**Ice-Breaker Activities**

Interactive game-like activities can lead students to develop a greater sense of community. McElrath and McDowell (2008) called for online instructors to involve students in interactive, game-like activities, which lead students to engage with and accept one another, and to be accepted by the online community. Stepich and Ertmer (2003) specifically asked students to make connections online with two or more classmates and engage in conversation about common interests, and reported that this activity helped students build a mutual sense of belonging to the learning community.

**Online Discussions**

Online students develop community, construct understanding, and question and clarify content through discussion with other learners. In a constructivist approach, the instructor takes part in these discussions but acts as a facilitator who guides the dialogue, rather than controlling it (Nicholson, 2005). Online learning benefits from a balance of whole-class and smaller group discussions (Rovai, 2004). Whole-class discussions are commonly suggested as a means for developing a sense of classroom community (Liu et al., 2007). Adult students in a graduate course indicated that asynchronous class discussions were a significant contributor to their SoC (Rovai, 2001). These students felt they benefited from their classmates' experiences through threaded discussions. The presence of both novice and veteran students in one class can add an element of interdependence among students as they work to construct meaning together (Brown, 2001; Stepich & Ertmer, 2003). Ke (2010) reports that students may approach enforced online discussions in a superficial manner, and that without appropriate guidance, asynchronous discussions can become grade-driven rather than an exercise in group knowledge construction.

In addition to asynchronous discussion, Rogers, Graham, Rasmussen, Campbell, and Ure (2003) found in their case study involving 19 students in a distance course that both students and instructors valued two-way synchronous discussion for the purpose of asking and answering questions.

**Small Group Discussions**

Wolcott (1996) promotes learner-centered activities in online learning, including small group interactions such as discussions, study groups, and cross-group communication to decrease student isolation and enhance communication. Students involved in group discussions are able to work toward academic goals together and to assist and support one another as they become active learners (Aviv, 2000).

**Social Communication**

Nicholson (2005) posits that the social component of a typical face-to-face class needs to be purposefully facilitated in online learning in order to support the social growth of students.
Rovai (2001) conducted a case study during a five-week graduate level online course. He found that students made use of a social communication forum to pursue connections with one another and to share information and support.

In Liu et al.’s (2007) mixed methods study, interview results indicated that opportunities for social interaction boosted interpersonal relationships and supported positive communications among students. Graduate students in an online instructional design course used an asynchronous social discussion area to express support and encouragement for other students, to discuss similarities, and to share the challenges they faced (Stepich & Ertmer, 2003). While some students in Conrad's (2002) interpretive study of adult learners expressed appreciation for the opportunity to communicate socially, others said there was a limit to how much time they were willing to spend reading social comments. Participants in Gallagher-Lepak et al.’s (2009) study reported that informal conversations helped them build friendships and camaraderie. They found this communication outside the boundaries of the academic requirements to be important for establishing social bonds and facilitating learning.

**Collaborative Group Projects**

The importance of collaborative group work in building an online sense of community is well established in the literature. Small group activities are positively correlated with SoC (Rovai, 2002a). Rovai (2004) states that small group activities in online learning are consistent with constructivist approaches, and can lead to the development of trust and positive relationships between classmates. Studies have found that students believed collaborative work in their online courses was instrumental in the development of community (Baturay & Bay, 2010; Conrad, 2005; Gallagher-Lepak et al., 2009). Small group work also has shown a positive effect on learning (Cameron, Morgan, Williams, & Kostelecky, 2009; Liu et al., 2007).

The idea that an online class community develops primarily among members of small groups rather than across the entire class also has been supported in the literature. Liu et al. (2007) reported that students in an online MBA program formed a community with their group members, but felt little community across the entire class due to limited whole-class interaction.

**Peer Teaching**

In an educational technology online course, graduate students expressed the importance of gaining experience in group leadership (Wegerif, 1998). The authors postulated that the students desired increased control over their online learning experience, and benefited from the opportunity to contribute to its structure.

First-year undergraduates reported satisfaction with peer teaching activities in a blended learning environment that included face-to-face sessions and online activities (Leese, 2009). Students in small groups worked collaboratively to prepare presentations that they would peer-teach during the next session. Students developed increased confidence in working together, presenting to peers, and resolving conflicts.
Exchanging Resources

Stepich and Ertmer (2003) suggest that when students share resources with one another, they become more responsible for their own learning, their participation is enhanced, and relationships among members of the learning community are strengthened. Participants in Stepich and Ertmer's study found that the instructor was not the only source of information, and they built a shared knowledge base by contributing information sources, techniques, and tools.

In discussing the development of online community in interviews over one year, participating graduate students indicated the importance of providing one another with multiple resources (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2006). These participants pointed out that the flow of information was reciprocal and helped to build strong ties.

Sharing Personal Experiences

Graduate level nursing students in an online course reported that they had the opportunity to learn from one another's clinical experiences (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004). They indicated that they valued other students' contributions in this area.

Saab’s (2004) mixed methods study found that students receiving the highest classroom community scores reported they shared personal experiences in the context of class discussions and assignments. Participants reported that sharing their experiences enhanced their learning and helped them make connections to the outside world.

Face-to-Face Meetings

Haythornthwaite et al. (2006) suggest that face-to-face meetings are important for establishing initial bonding between distance students. Participants in Haythornthwaite et al.’s (2006) qualitative study indicated that while some considered live meetings to be an inconvenience, others found the initial face-to-face experience was an important way to unite, establish a shared history, and develop bonds of friendship. Stallings and Koellner-Clark (2003) found that using face-to-face meeting time for highly interactive activities resulted in a stronger classroom community. Students reported that the connections forged in the face-to-face sessions were important for the success of the online components of the class.