Planning an Assessment and Evaluation Strategy—Authentically

It is unfortunate, but not infrequent, that instructors throw in assessment and evaluation occasions at the end of their planning process. It’s also unfortunate that, often, these activities are designed for purposes other than to enrich learning—for example, to provide required measurement data to departments or institutions.

Readers of this book know by now that we support a constructivist approach that views assessment and evaluation, and the tools that frame them, not only as opportunities for interaction among learners and instructors, or between learners, but also for increased growth and learning. To this end, an assessment and evaluation strategy forms an integral part of the course planning process from its inception. We will discuss both assessment and evaluation in this chapter; although our primary focus has been on assessment, and how to create authentic opportunities in which learners can engage, evaluation is usually an imperative in formal learning.

In the learning cycle diagrammed in Chapter 1 (Fig. 1.2), four stages are presented in a circular design. The notion of circularity implies a continuum of never-ending process, a view of design that we support. If we assume that the genesis of a course begins with an idea of content, driven of course by need—“Let’s offer a course on the history of music in England in medieval times!”—then attention to assessment and evaluation
will follow immediately in and through each succeeding step: outcomes, strategy, and the actual assessment of the course.

**Learning Outcomes: Planning for Authenticity in Integrated Learning Environments**

Learning outcomes often suffer in reputation, accused of harbouring behaviourist origins or of being reductionist and controlling (Dron, 2007). In more behaviourist-oriented times, a well-written learning outcome was a very lengthy and mechanical item. It comprised three parts: student behaviour, where skills or knowledge acquired were demonstrated through action; conditions of performance, where the circumstances of the learning or action were described (for example, “in an oral presentation”); and performance criteria, where behaviour was compared to a standard, for example, an industry standard.

However, over time, outcomes underpinned by strong behaviourist views have fallen from favour and have evolved into less arduous, less measurement-focused formats that suggest more guidance than measurement, taking on follow-the-roadmap qualities instead of “jump-through-the-hoop” qualities. Eisner’s (1994) “expressive outcomes” are designed for accommodating active learning and tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1966; Wenger, 1998) and allow for more creativity and explorative learning than was previously the case following Mager’s (1997) model.

Modern-day learning outcomes are enjoying a resurgence of popularity as institutions seek ways to establish their integrity, accountability, and responsibilities to learners. In the United States, several accreditation organizations operate regionally, covering the entire country, examining postsecondary institutions for the existence of learning outcomes, aligned assessment, and integrated curriculum.

The diagram below captures and summarizes much of the material discussed in previous chapters of this book. How do learning outcomes contribute to the realization of deep learning and higher-order, critical thinking?
We consider learning outcomes to be foundational to the construction and evolution of an integrated learning environment. By integrated, we mean that a state of coherence and alignment exists among curriculum parts and that the teaching and learning strategies applied will “use active learning participation and interaction [that will be] facilitative of deep learning and require both higher-order understanding of content and the active construction of knowledge” (Morrison, 2007, p. 107). The initial foray into the teaching and learning dynamic entails a clear delineation of learning outcomes.

Costa and Garmston (as cited in Zimmerman, 2013) developed a model of five levels of learning outcomes that reflect ever-escalating levels of knowledge and potential performance. Ranging far beyond the behaviourist conception of outcomes as rote, basic, technical, or mechanical,
Costa and Garmston’s outcomes open the door for authentic performance in cognitive, affective, and social domains. In ascending order of cognition, expectation and “maturity,” their hierarchy of outcomes are described below:

- **Activities.** Activity outcomes ask, “What do I want learners to do?” and “What will learners be doing as they accomplish these outcomes?” The emphasis is on *doing*.

- **Content.** Content outcomes ask, “What concepts or understandings do I want learners to know and how will they show me that they know them?” The emphasis is on *knowing*.

- **Processes.** Process outcomes ask, “What processes do I want learners to develop and how can they show me that they are developing these processes?” The emphasis is on *experiencing*, practising, and “applying cognitive processes. . . to think creatively and critically.” (Morrison, 2007, p. 110)

- **Dispositions.** Disposition outcomes ask, “What habits do I want learners to develop and how can I help them in their development? How can they show me that they are developing appropriately?”

- **Mind States.** Mind state outcomes ask, “In which of the five states of mind (efficacy, flexibility, craftsmanship, consciousness, interdependence) do I want learners to become more proficient and how can I help them to become so?” (Zimmerman, 2013, p. 87)

The hierarchy of domains here is clear, as expectations of learners’ performance increase from basic “doing,” through knowing and applying, to developing the capacity for transferable skills, knowledge, and continued learning (disposition outcomes), and, finally, to mind-state outcomes, representative of the highest order of outcomes that stresses not only cognition but relationships, decision-making, ethics, and authentic behaviour.

Armed with this range of potential learning outcomes, course designers—these may or may not be those who will teach the course—begin to fashion the shape of the course. Working at the outset of the process with the notion of impending assessment, the relevant questions are posed:
• What do I want learners to know?
• What should be evaluated or assessed?
• Why is it important that that should be evaluated or assessed?
• What should be discussed? How should it be discussed?
• What approaches/strategies/instruments will provide the best assessment opportunity?
• How will assessment/evaluation instruments or procedures reflect course outcomes?
• When should assessment/evaluation occur?
• How will learners be apprised about upcoming assessments/evaluation?
• What kind of feedback will best benefit learners?
• How/when will that feedback be returned to learners?

Now, let’s scrutinize an integrated online environment, as shown in Figure 7.1 above. For the model’s components to contribute to the ultimate goal of integrated learning, the breadth and elasticity of learning outcomes, as outlined above, can be brought to bear on the construction of an assessment and evaluation strategy. Morrison (2007), building on the assumption of constructive pedagogy in online teaching and learning, calls for the eradication of the boundaries and siloed thinking that have tolerated the parsing of knowledge into discrete parts that institutional structure (and we, as institutional personnel) handle most easily. For example, institutions tend to box knowledge into courses that perpetuate the myth that knowledge can be neatly separated, assign textbooks as singular sources of knowledge, and fashion departments with some content or disciplinary areas but not others. Regarding learning, Morrison (2007) suggests that “breaking down the barriers between knowledge areas, challenging the concept of disciplines, and creating opportunities for scholars and students to understand the points of intersection between their disciplines” (p. 115) will help us move toward an understanding of knowledge as either a connected whole or a series of parts that are not unrelated.
Many instructors who develop their own courses confuse learning outcomes with topics. With a more accurate understanding of learning outcomes and their potential contribution to both course curriculum and assessment, the stage is set for the appropriate choice and design of course resources and material, interaction, activities, and assessment.

The Assessment Plan

In developing a course, it is best to begin at the end with the learning outcomes. . . . Being as clear as possible in framing outcomes statements is essential as these will form the basis of student assessment and the overall design of the course, and thus will serve the key goal of fostering deep student learning. (Diamond, 2008, as cited in Ascough, 2011, p. 48)

But where to begin? Despite the skepticism and perceived difficulty around awarding marks to assignments, it remains true that grades are extremely important and motivating to learners (Wlodkowski, 1999). Grades can make the difference between success and failure with the institution and in future studies, work, and life. Their importance cannot be downplayed.

In the “backwards design” sense, following the recommendation of designers to work from the outside in, from the desired end result to the beginning of the learning process, we suggest that assignments that will be evaluated for marks be developed first. These “markers” will serve as guideposts for the subsequent development of activities and other types of formative assessment that will usher learners toward attaining grades.

Developing graded assignments or activities is dependent on the desired outcomes that are driving the shape and rhythm of the course. What are the most important topics? How will you get there—what sequential activities will lead to the most difficult and complex issues? How much time will this take? Are you required by your program or institution to set a final exam? Are you required to allocate a percentage of the total grade to one exam, or to an exam and a midterm test or exam?
Each institution or program will set out its requirements for evaluation. Perhaps you are fortunate enough not to have to work within such a designated framework, in which case, with careful consideration, you can construct your own evaluation strategies. The range and variations here are endless, as any search through online syllabi will show. Table 7.1 provides some examples of course syllabi randomly selected from online course offerings:

Table 7.1. Examples of Syllabi for Online Courses.

Course 1: Communications, first year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated Outcomes/ Goals</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provide a general history of media and communication technologies, emphasizing their centrality to social, political, cultural and economic life.</td>
<td>Project: 15% (week 6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increase awareness of the importance of mediated communication in daily life.</td>
<td>Mid-term exam: 20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce learners to the field of communication studies, with particular emphasis on basic concepts, key terms and theories, as well as its relationship to other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.</td>
<td>Annotated bibliography and thesis statement: 25% (week 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Final exam: 25% (end of course)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tutorial participation: 15% (ongoing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Course 2: Women’s studies, second year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stated Outcomes/ Goals</th>
<th>Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Understand, paraphrase, and assess key scholarly arguments. Identify and explain factors shaping women’s participation in technology based fields.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use scholarship to assess popular discussions of gender and technology.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explain how gendered metaphors in science and medicine have shaped the development of sexual and reproductive technologies.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construct your own coherent arguments about relations between gender and technology.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write more clearly and better articulate your thoughts.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Assessment Strategies for Online Learning

Course 3: Philosophy, third year

Stated Outcomes/Goals
Express the basic tenets of major ethical theories and are competent to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of these theories.
Be familiar with major ethical issues in contemporary bioethics and are able to engage critically with material in areas of bioethics.

Assessment
Three timed quizzes, each worth 25% of the final mark, and each consisting of 15 multiple-choice or short answer questions.
Final assignment consisting of two short essay questions, each worth 12.5% of the final mark.

Course 4: Political science, graduate study

Stated Outcomes/Goals
Understand how the Canadian health care system works and identify the key policy debates and political issues surrounding the provision of health care.
Be able to describe various policy options and to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each.
Understand the political context underlying these policy alternatives, and to comprehend how political obstacles can undermine constructive policy objectives.

Assessment
Class presentation: 20%
Policy brief: 30% (week 8)
Research paper: 30% (end of course)
Attendance and participation: 20%

Course 5: Education, graduate study

Stated Outcomes/Goals
Understand the origins of the modern practice of education.
Craft a well-reasoned personal mission statement referring to the practice of adult education.
Consider thoughtfully the individual and social dimensions of adult learning.

Take a considered position on the philosophy and practices of self-directed learning.

Understand the different views of social learning current in the discipline.

Identify different approaches to emancipatory learning, and make strong arguments for a particular view.

Understand the nature of the learning society and of public pedagogy for our time.

**Assessment**

Learning journal: 25% (end of course)

Reflective essay: 20% (week 4)

Position paper: 20% (week 9)

Group project: 20% (week 12)

Participation: 15% (ongoing)

*Note:* These syllabi were randomly selected from Fall term courses in Canadian universities.

As noted throughout this work, our purpose has not been to guide readers in the development of evaluative instruments such as tests and examinations. While we recognize that those types of tools are necessary to determine performance in many situations, we have focused on tools for authentic learning that more often, in the social sciences and humanities, take the form of essays, papers, and projects.

From the material in Table 7.1 above, we cannot presume to understand the rationale for the assessment plan outlined in each course. However, there are a number of questions that should have been, and may have been, asked as these courses and their assessments were being designed.

**Course 1: Communications, first year**

Project: 15% (week 6); Mid-term exam: 20%; Annotated bibliography and thesis statement: 25% (week 10); Final exam: 25% (end of course); Tutorial participation: 15% (ongoing).
Questions:

- How is the project constructed?
- Is it individually done or group-based?
- What were the parameters of the project regarding topics?
- Did the project topics reflect the content of the first few weeks of the course?
- What are the parameters of the annotated bibliography?
- To what topic/theme do the bibliographic items relate?
- Is this an exercise for research skills or for content-knowledge acquisition?
- Is there an occasion in the course to further use the bibliographic discoveries?
- Why a thesis statement? Is it intended to encompass the research area presented in the bibliography?
- Where does the assessment for analytical and critical thinking skills, as stated in the learning outcomes, occur?

Assumptions:

- The midterm exam will cover material presented to date.
- The final exam will cover either course-wide material or material presented since the midterm.

What if?

- The project was scheduled for later in the course, when learners were more comfortable with each other?
- The bibliography and thesis statement were preparatory to a paper that required both inputs?

Observation

There seems to be no connection between evaluation activities.
**Course 2: Women’s studies, second year**

Critical reflection: 20% (week 7); Online discussion: 15% (weeks 4-8); Poster presentation: 20% (week 9); Flipped classroom activities: 15%, 30% (week 10, week 11); Final research paper/project: 30% (end of course).

Questions:

- Are the poster presentations collaborative or group-based?
- What are the parameters or guidelines for poster topics?
- Do the poster presentations spark online discussion? Debriefing?
- What avenue for discussion and interaction is provided for weeks other than weeks 4 to 8?
- What is being evaluated in weeks 10 and 11 during the “flipped” sessions?
- Where are the opportunities for collaboration and exchange?
- What preparation has been made for the large final assignment? Does it build on the poster topic or some aspect of the flipped classroom activities?

What if?

- Learners were provided with a forum for discussion in weeks 1 to 3?
- The flipped classroom activities and final paper/project were integrated in some way?

Observation

Course 2 has a varied assortment of activities that seem well balanced. That nature of the flipped classroom activities is critical, as they occupy four weeks approaching the end of the course. We hope they offer opportunities for discussion, exchange, and interaction.

**Course 3: Philosophy, third year**

Three timed quizzes, each worth 25% of the final mark, and each consisting of 15 multiple-choice or short answer questions. Final assignment consisting of two short essay questions, each worth 12.5% of the final mark.
Questions:

• How are the quizzes placed within the course? What percentage of content does each “reflect”?

• How inclusive or restrictive are the short essay questions, each worth 12.5%?

• Where is the discussion that is alluded to in the outcomes taking place?

• Where are the learners exposed to the critical engagement with materials alluded to in the outcomes?

• Where do the learners have the opportunity to demonstrate their critical competence?

What if?

• The material being assessed in three timed quizzes was assessed in three short papers that focused intently on the material that the instructor deemed evaluative-worthy?

• One midterm exam substituted for the quizzes—if testing in this way is deemed critical?

• A forum was introduced to permit learners to engage with each other over important course themes or topics?

Observation

Course 3 does not permit, according to the information outlined on the university website, any interaction among learners. It offers no reward or motivation for learners to collaborate or learn creatively with each other. It does not seem constructivist in approach. It appears content-based.

Course 4: Political science, graduate study

Class presentation: 20%; Policy brief: 30% (week 8); Research paper: 30% (end of course); Attendance and participation: 20%.

Questions:

• What is the basis for the class presentation? Individual or group?

• When is the class presentation?
Does the presentation prepare learners for their major assignments?

Are presentation topics assigned or chosen? Do they emerge from course topics?

Is attendance differentiated from participation? How is online “attendance” monitored and evaluated?

Assumptions:

- Both heavily weighted assignments are integral to the intent of the course material as described in course outcomes.
- The higher-than-usual (15% is considered “usual”) weight for attendance and participation implies robust opportunities for learner interaction and discussion.

Course 5: Education, graduate study

Learning journal: 25% (end of course); Reflective essay: 20% (week 4); Position paper: 20% (week 9); Group project: 20% (week 12); Participation: 15% (ongoing).

Questions:

- What are the parameters for the group project?
- Are project topics assigned or chosen?
- Why is the learning journal weighted more heavily than the position paper?
- Have learners engaged sufficiently in reflective practices to produce a reflective paper by week 4?

Assumptions:

- The learning journal is an inclusive, course-wide enterprise.
- The learning journal’s rubric outlines the need for critical thinking.

What if?

- There was less emphasis on reflective work.
Determining Authenticity and Engagement

How can authenticity be introduced into each of these courses and their assignments? How can engagement among learners be encouraged in order that knowledge can be shared, integrated, elaborated upon, and further built in the constructivist way? Our caveat here is that we have randomly selected these courses as examples; we do not condone the assignment structure in each course. The difference in philosophical approach evidenced by these assignment structures should be apparent to readers. Still, all examples can provide fodder for contemplating the addition of strategies and activities to facilitate more—quantitatively or qualitatively—authentic and engaging learning occasions.

In the communications course, Course 1, almost half the course’s grades result from examinations. The project, worth only 15%, is most probably an individual exercise that might afford learners the opportunity to create something authentic—that is, of real-life value to them, of sustained interest, and possibly a topic that could be further developed in the annotated bibliography assignment. Course 1’s second learning outcome, “increase awareness of the importance of mediated communication in daily life,” opens the door to authenticity for its learners. Aside from the tutorial participation, which no doubt gives learners a chance to bring themselves and their experiences to ongoing discussion and engagement with peers, Course 1 offers no other chance for authentic assessment. While it is possible that on either or both of the course’s exams, there are questions that allow learners to analyze, critique, or apply personal experiences in their responses to questions, it is difficult to encourage authenticity in this type of restricted, time-pressured, and directed situation.

Course 2 on women’s studies features three outcomes with which learners could authentically engage (the first, third, and fourth). Given this framework, the critical reflection paper which learners produce for week 7 could nicely permit them to enter into an authentic study of the course’s themes, perhaps reflecting on their own relationship to technology, to science, or any aspect of gendered relationships in the areas under examination. If the critical reflection paper were designed to build on online discussion topics of weeks 1 to 4, the alignment between assignments
and activities would enhance learners’ opportunity to build knowledge connections and develop a sustained interest in an area or areas of the course. Likewise, the poster presentation that follows, especially if it were organized as a group activity, could strategically mesh learners and topics in collaborative learning. The same could be hoped from the flipped classroom activities of weeks 10 and 11, although we don’t know what they are.

And whether the final assignment is an individual effort or a group effort, it holds the potential to serve as a capstone piece or an expansion of a prior interest. At 30% weighting, the final assignment is also substantial enough to encompass an entirely new topic for exploration and still offer the breadth and depth for a critical or applied study. Course 2 lives up to its outcome expectations in that it gives learners ample opportunity for writing and development, with sufficient time between the two major written assignments for learners to contemplate constructive feedback and apply new learnings to the major project. And although we don’t know which activities will represent the flipped classroom in weeks 10 and 11, it’s possible that more writing opportunities of lesser intensity are contained in that time period.

The philosophy course, Course 3, appears in its assessment structure to be very traditional and suggests that it has been adapted, without much design, from a face-to-face classroom experience. In that classroom, we surmise, there may have been some discussion between learners and instructor, but it is just as likely that it may have been very lecture-oriented. We do not discern, in this online version, any consideration of constructivist thinking that might be reflected in assignments or activities that offer learners the chance to gather together in knowledge-building occasions. Nor do we see the opportunity for learners to involve themselves deeply in exploring course concepts through prolonged investigation of topics, through group discussion and exchange, or in creative projects. Tests and examinations are more likely to evaluate surface learning rather than the deep learning that constructivist educators strive for (Garrison & Archer, 2000; Hiltz, Shen, & Swan, 2006). With the caution that our observer-eyes cannot know the story of this course with certainty, we feel safe in saying that it offers no opportunity for authentic assessment.
It is customary in graduate work in the social sciences and humanities for assignments to offer learners hearty opportunities to grapple with content: big papers, big projects—assignments that aptly challenge learners to apply their research, organizational, and writing skills to the task. Course 4, a graduate course in political science, reflects a graduate-level format in its assessment plan. However, the content-driven outcomes do not offer or demand, ostensibly, any opportunity for learners to integrate their own experiences with the material. As mature adults (an assumption), and citizens of this or another country, it’s reasonable to expect that learners have experiences with the health care system, that they have succeeded or failed within its various purviews, and that they have opinions and historical evidence that could bear on discussions of policy, barriers, and any numbers of “conditions” within the health care system.

Optimally, their experiences will in fact be brought to the table in the discussion forums regardless of the absence of a learning outcome that captures the value or potential contribution of that experience. As an example of the foregoing critique, the second learning outcome, which currently reads, “Be able to describe various policy options and to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each” could be recast to read: “Be able to describe various policy options and to analyze the advantages and disadvantages of each with reference to the experience of citizens experiencing the health care system.”

The fifth and last course chosen for examination is also a graduate course and clearly inspired by constructivist philosophy. Three of the six statement outcomes indicate good potential for learners to engage authentically with course material. Correspondingly, three of the five assignments requiring evaluation appear to accommodate learners’ responses to their learning experience(s), present and past. Both the group project (20%) and the discussion forum participation grade (15%) provide opportunities for knowledge-building and collaborative work.

Of these online courses randomly chosen for scrutiny, four out of five stipulate from 15 to 20% for participation in ongoing discussion. It’s likely that the discussions are facilitated through a Learning Management System such as Moodle, with its system of forums providing a home for themed and threaded asynchronous discussion. How do
learners qualify for participation grades for discussion? How can these discussions foster authenticity? What is the relationship between community and participation?

**Community and Participation**

Education scholars have amply researched topics pertaining to participation, its parameters, expectations, and protocols (Anderson, 2003; Conrad, 2014; Holmberg, 1986; Kirschner, Strijbos, & Kreijns, 2004; Lee, Srinivasan, Trail, Lewis & Lopez, 2011; Swan, Shen & Hiltz, 2006; Swan, Schenker, Arnold, & Kuo, 2007). The consensus among researchers is that participation is good: it opens the door to critical exchange, when appropriately facilitated; it increases sociability online and, in doing so, for most learners, increases their sense of course satisfaction; and it broadens, “civilizes,” and democratizes discourse. Participation also builds trust (Cheng, Nolan, & Macaulay, 2013), which is essential for learning at a distance when learners are not able to make the kinds of visual person-assessment that we have been trained to make since childhood. Participation in the online conversation among learners and instructor also offers an easy foothold for both authentic learning and assessment.

Schwier (2007), in discussing online, interaction-related senses of belonging in terms of metaphor, concluded that, in spite of the complexities of metaphorical language and intent, the notion of “community” was adequate, in fact superior, in describing the online environment. Drawing from Selznick’s (1996) discussion of community—which did not arise from a virtual environment but rather a traditional “land-based” environment, Schwier cites his seven elements of communities: history, identity, mutuality, plurality, autonomy, participation, and integration. In updating Selznick’s list, Schwier adds his own: an orientation to the future, technology, and learning (2007, p. 69). In the virtual learning environment, the relationship of participation to community might not be so clear. However, research demonstrates that participation by learners in discussion and online activity creates community, and a robust community invites participation (Conrad, 2005, 2002).
Creating and maintaining a sense of community in online learning has been widely acknowledged as critical for learner comfort and affective satisfaction, which are two major factors for success (Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009; Conrad, 2005; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005. Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Veletsianos & Navarrete, 2012). Interestingly, in addition to the many academic resources available on this topic, the Internet is rife with “lay” sites from the business, commercial, self-help, and leadership worlds.

It is important to note that online community is different from the Community of Inquiry (CoI). CoI, as discussed in Chapter 1, proposes an inclusive model for the online learning environment, involving three foundational “presences”—teaching, social, and cognitive—and their interaction. It has been discussed that the CoI model and its underlying constructivist philosophy creates fertile ground for implementing collaborative, group, and “deep learning” assessments in higher education. Online community, on the other hand, refers to “a general sense of connection, belonging, and comfort that develops over time among members of a group who share purpose or commitment to a common goal” (Conrad, 2005, p. 1). Community is associated with belonging, safety, trust: a place to gather, exchange, and share.

Scholars of online learning have come to understand how the establishment of a firm sense of community among learners contributes to their learning success and/or satisfaction. We write “and/or” because the two measures are indeed different. That said, community is generally valued for its contribution to both. But how does community figure in to online assessment? Its benefit is no doubt tacitly understood by both online learners and instructors. Spelling it out, as we do here, is akin to explaining that we can stand firmly on solid ground, but we cannot stand firmly on quicksand—a “no-brainer,” as some would say.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2000) CoI model envisions the online learning environment and shows that the anticipated outcomes of that environment are dependent on the integration of its three “presences” in such a way that learners and instructor together create a secure—actually a closed—learning environment. This closed learning environment offers not only academic intimacy but also the safety and comfort required for
learners to share their stories, knowledge and, in many cases, professional and personal confidences, fears, and hopes. The environment is, quite literally, closed. LMS courses are password-protected so that only registered learners can access the course materials and all discussion therein. Behind the virtual doors of the online course, the sense of community, as defined above, gives learners the confidence to interact comfortably with their colleagues. “Students’ comfort with sharing experiences enabled them to be supportive and encouraging of one another as they worked to understand and learn from one another” (Kayler & Weller, p. 140).

Learners’ comfort levels are expressed in many ways in online discussion. Anecdotally, many learners have expressed to the authors, both formally (in learning journals) and informally (in email correspondence), the importance of their sense of comfort within the community for their ability and desire to participate, or the opposite. Online instructors can often watch a learner’s confidence and comfort level grow as a course proceeds. Online instructors can also watch a learner recede or fade after experiencing some type of negativity online—from a disagreement with another student or an earnest posting that received no take-up from the group; there are any number of circumstances that may cause a learner’s comfort level to fall during a course.

In most online courses an evaluative grade is awarded for participation. The reason for this is to encourage observable participation rather than the “lurking” behaviour that many learners have grown accustomed to in large and impersonal face-to-face classes. Active participation is especially expected in online graduate courses, where the analogy is made to sitting around the seminar table engaging in discussion prompted by responses to course materials or to an instructor-led or student-led presentation. How can shy, unsure, or novice learners be encouraged to come forth with their ideas and responses in a medium where there is no hiding? How can confidence be inspired in a medium where the written word is captured, enjoying an archival presence for a considerable length of time?

Building community is the best way—perhaps the only way?—to foster this kind of interaction and participation. The theoretical base underpinning our belief in the value of community has been explored through discussion of the work of Holmberg (1986), Moore (1989), and Garrison

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and Anderson (2003). In 2004, Kirschner, Strijbos, and Kreijns suggested the “integrated electronic collaborative learning environments” (p. 24) model, for which they defined successful learning environments in terms of tasks: ownership, character, and control. The integration of learners with all domains of the course—including other participants—is critical to the formation of community.

Community is created in various ways and is well described in the literature (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Bullen, 1998; Conrad, 2005; Eastmond, 1995; Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Harrison & West, 2014; Mayes, 2006). The University of Massachusetts’s online teaching handbook, a tidy and useful volume, outlines briefly how to achieve a sense of community within an online group, addressing issues of student-to-student interaction, student-to-faculty interaction, and tone. They suggest creating occasions where students must interact with each other, which of course is sensible; however, the “devil is in the details,” which in this case includes the nature of task, timing, and tone. We have taken the suggestions in the University of Massachusetts’s online teaching handbook (Poe & Stassen, n.d.) and meshed them with our own:

• Limit the size of discussion groups. Smaller groups create a greater sense of safety and encourage more meaningful interaction. However, leaving students to interact in a small group throughout an entire course limits their learning experiences and growth and may also set them up for difficulties if the small group does not coalesce well personality-wise. A better idea is to create a purpose for small-group activities but to maintain the large-group function as well. In a large online group, this formula may have to be modified for logistical reasons.

• Provide an opportunity for students to introduce themselves to the group at the beginning of the semester. This is best handled in an “icebreaker,” in an informal way. Make it fun. Ideas include answering questions such as: “Tell us something unique about yourself”; “Where do you live, and why?”; “What is your goal in enrolling in this course?” While creating these kinds of activities for learners, it is important to provide latitude for those who do not want to contribute personal information.
• Establish an informal forum—a “lounge” or a “café”—where learners can share information and resources that might not be directly related to stipulated course activities. As an example, a “Cutest Dog Contest” elicits plentiful light-hearted responses. Those who are not interested do not have to participate.

• Pair each student with a “buddy” in the course to give students a source of support in the online classroom. Students can be matched using a variety of criteria: location, place in program, level of expertise with technology.

• Use learners’ names in your responses as instructor to personalize the response, while broadening the response to include all learners. It is important not to reply one-on-one or establish this precedent in online forum postings. The model for online discussion is many-to-many, for pedagogical and logistical reasons. Establish “public-ness,” not privacy.

• That said, the climate of safety and trust is enhanced if instructors carefully direct their critical, or sensitive comments to learners privately. Learners should not be embarrassed in the public forum.

• Exercise the utmost in respect and care for each learner. Ask permission before commenting on areas requiring sensitivity (culture, race, politics, etc.). If you plan to use student assignments as examples, seek permission first, and take care to omit any personal references so that the student’s identity remains anonymous.

• Encourage learners directly to interact with other learners: “John, based on your insightful comment yesterday about X, can you respond to Allan’s question in today’s forum?” Ensure when you do this that the learners are competent and able to contribute accordingly.

• Keep your own tone, as instructor, casual and friendly. Help learners fit into this ambience. Many novice learners feel that a sense of formality is necessary to contribute. It is not. Learners come to enjoy a sense of informality; it is easier for them to contribute knowing they will not be held to APA style or required to cite sources. Online discussion is not for essay writing or formal
assessment. There are other occasions for learners to demonstrate that they can master academic conventions. Give them the freedom here, in discussion forums, to discuss, explore, and roam, if necessary.

- As an instructor, be accessible and present. Instructor-presence has been shown to be one of, if not the most, important factor in successful online courses (Kupczynski, Ice, Weisenmayer, & McCluskey, 2010; Lehman & Conceicao, 2011). Your constant presence aids in creating an atmosphere of shared labour, togetherness, and community.

The increased availability of networking and social media tools in recent years provides more options for creating community online. A 2003 Duke University initiative with iPods demonstrated that digitally native learners easily gravitated to social media for collaborative learning and are comfortable with being technologically linked to the group in a variety of ways (Conrad, 2014). The opportunity for blogs and wikis are now built into many LMSs. YouTube videos are easily mounted in courses. Research has shown Twitter to be a useful, “informalizing” and accessible strategy for creating community (Rohr, Costello, & Hawkins, 2015).

Building and maintaining a cohesive, inviting sense of community among online learners contributes to and fosters their online presence, which in turns permits solid ground upon which instructors can provide ongoing formative assessment during course activities. Each instructor-response post has the potential to highlight important points, critical thinking, insightful ideas, and potential and real connections to other students’ thoughts and ideas. Over time and with an appropriate level of confidence, learners themselves will point out the same realizations in each other’s work. In this way, the assessment of learners’ participation reflects both cognitive ability and engagement.

If the course’s opportunities for discussion via seed questions, or whatever stimuli instructors have used, have been pedagogically well constructed, learners’ response-posts should also reflect the type of authenticity previously described. That is, they should have been given the opportunity to tackle issues that resonate with their real-life experience:
issues that can have a life over several parts of the course; issues that are current and meaningful; issues that may be ill-defined; and issues that require not a rote or “closed” yes-no response but an appropriate level of critical thought.

Healthy online community contributes in other ways to other types of assessment. Group work is a popular strategy for online learners in that it accomplishes several pedagogical and logistical goals: it provides a venue for learners to work together and share and build knowledge, and it relieves some of the routine of online learning, which can at times become oppressive to learners. Very practically speaking, for instructors, assigning learners to group projects can reduce the evaluation and assessment load considerably.

Online group projects, in our experience, are fairly universally reviled by learners, especially at the outset. There are many valid reasons for learners’ distaste for this kind of activity, including those that apply to group projects generally, as outlined in Chapter 5. Learners write consistently in course evaluations and learning journals about group members who do not perform appropriately. Learners often jockey for position within their group and learning styles compete against each other. Logistically, a range of time zones can make synchronous interaction by Skype, telephone, or chat awkward. Still, with proper management, a pleasant ambience, and a sense of community already established within the group, group projects can succeed and provide fruitful learning experiences for their members.

To assist this process, it is recommended that roles be created for group members to fill (Garrison & Archer, 2000; Poe & Stassen, n.d.). Roles, such as “leader,” “reporter,” “communicator,” can either be assigned or negotiated among members. In an adult group, negotiation would be the preferred method. Other suggestions to strengthen the integrity of the group include “taking the group’s pulse” from time to time, requesting that the group submit a report on its processes and functioning, and having the group self-assess its performance. Although none of these techniques guarantees a flawless group experience, they can smooth the path. We also suggest that introducing a group project in the last half or last third of a course is preferable to introducing it early on in the course before
the class’s sense of community has had time to gel. A fuller discussion of group work can be found in Chapter 5.

Online partnerships, role play, and team activities such as debates provide more opportunities in the online classroom for learners to use the positive effects of engaged community to move toward authentic assessments, where “positive” means fulfilling the values of constructivist pedagogy and improving learners’ subsequent abilities to build and share knowledge with their colleagues. These activities and their assessments are enhanced through the fostering of community, following the themes outlined below:

- Learners can form partnerships with other learners with whom they feel comfortable or share a situational bond (geographical, familial, cultural) they’ve been made aware of through informal or formal exchanges;
- Learners will engage more eagerly and consistently in activities that require organizational effort—as compared to solitary activities—when they have some connection with other learners;
- Learners may have a better idea, from previous informal or formal exchanges, of who they can best learn from or collaborate with.

Partnerships or collaborations for further research, study, or work-related ventures can spring out of positively established relationships from online engagement.

### Concluding Thoughts

Chapter 7 discussed the hows and whys of planning assessment and evaluation strategies. As emphasized throughout, incorporating the assessment plan into the learning cycle is key to successful learning. Whereas learners’ work, produced in whatever format is appropriate, is usually straightforward to grade, the participation issue is more contentious. Participation, exercised in a climate of safe and trusting learning, is connected to the development of online community, and the successful establishment of community in online engagement is essential.