

Producing Community In An Online Or Web-Enhanced Environment

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Abstract:

It is our belief that for an online or web-enhanced environment to truly be beneficial to its participants, a participant centric community has to be developed. The participants need to believe they are part of the community and have the capability of taking an active role within the community.

To this end a unique online environment was developed that could easily serve the needs of online groups (e.g. structured groups including classes and professional organizations, or unstructured groups meeting online), by fostering a sense of community. This environment is easily accessible on the WEB and can be used in conjunction with Blackboard, WebCT or other online class management tools.

Poster-Demo:

As the trend toward more online interaction and online support for traditional education environments accelerates, the need for an environment to effectively build/develop community has become apparent. Although a number of commercially available online course management systems exist, they were found to be lacking in both sociological and technical aspects. Therefore a system was proposed that would be **participant centric, user friendly, community oriented, functionally robust** and yet flexible.

The overall best practices of departmental faculty – in building interaction, teamwork and community within the scope of the real or the virtual classroom – provided a benchmark for the development process. Both faculty and students (**participants**) contributed to the design of the online environment. The environment was named Community/course Action/interaction Management System to reflect the goal of using the environment to create a sense of collaboration and community among the participants(students) and facilitators(faculty).

It was recognized that CAMS participants would benefit from the environment's ability to allow seamless integration of multiple features.

The environment includes the following highly integrated tools illustrated below for a sample online course environment.

Home Page includes

- All participants are represented by picture
- Facilitator announcement
- Most recent Community Announcement
 - Link to all announcements from most recent to oldest
- Each participant in the community is displayed including
 - Nickname
 - Picture including link to participant's hobbies and interests
 - E-mail address
 - Link to participant's web presence
 - Ability to use Environment Instant Messaging
- Participants can update all of the above information

Community Information Page

- Basic information about the Community including
 - Mission Statement
 - Location information
 - Contact information

Assignments, Notes and Schedules

- For each of these
 - Faculty can add or edit using HTML or unformatted text
 - Will be displayed in order from most recent to oldest
 - Click on a given title to display the complete assignment, note or schedule
 - Scroll down the page to display all the notes or assignments or schedules

Bookmarks

- Participant or facilitator can
 - Add areas which can be up to two levels deep
 - Add a link including:
 - the http address
 - link description
 - Link title
 - Delete or modify the links they created
- All links include the **picture** of the participant

Calendar Page

- Participant or facilitator can post and edit personal calendar events
- Facilitator will
 - View all of their personal events
 - Have the capability to update an event so that it can be shared with all participants
 - View all postings/assignments and schedules for each community
- participants will
 - View all of their personal events
 - View all postings/assignments and schedules for all communities they are enrolled in
 - View all events shared by any one of the facilitator

Chat

- Participant or facilitator can
 - View pictures of all participants in the chat program at that instant
 - View messages
 - including picture of the person who sent the message
 - including the message number which can be referenced in chat
 - Send a message in “real time”
 - Search Chat archives
 - All messages are archived
 - Search between dates
 - Search for messages that include a given word or phrase

Group Chat

- Contains all the features of Chat listed above
- Facilitator can easily setup groups and assign participants to groups or allow easy self-select by participants

The environment has many addition features. The enviroment has proven very robust and easy to maintain. At this time it is serving over 900 participants in 11 classes and 5 communities. We are interested in oppurtunities with other organizations to expand this research.