

Making Connections—The MeneMAC Online Learning Community

—Lynne Sueoka

“This is Krystal and I’m just emailing you because I’m having a little trouble finding an article for civics... I don’t know why I guess I just don’t know how to search for stuff...”

“hey Alisa my friend! You have a good idea going here with the cooking but I agree that it could use a little push you know to get the snowball going?”

“The reason I am sending this reminder is that I have been checking some of the portfolios that are being uploaded and I am not seeing enough support and variety in the standards documentation. Mrs S.”

“heheh... i shared my context project with my mom tonight. She said she really enjoyed it...now I just have to keep her oblivious of my xanga (on-line journal)

*I really enjoyed doing this particular project. g’nite
—Mari”*

“you shouldn’t just label them as stupid and say they should leave america cause they have a song like that there are alot of songs and people out there who say the same things so its like your saying screw everyone who agrees with blink 182 N green day... [signed] a very mad Beka”

Frustration...encouragement...guidance...pride...anger...emotional connections, person to person, and all taking place online. Welcome to the MeneMAC Media Communications and Technology Learning Center online community, Media Central!

Virtual communities are an important component of new pedagogical strategies based on information infrastructures, one that can dramatically improve learning outcomes. Learning is social as well as intellectual. Individual, isolated attempts to make sense of complex data can easily fail unless the learner is encouraged by some larger group that is constructing shared knowledge. (Chris Dede)

Chris Dede, Professor of Education at George Mason University, articulated the above vision of virtual communities in 1995. In 2001, the MeneMAC Learning Center at Moanalua High School (MoHS), inaugurated its integrated media curriculum for its class of 27 entering freshmen. Since that time, teachers and students of the Media Communications and Technology Learning Center have been attempting to make the vision a reality. We are members of a profes-

sional development inquiry group who, for the past four years, have attempted to design, construct, and maintain an online learning space in which our students can be challenged to “make sense of complex data...constructing shared knowledge” as part of an online learning community.

Background

MeneMAC (Media Arts Communications, dubbed “MeneMAC” in honor of the school mascot, the menehune) originated as a media learning center, offering students a chance to explore their interests and develop their skills in media production. As the years progressed, the learning center coordinator, Dan Hale, and MoHS principal, Darrel Galera, realized the potential of media studies to engage learners in the highest level of critical thinking and problem solving, and to offer an authentic context in which to meet and exceed the Hawai’i Content and Performance Standards and General Learner Outcomes.

Thus, in fall 2001, the first group of students began their integrated studies program, taking courses in language arts, social studies, and media communications within the learning center. We have since expanded our program to include science as part of our integrated core offerings. The learning center teaching staff collaborates in their planning and designs the integrated curriculum around a yearly theme and quarterly projects that incorporate the different disciplines within the center.

Media Central 2001 to the Present

Traditionally, communities have been identified with place and physical proximity. Sustaining a community required meetings and actual face-to-face encounters, neighbor to neighbor and worker to co-worker. The Internet, it appears, has changed all this, not by making traditional communities disappear but by vastly extending the reach of people and by making it much easier for them to stay connected, no matter where on Earth they live. (Ho and McEwan, 2003, p.2)

One of the underlying principles of the learning center is that of the smaller learning community, one in which individual empowerment, authentic learning, and strong personal relationships are nurtured in a learner-centered environment (Cattagni and Westat, 2001; NASSP, 1996). Would

taking our community online help to deepen this sense of community and enrich the culture of learning or would it contribute to the sense of anonymity and fragmentation that has been a criticism of the online environment? Would our online community nurture “caring relationships” and “meaning making” that would form the foundations of a “community of commitment”? (Acess, 2003)

The MeneMAC learning community went online in fall, 2001, under the name “Media Central” and as part of the MoHS website. Throughout the four years of the program, Media Central has attempted to provide a supportive space for students, which would both reflect and extend the community building of our learning center.

The website is organized by subject area and includes highlights of learning center achievements and activities. Student online portfolios are linked here, as are resource materials for their various projects, Word documents for assignments, access to the listserv, email, and the online forums.

MeneMAC students quickly become web savvy and will actually request that I post documents or links that will help them in their project work. And they’ve caught my slips several times when I’ve forgotten to upload a document or link a website as promised!

Besides the website, the two most basic tools of this online community are student email accounts and listservs. Some students remain uncomfortable with navigating a text-based email program that is not as user friendly as web-based programs such as Hotmail and Yahoo. But eventually, most realize that such access means, “school on call.” Soon, I am getting requests like the one quoted earlier, from Krystal and this exchange with Vanessa:

“Hi Mrs. S, I have a question on our social studies homework “Social Studies Culminating Activity: Making a Difference”....My team or group split the work and I ended up with question number 1. Our topic is on street racing and i am having the hardest time looking up statistics or the percentage of deaths in Hawaii involving street racing. I have been searching it on Google and other search engines, all results are current news articles on Deaths caused by street racing and i just want to know if i can just use these articles?...if not do you have any helpful hints for me? ;) okay thanks Vanessa.”

Student emails include requests for help with technology, assignment directions, and feedback on works in progress. I once got a query about a lost cell phone! This email

correspondence provides students with an authentic context in which to develop their skills in written communication. They learn that the most effective queries include precise wording and information about their problem and their progress. Like Vanessa, they learn to show me the effort that they have put into their assignments so that I will be better able (and more willing!) to assist them in their work. And like Vanessa and Krystal and others, they preserve their identity and voice even in these remote exchanges.

Hey Mrs. S, How is your weekend going so far? I was wondering what the poetry analysis was. Do we just write about how we felt about the poem? Or do we include the other 4 steps in our analysis? Um, if I don't reply right away, i might be at a party or cleaning my room. Just to give you a heads up...Thanks, MeL

Students also use their email accounts to participate in the class listserv, a collection of email users who “subscribe” to this service, which allows them to send and receive email from all of the other subscribers, thus enlarging their community of “trusted friends” who will respond to their ideas and learning. Our MeneMAC listservs allow students to learn to teach each other, as in Lorraine’s posting in which she gives advice to Alisa about her upcoming video on cooking:

..hey Alisa my friend! You have a good idea going here with the cooking but I agree that it could use a little push you know to get the snowball going?

It's good that you're looking at cooking from a different angle.

What you might want to add onto your idea of cooking providing independence and self-satisfaction is how cooking helps teenagers express them or help them deal with their feelings. For example, you go into how cooking helps them deal with stress from school because it's therapeutic and the aromas are soothing, etc. I know this for sure because I like to cook to sooth my stress.

Also, you could talk about how cooking helps teenagers bond with their family and you could talk about how this is good because it is at this age where the teen drifts. This is where family recipes and the idea of soul food come in.

These exchanges allow everyone in the community to take part in thinking and problem solving. They allow the teacher to cite common successes and common problems, and also provide immediate models for the students to follow in order to exceed the standards on any particular assignment. Margaret Riel calls this “shared minds, made visible.” (Riel, 1999)

Lorraine's post, which went on for several more paragraphs and gave great advice on both content and video strategies, was one of many on the listserv which exemplifies a sense of camaraderie and supportive collaboration. Other posts offered advice to Pia, who was worried about using a turtle as a metaphor because it would be "too boring," and Maureen, who had chosen rain for her metaphor and needed to contend with cloudless skies and sunny weather when she needed to collect footage. (I think she eventually used a close up of drops from a garden hose to solve her problem.)

Our journey into the online world was not without problems—we did encounter parent concerns about student email contacts and incidents in which students used their email to harass each other. But these were isolated incidents. For the most part, the technology orientation and DOE Appropriate Use Policy insured that the accounts were used appropriately.

The online discussion forum or message board is another feature of our online learning community—one that allows input from the public. The forum enabled parents to participate in the student portfolio process, as, each quarter, students were required to schedule a sharing conference with their parents or guardians, to be followed up by a parent post to the portfolio commentary forum.

Some students deputized older siblings, away at college, to be their family spokespeople, as in the case of Edison, who comments on the portfolio of his little sister, Fiona:

It was really interesting looking at her portfolio. I finally got to know what you all do in this class. It finally gives me proof that she really was asking to use my computer all those times last year for working on Menemac projects and not just for browsing asian avenue or things like that.

I think the whole portfolio in itself was the most helpful feature. I never knew that she was creative like that. I know it's only paint, but it's still pretty neat. And if we're still on the subject of improvements, the only thing I see in line is that the parents and families need to see the portfolios more. I think the idea of portfolios online where the student can't lose them is great enough in itself, but all we need is to be more exposed to it or at least during the process in which they're made.

Like Edison, others in our MeneMAC "extended family" were unanimous in their support of the project and offered

suggestions about how the process could be made more meaningful. It was great to see this family involvement (albeit required) in our learning community, especially because they were willing to share their ideas about improving the community itself and thus contribute to the development of this culture of learning.

I think that online portfolio helped Melissa have a better idea of learning. Most parents think that children waste their time surfing online chatting or just playing games in the computer....

The portfolio could be improved by adding a public's feedback about their work. It would be nice to expand their horizon by sharing it online and hear what people comment, especially other learning centers. In this way, they can see how different people could critique it and compare/contrast.

In addition to parent commentary, students from our partner school in Molokai also contributed to the forum during a collaborative project, which resulted in some real world confrontation online over foreign affairs and military action. Beka's post, quoted at the start of the article, was part of an informal and spontaneous debate that arose about the US involvement in Iraq. She was passionately antiwar and responded vehemently to the arguments of some of our class "hawks" who felt those who opposed the war should leave the country. Again, unlike typical classroom debates or pro-con essays, this open forum allowed authentic interchange—real people, real feelings, online.

The most recent tool that we use for collaboration in the learning center is videoconferencing. We began to use videoconferencing via Internet 2 in May 2004, when students from MeneMAC joined with students from the MoHS advanced Japanese classes to participate in the first MegaConference Junior. In a presentation entitled, "The Sea Around Us, Connections of Culture and Concern," MoHS students shared their work on the theme of the ocean in a project that brought research in science on threats to the ocean environment together with a social studies history day exploration of the voyages of the Hokulea and a study of the language and culture of Japan and Hawai'i.

But that was just the beginning. To further our inquiry into the area of online collaboration and community, we sought to use videoconferencing more as a collaborative than a presentational tool. So in fall, 2004, we embarked on the

“Art and Memory” project with Molokai High School and Osaka Gakuin University. This time, although the project did culminate in an online presentation, we attempted to make use of videoconferencing in the planning and production stages. Teachers and students communicated using email, forums, and websites. Four videoconference sessions were also held so that the students could find points of connection among their research projects...to “construct shared knowledge” within their online learning community.

Despite the usual “tech” problems and the universal shyness of students during their first online encounters, everyone judged the experience a success. All the parties concerned are committed to continuing the collaboration into the second semester and coming school year. Our goal is to make the videoconference connection just another means of communication and community building, as familiar and comfortable as email and discussion forums.

A Shared History, Online

One of the advantages of having learning take place online is that there is much more opportunity for nurturing a sense of community. Whether they are sharing their work in the lab space at neighboring computers, browsing each other’s websites, or emailing each other or the teachers from home or elsewhere, the work is, indeed, “shared minds made visible.”

This online history of the learning center remains available after the creators have moved on to another grade level, creating a culture composed of “generations” of MeneMAC participants and a learning history for our pioneering class. Two of our seniors were sitting at computers just the other day, revisiting work they did as freshmen and reminiscing on their learning journey that had started in fall of 2001.

Here is a reflection from Maureen, one of the MeneMAC pioneers:

I remember when I was in the Philippines and I e-mailed Mrs. S thinking I probably wouldn't get a reply for awhile since I was in a different country. I shouldn't have been surprised when two minutes after I sent the message I got a reply from Hawaii.

My four years in MeneMAC depended so much on the wonders of e-mail. Because of this online tool, classmates sent reflections making it possible to finish work from home, partners shared contact or research information, and groups conducted interviews with professionals all online. I think we've all matured; it is evident in our

writing and the way our sites look. Our first portfolios were very similar to one another because we learned the codes together. But once we found ourselves technically, we tried to add our own ideas. Different personalities also became more apparent in recent portfolios. People found their own sense of humor or style, which they tried to incorporate into their work more. Examples could be Lorraine's love for Sephora or Beverly's love for hip hop or my simplistic and “need-to-use-Photoshop ditherbox-in-everything” phases.

No one had these things at the start of Freshman year, partly because we didn't know how to do it and maybe because some of us didn't know we had those tastes/opinions yet. (If that makes sense.) We learned more about each other personally because we started to add these elements. It wasn't only in our portfolios itself but the artifacts included too. Essays were more personal, artwork, more meaningful...

Because these are all online, it is easy to trace our growth. (And laugh at the really simple things we had so much difficulty with at the beginning.)

In the end, community has become more than just an online learning space for our students. The concept of community itself—and the students’ role in creating, contributing to, and maintaining it—is an integral part of their education as community builders of the future.

“Schooling is about more than just subject matter. It is about inculcating in our young a set of dispositions, attitudes, and behaviors that they take with them into their communities.” (Wood 1992, p. 75)

“...if it takes a whole village to raise a child, what are we collectively doing to prepare the next generation for their role in society? The electronic world offers a new terrain, a space for collaboration, but creating national and international community is the work of people, not wires, or interaction, not information.” (Riel, 1996)

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