



**THE GMarie GROUP**  
Performance Improvement Specialists

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# Learning Communities

Learning Through Collaboration

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## Introduction

“It takes a village to raise a child,” is an often-heard saying about how each member of a community—parents, neighbors, teachers, friends—impacts the growth of others living there. Similarly, social learning theorists assert that learning communities help learners benefit from the knowledge and experience of others.

What are learning communities? Think of them as groups of people brought together with a shared purpose, who gain a deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning. They interact with each other and, if applicable, their instructor. They become fellow participants in the learning effort.

## Purpose and Benefits

Why develop learning communities? Learning theory has broadened from a focus on each individual’s interaction with content and an instructor to a more social learning perspective—acknowledging that learners benefit from interacting with each other as they create a shared understanding of the material.

The benefits of incorporating this approach into training include the following:

- Much of what an employee needs to know to successfully perform his or her job (estimated at up to 70%) comes from informal learning. Communities can extend learning by creating opportunities for this informal learning to occur.
- Learning how “things really get done”—the tacit knowledge around job performance—is difficult to gather and is often left out of formal training programs. Learning communities create an opportunity for exchanging and practicing this much-needed tacit knowledge.
- Learning communities also help employees network, identify mentors and communicate. They can enhance the individual’s effectiveness in the organization.

## Community Types

Learning communities can be incorporated into a variety of learning formats: face-to-face, online or a blended approach. Each format lends itself to effective collaboration, provided the appropriate structure and technologies.

### Face-to-Face

In face-to-face instruction, learning communities can interact synchronously. For instance, after an instructor provides an overview of the content, groups of 4 – 5 students can interact—in real time—to discuss, debate, research or present additional findings about the topic.

### Virtual

In online instruction, learning communities can interact synchronously or asynchronously. They can chat live via virtual meeting rooms, instant messengers, interactive whiteboards and similar technologies. Alternatively, they can meet asynchronously via discussion boards, Wikis, blogs and the like.

### Blended

In some respects, blended learning communities receive “the best of both worlds.” They can benefit from the “human” touch of face-to-face interactions as well as the convenience of online instruction. Developing relationships among learners prior to the class meeting through introductions, pre-work and warm up activities can accelerate openness, sharing and collaboration before the meeting. Once the meetings occur, follow-up online discussions and group projects provide opportunities for collaboration and peer learning.

**Note:** A *follow-up community* can be encouraged by providing a means for keeping people connected and engaged with one another after the formal training concludes. They can be a vehicle for sharing post-learning successes and for peer mentoring.

## Creating Learning Communities

There are a variety of people and process approaches to the development of successful learning communities. They include clarifying roles and responsibilities, establishing group norms and expectations, discussing shared goals and developing trust.

The technologies used to create online learning communities support creation of a collaborative environment. They include both synchronous and asynchronous tools:

| <b>Online Collaboration Tools</b>   |   |
|---|---|
| <b>Synchronous</b>  | <b>Asynchronous</b>   |
| Web conferencing, video conferencing, chat rooms, instant messaging, live gaming/interactions | Discussion boards, Wikis, blogs, e-mail, courseware, podcasts, narrated presentations, resource libraries |

## Summary

Learning communities are developed around a shared purpose or goal. They enhance collaboration and broaden resources available to learners as they develop new knowledge and skills. They help learners recognize the value of diverse experiences and understandings as well as help establish useful networks that can increase employee success when transferring new skills to the job.

## The GMarie Group

For over 20 years, The GMarie Group has provided nationwide clients with custom learning and performance improvement solutions. To do so, we apply the ADDIE Model, a systematic process for:

### **Analyzing Performance and Training Needs**

The GMarie Group recommends initiating a project through rigorous analysis, which is the key to obtaining valid results and ensuring that a significant cross-section of the organization has a stake in the process. We can conduct training needs and performance analysis to determine learning solutions to address identified performance gaps.

### **Designing and Developing Effective Solutions**

We design and develop online (Web-based) training, virtual Webcasts, podcasts, instructor-led training, performance support tools, learning portals and much more! Our team can author your custom product using any industry-standard authoring tool (e.g. Flash, Lectora, Flypaper and Captivate).

### **Implementing Products and Programs**

We provide training program planning and coordination, train-the-trainer, training delivery and facilitation for all types of subject matter. We can also help integrate Web-based solutions into your LMS or LCMS.

### **Evaluating Reactions, Learning, Skills Transfer and Returns**

Using Kirkpatrick's "Four Levels of Evaluation," we develop tools and scoring mechanisms to measure participant reactions to learning, mastery of objectives, transfer of skills to the job and return-on-objectives.

## How Can We Help YOU?

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