

Sketchy Business Plan for Tomorrow's University

What Is a Learning Community?

Learning communities allow people throughout the world who are not well served by traditional higher education systems to learn in a community focused on a cohesive area of interest.

A *cohesive area of interest* is often called the community *domain*. An example might be a learning community focused on web design and development.

Learning communities exist predominantly online and adhere to the precepts of openness in standards, source code, and content.

What Does It Cost?

Learning is free. There are no fees.

How Do Learning Communities Work?

Learning communities are based on projects rather than courses; work teams and individual exploration rather than classes; and collaboration rather than competition.

Domain knowledge varies widely among members of a learning community. New members typically begin by playing and touring in the domain, meeting other people doing the same thing, examining the work created by the learning community, participating in learning activities, getting acquainted with community members, and generally deciding if they'd like to get more involved.

For casual and self-directed learners these opportunities are usually sufficient. If learners want more, however, then projects and work teams provide a way for less experienced and more experienced members to work and learn together.

Who Can Join?

All members self-select themselves into a learning community based on interest in the domain. This means there is often considerable diversity in ages, nationalities, and backgrounds.

Members of one learning community are frequently members of several other learning communities and may play different roles in each. Because members may join, leave, and re-join as their needs, circumstances and interests change, learning communities are characteristically fluid except for a core group of people who provide continuity.

Can I Get a Credential?

Yes and no. A learning community is not a university, so the answer is no, you cannot get a credential in the traditional sense of a formal degree. But learning communities recognize that credentials serve a useful external purpose (e.g., in job markets). Each member of a learning community has his or her own

electronic portfolio. Portfolios provide all members a means to preserve, document, and present their learning and project histories. Portfolios also accompany a member from one learning community to another, so they provide clear and ample demonstration of proficiency for use in job markets. Upon request from a member and recommendation by the learning community, certificates of competency are also awarded that reflect level of attainment (much like belt color in martial arts). If a person has participated broadly in many learning communities, she or he may petition a coordinating organization for even broader certification. This certification is similar to a degree but more expressive of each person's uniqueness and strengths.

How Do Projects Work?

Projects vary considerably from one learning community to another. But typically each learning community has three sources of strength. One is domain knowledge. The second is the educational content that learning communities create. And the third is other learning communities. Projects develop around these sources of strength.

Examples include contract work, consultancies, workshops, and training for various for-profit, public, non-profit, and startup organizations.

What Learning Communities Exist?

There are now thousands of learning communities focused on nearly everything imaginable that ties people together and provides a mechanism to explore, work, and learn. Popular learning communities that are near capacity spawn like-minded communities elsewhere. So there are often many learning communities focused on a similar domain. Because membership is fluid across and within learning communities, there are usually ample opportunities to join a community of interest.

Can You Provide an Example of a Learning Community?

Sure. Let's consider a learning community focused on web design and development. This community includes teachers, artists, information architects, usability experts, educational designers, programmers, graphic designers, CSS gurus, database architects, practitioners, researchers, consultants, entrepreneurs and others.

A core group of these people provide stability to the community. Others use the learning community for spot work on specific projects. Some people provide a portion of their work gratis, but for most it is a source of livelihood. Besides that it's fun.

How Large Are Learning Communities?

There's still a lot of experimentation happening here. At first some learning communities grew to large sizes, but it seems increasingly clear that group cohesion suffers at some point. Many learning communities now tend to be modest in size (e.g., a couple hundred members), but benefit from scale effects through relationships with other learning communities.

How Does a Learning Community Survive Financially?

Learning communities are legally organized as limited liability companies that serve the public good. They are hybrids of for-profit and non-profit organizational forms. Profits are retained or distributed to the community rather than founders or shareholders. The meaning of community here includes distribution of profits to coordinating organizations for sharing with other learning communities.

The legal structure of learning communities creates some unique revenue opportunities. Profits from project work provide an important source of revenue. Somewhat surprisingly donations from learners, their families, and the general public are also significant. Apparently free learning and the public goals of learning communities seem to have broad appeal. Foundations, international organizations, and other donor-related funding provide support for many creative new initiatives that learning communities undertake. Some revenue comes from advertising opportunities such as Google AdSense, but it is generally small and commonly used only to supplement revenue as needed.

Learning communities are meant to be market sensitive. Good ideas should succeed and poor ideas should fail quickly. Sensitivity to market conditions, however, benefits some learning communities more than others. The small amount of government funding for learning communities goes to those communities with good ideas but without much market appeal.

What Do I Need to Join?

Anyone can explore, play, and learn in learning communities. But to undertake broader domain learning and engage in project work, you need the prior background to actually benefit from the opportunities that a learning community provides. This capability can be mutually determined as new members play and get oriented in a specific learning community.

In addition, you'll need an inexpensive netbook or a mobile device and broadband access to the Internet. If you don't have Internet access or the necessary hardware, coordinating organizations may be able to help. Sometimes there are resources they can recommend that will allow you to participate in a learning community.

What is a Coordinating Organization?

Coordinating organizations serve several functions. Principally they provide back-end support to learning communities for a fee. This includes such things as project accounting, payroll, and membership services. Coordinating organizations also help potential members identify learning communities of interest. Certification of learning that spans multiple domains is another responsibility of coordinating organizations.

How Are Learning Communities and Universities Related?

Learning communities were initially created to reach learners not well served by traditional higher education systems. Price and location are only two of the major barriers to higher education that learning communities solve. At first there was not much overlap between universities and learning communities. But as learning communities gained traction, they started to appeal to more traditional students. Many universities now offer their own interdisciplinary learning communities, frequently in conjunction with other

educational, public, and private institutions. Universities and learning communities also complement each other. For example, there are specialized areas of graduate work not suitable for learning communities.

What Makes Learning Communities Unique?

Learning communities are simply a new institutional form cobbled together from the already familiar. They provide high quality free learning to people everywhere. In doing so learning communities attempt to make a modest contribution to the global good. One benefit of the close coupling of learning and work has been the dramatic innovation and productivity gains in the network of learning communities.