from the field. However the quality of the discussions were good and there were a number of interesting points and issues covered. Moderators of Café discussions were able to pass on practical techniques while mentors mainly stated what they were doing in the Café with learners.

During the first week we had a separate chat session for Francophone and Anglophone participants. The Francophone session only had a few participants and did not bear much discussion; on the other hand the Anglophone chat session went very well with 8 seemingly eager participants. However, only one of the 8 eager participants actually participated in the discussion after the chat session. For this workshop, only the numbers of active participants are available; lurkers are not accounted for.

Recommendations for other such events:

- 1) Consider working with the field to have them facilitate the discussion. Give them some ownership
- 2) Assume everyone would want to participate rather than asking if they want to participate. Communicate the details such as the time, schedule and how to participate. You could even be so bold as to ask members to contact you if they were not going to participate.
- 3) It has been suggested that a chat session every few months would be useful to let people ask questions and learn from other experiences. During the discussion there did appear to be reluctance from mentors to act as experts and they may need to ask questions and hear others respond before feeling comfortable being an "expert".
- 4) More targeted promotion. Consider promotion of the event months beforehand and try to bring in people from the field to help facilitate. For this event flyers were sent to all mentors via e-mail, flyers were posted on various discussion boards as well, messages about the upcoming event were sent out just before the event to remind people.

Lessons learned

The Writing club should be a place to celebrate work that learners are doing

During the pilot phase the moderators of the discussions were very active and messages were posted each and every day to try to engage learners. Unfortunately some of the discussions looked like a private discussion with only the moderators many messages appearing. Apart from one or two keen members, learners were not participating and this led to the decision to remove the moderator and hand the discussion over to programs to moderate. A call was put out to programs to have their learner put weekly or monthly writing up on the discussion and moderate any responses the writing generated. Within two months two programs had learners contributing their writing regularly and also posting questions and responding to other posts. Benefits of learners posting their writing was quickly acknowledged. One mentor was thrilled with the obvious increase in self-confidence of her learner who started posting stories. For many literacy learners writing can be painfully difficult and whether the posting in the writing discussion is fiction or a personal poem, it needs to be recognized that putting thoughts and ideas on display for any number of people to see is a very brave act and should be recognized as such.


It is a slow process

Although many on-line learning communities exist, all are unique and a community of literacy learners starts with its own set of challenges. Many of these learners are using a computer for the first time, many are not able to read at a level high enough to participate fully and still others may lack self-confidence and support to try something new. In comparing the number of literacy learners using AlphaRoute, and the number participating in the Café, the number is quite low. However there has been expressed impact on the learners who are participating and the numbers are expected to grow as more people become engaged in the use of AlphaRoute and as the importance of learning communities becomes more widely known.

Suggested next steps

1. Address barriers to access such as how learners with high computer skills, but low literacy skills, or high literacy skills and low computer skills can participate.

2. Work with mentors who are not comfortable using chat rooms and discussion boards
3. Continue promotion of the Café focusing on both learners and mentors, but primarily mentors.
4. Regularly schedule activities to keep learners engaged. Work with mentors to find ways to engage the lurkers, but also to accept that many learners will only ever lurk and this does not mean that they are not gaining something from participating in this way.
5. Technical and instructional training on the Café for mentors.



As with the development of any tool, there will be many versions before the right balance is discovered. Although the literature on learning communities has been a wealth of information, the key to developing a sustainable tool is listening to the users and responding to their needs and wants. As instructionally effective as a tool may be, it is only truly effective if the users continue to use it. As is the case with the AlphaRoute Café, motivation for both learners and mentors will be the key to building and promoting a dynamic, safe, communicative environment for literacy learners to learn and enjoy.

References

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