Welcome to the Fostering Community micro-course with Karin Spader, part of the Enhancing Online Education professional development series from the Center for Teaching, Learning and Mentoring.

Hi everyone. I'm Karin. And in this presentation I'm going to answer the question, What is Community? Especially when teaching online? You've just had the opportunity to read a chapter from Claire Howell Major's book Teaching Online: A guide to theory, research, and practice. I highly recommend this book, especially if you're new to teaching online. But even if you've taught online before, and as you know, we have this book available via e-text through our libraries. So take a look at some of those other chapters if you're interested. But in that chapter, Dr. Howell Major explained what a community is, particularly when it comes to online courses in a variety of ways. But I think the most important part is defining a community, if you will, expanding our perception of what a community is when we're thinking about an online course community. So Claire Howell Major describes a community as a collection of people who are bound together for some reason, for some purpose. When I think about a community, when I talked to other instructors about course community, one of the things we have a tendency to do is kind of bound ourselves into this idea that a community is at its core about those who are in a close physical proximity to ourselves. But instead, if we think about a community as those who share our interests with, those whom we share our ideas with, those whom we learn with and from. Then our idea of what a community is in the way that we go about fostering and course community is very different. Ultimately, a community should provide a sense of identity and give us a sense of belongingness to that community. In the literature from the learning sciences, we can look at a variety of different types of communities, both formal communities and informal communities. Once we take a look at those, similarities between those types of communities, were much better set to foster our own online course community.

So let's take a look at a few of those. In particular, we're looking at the, at the, at the literature from learning scientists, primarily social-constructivist learning theorists. Social-constructivist learning theorists explain learning as being situated in a broader world. That means that we can understand the process of learning without looking at the contexts in which learning occurs. Ultimately, we learn with others. So two of the formal types of learning communities that have been talked about in the literature, or the Communities of Practice from Lave and Wenger and the Community of Inquiry framework from Garrison, Anderson, and Archer. And I'll be providing all of these references for you as well. But the community of practice really looks at professional communities of learning. And ultimately, you may be familiar with the idea of an apprentice. An apprentice is a, a newcomer to a profession. And they work alongside those who are more skilled in a community of practice. It's kind of like concentric circles. So a new commerce starts on the outside as what they called a legitimate peripheral participant. And as they learn more and more, they move closer and closer to the center before they themselves are the expert. And this cycle occurs over and over again. In the Community of Inquiry framework. This was a framework that was designed specifically for distance education and online courses. And in the community of inquiry framework. They look, they talk about three different kinds of elements that overlap one another in a Venn diagram sort of way. To produce a course community. You'd have cognitive presence and this is the presence of thought work. This is what we traditionally think of as the learning process. So it is the exercises that expose us to new ideas, to new materials, the personal experiences and collaborative and social experiences where we're grappling with that information, working to understand it and incorporate it into our understanding of the world. Then we also have social presence. And social presence is our ability to present ourselves as real people in an online learning environment. Rather than as just a name on a screen, are we seeing as people with real emotions and real ideas? Then lastly is teaching presence. And teaching presence really comes in two forms. The first is the design of the courses in and of itself. So the selection of learning materials and the organization or sequencing of those materials, the creation of activities and the like. Then the other is that kind of support for learning the asking questions, digging deeper, providing different explanations, working together to solve problems that can come from the instructor, but also can come from other learners. Which is of course, why community is so important in an online course. Because we need support. That is how we learn. We learn through sharing and testing ideas and getting feedback.

Then we also have informal types of community that have been talked about in the education or the learning, learning sciences literature. Gee talked about affinity groups. And these affinity groups are groups of learners that come together. In Gee's research around video games, and it's similar to a community of practice. These digital communities started to form around a particular video game where again, you have newcomers coming into a digital community asking questions, seeking advice and more skilled expert players, sharing video tutorials or additional resources to support that learning process. Participatory Cultures were written about by Jenkins. Jenkins talked about groups around, in an early literature was around television shows like Star Trek and the fan communities that came out of that and the development of writing a fanfiction and the like. But ultimately, there was something shared among all of these. These are communities that have come together for the purpose of sharing their interests and exchanging their ideas. And the communities, the way that they operate provide that sense of belongingness through respect and trust and relationship building and the act of sharing itself.

So in this course, we're talking about a variety of things in strategies for fostering a community in your online course. Some of this is going to come down to design. However, we're going to focus on those facilitation. The kind of tasks that you engage in with a course that's created as the course occurs. But let's take a look at one concept in particular called the participatory learning environment. So a participatory learning environment was described by Barab and others as an environment in which the teacher is a facilitator of learning activities that are highly collaborative and production-oriented. So here it's about the role of the instructor, the teacher in the course, rather than being the sole delivery of information, the provider of information. And this can be really easy, easy to do in an online course where we just provide more and more information rather than playing the support role of somebody who helps students through activities to help them work without information, apply that information, eventually understand that information. The central features of a participatory learning environment are that they have technology rich environments for inquiry, for practice, right? And of course, in an online course, this is very true for us. We are working in an LMS. We're utilizing a variety of tech tools that allow learners to engage and ask questions and, and actually practice the material that they're working on. These participatory learning environments emphasize inquiry rather than just receiving information. It puts the responsibility on the learner to ask questions about information that's provided to them and potentially even find new information that is relevant or connected to that material. It also asks learners to participate in some kind of domain related practice, rather than simply reading articles or texts, watching videos, and then perhaps just taking tests on them. Now, it's asking students to do something, something that's related to that domain that they are learning in. It also is an environment that provides intentional support for the learning process. And perhaps this is one of the most important two areas as an online teacher to really think about what are you doing to support the learning process. First of all, you have to know where your learners are at in the learning process. The more opportunities you have for them to share. Whether that is through a mini quiz to just kind of assess knowledge. Or a discussion that allows students to express a more detailed interpretation or understanding of material and even working with others to solve problems. This next feature here is an intentionally designed environment for collaboration. So ultimately what we're talking about here is that learners aren't working alone, right? And that's one of the benefits of the course community is it reduces that alienation and isolation of doing things on your own. Now, you're there with other people who have similar questions as you do. And you're encouraged to participate in that, in that community. So ultimately, the entire environment of a participatory learning environment, grounds, understandings to meaningful practice. Everything is always working to be able to be applied to learners own lives and learners own practice, whatever that might be.

So let's take a look at some more specific ways for incorporating this concept of a participatory learning environment. What are some strategies that you can take to promote that community? What you're seeing here on this slide is a model that I created during my dissertation work. My PhD is in curriculum and instruction, and my teaching background is largely teaching online courses. One of the things that I found while teaching online was this general dissatisfaction with the level of interaction that my learners had. And the ways that I was really kind of assessing or evaluating how and what my students were learning. During my dissertation work, I utilized Henry Jenkins work on participatory cultures. Turned that into a model that we can use to both design and evaluate online courses as environments of promoting learner agency and learner to learner interaction. So Jenkins talked about four different forms of participatory cultures. And that's what you see in the small boxes. on the top. In the larger boxes below, you see a brief description and a couple of key points for incorporating that form of participatory culture. While this model that I originally created is ultimately emphasizing design decisions. This course that you're in is really talking about the facilitation or the teaching online. I'm still sharing this with you because I believe there are a few key points that can really support the teaching process to enhance community in your course.

Affiliation is the first box on the left. Affiliation is really about interest-based membership. In your case, you have students were enrolled in your course. Some of you might be teaching upper-level or even graduate courses where your students are majoring in already have a deeply connected interest in your discipline. While others of you may be teaching lower-level courses, general electives, those kinds of things. There's a different kind of set point at which you have interest in your course content. But that doesn't mean that you can't utilize affiliation as a way to enhance community. If you have students who are already deeply connected and interested in the course content, you already have a leg up with affiliation. If you don't, you can still have students connect with group members. Perhaps you could organize them into small group discussions that emphasizes a shared interest. So maybe it's something in the past. It could be completely irrelevant to course, right? It could be all students have shared sports interests, are shared hobbies or something like that. But it could also be professional goals, career goals. You name it. There's a variety of ways to bring learners together based on interests. What's important here is that, that shared interest is obvious to students. So having students self-select based on a shared interests is going to help them have higher levels of trust and relationship just based on that shared interests.

The second column we have expression as a form of participatory culture. Expression is really about what we do with our knowledge. It's about how we, how we show to you that we have learned with the expression. We're talking about the production of creative, new creative forms of knowledge. So here instead of assessing knowledge through a quiz, now, we're assessing knowledge through the production of some kind of artifact. And to take it a step further and incorporate some of the principles from the Universal Design for Learning at cast.org. Even encouraging learners to create an artifact in whatever means of expression works best for them. So that may be written, it may be spoken, it may be some kind of digital creation of mixed multimedia. But by lowering the bar for expression of understanding. What I mean by that is by limiting students to one modality of expression, of expressing their understanding, you may be inadvertently introducing a barrier, right? So if a student is perhaps has a lot of speaking, public speaking anxiety and you are requiring a final presentation for their major grade in the course. They, there may be a barrier there because of the anxiety for public speaking. However, they're very good writer. So perhaps they could demonstrate their understanding more accurately or at least more robustly through that form of expression. And that also increases that sense of belongingness, right? Because they don't feel like an outsider because they have to work through a weakness of their own.

The third column we have here is collaborative problem-solving. So if you have work that is having students work on, have content, I should say that has students working on problems. Have them work on that together. Have them work through a case study in a discussion forum, or have them work together in a shared notes document to prepare for an exam. Any way that you can encourage that working together, again builds trust and will enhance community. And lastly, on the right, we have circulation.

Circulation is really just about open sharing. Do you have avenues for students to share work both within and beyond the classroom? When you ask students to share their work with others, it gives them that opportunity to have more pride in their work. It also increases the accountability that learners have to one another because they are engaged in a culture of sharing regularly. And that sharing can comment a variety of forms as well. It might not just be written text, it might be audio, it might be audio and video, and it might be imagery. So there are a variety of ways to share, again, that kind of overlapping with the multiple means of expression as well.

So I hope this presentation has given you a little bit more to think about in terms of what kinds of things you can do as an online instructor to foster community in your course. And at the very least, you have a much better understanding. Or maybe I'd rather put it as a broader perception of what community is. In an online course. On this next slide, you will see the references from this presentation. You can find any of these references through our libraries. If we don't have access to one in our libraries, we always have our interlibrary loan process that you can request them from. As I mentioned, Dr. Claire, Howell Major's book is an e-book through our libraries that you've already linked to. So you can explore some of the other chapters as you'd like. And if you're interested in more details about my dissertation work, you can also access my full dissertation through ProQuest Dissertations. You can also email me and I can send a document directly to you. So thanks for listening to this presentation and please let me know if you have any other questions.