

A New Culture of Dance:  
Implementing Blended Learning Ideas to Enhance Community and Retention

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ECI 652: Internship in Instructional Technology

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April 28, 2013

Play is good. Play is fun, but play is a strange topic for beginning this essay. Play is however an essential part of building a community. In order for the seeds of a new community to form people must want to come together for a common goal. Once together, other bonds may keep members within a community friendship, time invested or personal reasons.

The internship experience is also about play. The intern should choose a topic that is a passion in order to excel. The book, "A New Culture of Learning: Cultivating the Imagination for a World of Constant Change" by authors Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown, helped to crystallize the purpose behind the internship experience and the themes presented within also provided insight into community creation, a central purpose to my internship experience at A Step to Gold International Ballroom.

Learning in the twenty-first century has shifted to a more participatory role than the traditional lecture format of the past. The dance school is fortunate in that their model has always been one of active learning rather than passive learning. In order to become a great dancer, the student must participate, practice and persevere.

This does not mean the twenty first century dance school does not face challenges. The current generation while having more information than ever before has distanced themselves from more traditional arts like ballroom dance. This is in addition to many people today growing more isolated and less willing to engage with their peers in a public setting like dance.

This paper will discuss tools and methods of creating an online community. The end goal of the research will be to implement these methods in a way that provides a road map for service businesses like A Step to Gold to establish an online following, use social media tools to reach out to new students while maintaining current students and to provide a space where passion for learning is contagious.

### **Why are businesses lost?**

The idea of play helps provide a deeper reason for why to build an online community many businesses today look past this and take for granted this "why" question because they are blindly following a trend. Internet connectivity has had a profound impact upon the lives of people and society. Where people previously wrote letters, today they write emails. In the past, they might have called a business for information, today they "google it" and find a vast amount of diverse information about the business. People have even begun to follow businesses using social media to remain up to date on products and services instead of looking to print sources for information as they might once have.

With so much information at people's fingertips, society as a whole has begun to shift. Businesses feel they must maintain a social media presence and rightfully so since people have moved away from making personal contacts like using the phone to seek information as their first stop in seeking information. Therefore, business are starting blogs and social media accounts thru Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest. They then wonder why these accounts aren't enough or why they lack followers or friends. The reason is because they've provided the space, but not the passion which grows the community.

Businesses have gotten caught up in the whirlwind of change brought about by a larger global phenomena. Thomas Friedman (2007), Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and author of "The World is Flat," identifies ten forces that have "flattened" the world. Friedman argues, these ten forces combined to create the world we live in today (p. 1-199). The key to his argument is that we have entered a new phase of globalization, that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and was accelerated due to advancements in computers plus telephony technology driven by the "Dot Com" bubble of the 1990s. (Friedman, 2007, p. 1-199.)

Friedman (2007) goes on to discuss an idea he terms the "Triple Convergence (p. 202-203)." The triple convergence describes the way the "flattening forces" have combined. One part of this triple convergence was that individuals and businesses adopted new collaboration habits made possible by the new technology at their disposal (Friedman, 2007, p. 203-205). The second was that businesses began to think horizontally rather than vertically, meaning they began to look to the ends rather than the means; This shift in thinking created a new type of business platform, or basic operating system for conducting business (Friedman, 2007, p.205). One example of this is the use of technology in new ways to maintain supply chains and to manage distribution at a much larger scale than ever before. (Friedman p200-210) Logically, this reinforced people's attitudes as they noted the convenience of retailers like Walmart and later Amazon, an entity impossible without these new platforms.

The conclusion to be drawn from Friedman's work and the reason it appears here is that the world has fundamentally changed since the last century. People's attitudes towards communicating, learning and doing business are radically different than they were twenty or even just ten years ago.

Friedman's work in conjunction with the idea of "A New Culture of Learning" can be used to help understand why many businesses are having trouble adapting to this new paradigm. The business owners are keenly aware of how some companies are growing at a staggering rate and false attribute this success to their simply creating social media accounts. These businesses have a "Field of Dreams" mentality of "if you build it, they will come." The problem is that it takes more than creating an account to "build it" in today's world.

Effective use of social media requires community building. The tools leveraged for each business must be individualized for that specific business. There is no one size fits all solution

for a business to follow. The key is to build a community that provides people with a personal stake in the community. People need to feel as if they're a part of something larger than themselves and as if their contributions to the collective matter.

There are many ways in which a school like "A Step to Gold" can use the lessons of Friedman and "A New Culture of Learning." First, it is important to remember that teaching a skill or an art form like ballroom dance requires an expert instructor and a face to face environment in order to achieve the highest levels of proficiency. This insulates the school from some of the flattening forces mentioned by Friedman, it also requires adaptation to others. The schools must find a way to bridge the gap between being an isolated real life community to being a hybrid community that involves both a real-life and virtual component if they are to succeed to their greatest potential.

### **Social Media Defined**

The term social media has been used throughout this document so far and it is important to understand the term to fully understand how to foster community. Development of today's world wide web can be viewed in stages. These stages are typically branded with revision numbers like those found in versions of software. For the purposes of this paper, it is necessary to cover two stages, web 1.0 and web 2.0.

Web 1.0 is defined as the period where users could view web pages through browser programs, but generally could not contribute to the content of web pages. Web 1.0 is known as the "Read Only Web" because of this limitation. The web during this period consisted primarily of static websites with little interactive content. Typical design during the Web 1.0 era consisted of static HTML pages which would be replaced with dynamic websites during the Web 2.0 era (O'Reilly, 2005, p.2).

On the other hand, Web 2.0 is defined by websites that engage users through participation or involvement in content generation in some way. By "harnessing collective intelligence" as O'Reilly (2005) puts it the Web 2.0 era has generated a very diverse universe of sites (p.2). Among the more common is the blog, but other Web 2.0 sites include Amazon, Wikipedia, Flickr and YouTube among others. They unifying feature here is these sites allow users to contribute content to the site in some fashion with little technical knowledge (O'Reilly, 2005, p2). Just as Web 1.0 was known as the "read only web," the ability to contribute led to Web 2.0 being known as the "Read/Write Web" because users can not only read pages but also write their own content onto them.

The shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 could really hinge upon the blog. In 1999, Pyra Labs created the software that became known as blogs. "Blogs" started out being known as "weblogs" because they allowed users to write down their thoughts which were organized into a web page with no need for the user to possess any HTML knowledge. These pages were then organized and linked to other pages of a similar topic. The tool was later named "Blogger" and was acquired by Google in 2003. Google then integrated blogs into their search algorithm. This made blogs more accessible and fostered the creation of "the blogosphere." Blogosphere being the term commonly used to refer to the collective of blogs (Thomas and Brown, 2011, p. 63-64).

Meanwhile, during this same period SNSs or social network systems were also starting to emerge. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), an SNS is defined "as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (p.2). These new social networking sites began as early as 1997, however the most notable SNSs would not appear until

2003 to 2005 with sites like LinkedIn, MySpace, Facebook and YouTube among others (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p3). These SNSs blend a variety of online tools together that vary by the service.

Online communities also changed as a result of the new social networking sites. Previously, communities developed around interests, but after social network sites hit the scene sites began to be increasingly organized around people (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 219). Of important note here is that while SNS communities have become popular, they have not replaced the old websites dedicated to specific interests (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 219).

The purpose of this history lesson is illustrate the emergence of social media as a driving force in people's lives and to understand the where we are in its development. With the blogosphere and the advent of social networking sites being ten to fifteen years old, many people have become accustomed to having information at their fingertips. They also have a new opinion of what it means to be an expert and have grown accustomed to seeking a diverse variety of views. The takeaway for "A Step to Gold" should be that being a member of this community will increase your visibility and drive new customers to your business. Therefore, maintaining a robust social media presence is crucial to the continued success and health of a small business such as A Step to Gold.

### **Determining Needs**

Another reason for the historical perspective offered above is this perspective has informed decisions during the internship process. The desire to intern at "A Step to Gold" was driven by the idea the company could grow through better application of social media. As a student at "A Step to Gold," I have witnessed the hard work and passion involved in teaching dance but have also seen the struggle to recruit and retain new students.

Beginning in December, I spoke with Melanie Dale, the owner of "A Step to Gold" to see if she would be receptive to hosting an intern. At this point, I began a needs evaluation to see how to best help the school. The first step was to interview various stakeholders involved to gather their opinions on ways to help. The stakeholders largely fell into the following camps: students/clients, employees/staff and the owner.

Staff interviews largely reinforced the idea that more students would be desirable. The prevailing opinion was that social media was the answer and they just needed to work harder to promote the school. They revealed they had a Wordpress blog, Meetup.com site, Facebook site, YouTube account and Twitter account. All of these social media sites were being used to some extent, with the Twitter account seeing the least amount due to not understanding how to use it.

These social media accounts were all linked to the school's homepage and the staff also revealed a general dislike of the main page. They felt the page was boring and needed more frequent updates to encourage people to use the page. Also of note was the perception the page did a poor job of linking people to their social media efforts.

Students questioned revealed many surprising attitudes towards the webpage and social media efforts. The prevailing attitude was one of indifference. Most students relied on word of mouth or the school bulletin board for news regarding the school. The students saw little need for them to follow the social media efforts of the school. These same students however, were often uninformed when it came to knowledge of school activities.

Other students, mentioned the Facebook page but that was mainly by students who were more established. Connecting to the social media sites seemed to come after having already found the school. Very few students showed any knowledge of the Meetup site, Youtube site, Wordpress Blog or Twitter account despite links to these services being advertised on the "A



Step to Gold" homepage. Most new students seemed to be drawn in from a random Google search turning up the homepage or from word of mouth in the offline community.

One final student concern was from a student who had missed several classes due to a family emergency. This student voiced a feeling of being lost or having lost what progress they had made while being away. This was a source of frustration for the student which led to looking for similar behaviors in other students who did not attend classes as often. They also commented about their insecurities when dancing due to being out of practice.

The owner, Melanie Dale, was primarily interested in the promise of social media in recruiting and retaining students. She mentioned the economic downturn of the past few years as being a time when potential students have tightened their belts and forgone spending for things like dance instruction. Ms. Dale was also interested in ideas that might be marketed as additional value to encourage students to take the plunge for lessons. Further, Ms. Dale implied a desire to avoid incurring new costs or at least keep expenditures low when implementing any new social media efforts.

### **Need Assessment Conclusions and Recommendations**

The interviews conducted in the needs evaluation of "A Step to Gold" lead to the idea that many of the problems encountered during the interviews could be solved by using social media to develop an online community to complement the already great instruction at "A Step to Gold." This idea of developing a online learning community was reinforced and enhanced by the lessons presented in "A New Culture of Learning." The students and teachers already exhibited passion for the subject and this passion could easily grow into an online collective liked described by Thomas and Brown, but it also meant that efforts must be playful in order to lead to community development.

Other readings further emphasized the need for playfulness, Danah Boyd (2012) while speaking at SXSW in Austin, TX, spoke of a something called "The Attention Economy." Boyd says, the groundwork for this concept was laid in the 1970s by scholar Herbert Simon who argued, "in an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients." Boyd further explains that social media is like swimming in an ocean of information and that no one can possibly hope to consume everything, despite the fact people try (Boyd, 2012).

This idea of an "Attention Economy" brought an entirely new dimension to the ideas behind developing social media efforts at "A Step to Gold." The students are extremely busy professionals whose time is limited and valuable. This could be one reason that explains why so few students used social media to keep track of school events. In order to win over these students the social media offerings would have to bring great additional value to encourage their participation. The question then becomes how to provide enough value through social media that people will "spend" their attention on your site, Facebook feed, YouTube Channel, or Twitter.

"A Step to Gold" already maintained accounts on several of the top social media sites, so lack of a social media presence was not an issue. Conversations with the staff did reveal a need and desire to find ways to enhance the effectiveness of their online efforts. This would mean improving their methods of encouraging students to join their social network sites and to encourage student participation in the use of these networks.

### **The Case for an Online Learning Community**

Why is building an online learning community the best answer for the problems identified at "A Step to Gold?" Research shows student retention to be an ongoing problem in education circles. One such study cites rising costs of public education along with declining household budgets to be among these retention problems (Webster and Showers, 2011, p.297). These ideas directly correlate to opinions voiced by Ms. Dale in our needs assessment. Webster and Showers (2011) concluded, that students were retention was influenced by the personal attention they received and by the way their educational institution catered to their needs, problems and concerns (p. 296).

Rhee Gold, cofounder of Project Motivate a professional development organization for dance educators, also cited the problem of student retention among dance schools (Gold, 2001, p53). Gold writes of how schools spend thousands of dollars a year in print materials to attract students. The solutions she mentions includes organization, information newsletters, articles highlighting faculty members and above all establishing the right atmosphere (Gold, 2001, p.53).

According to Vesely, Bloom and Sherlock (2007), the most cited elements of community involve: a shared sense of purpose, establishment of boundaries defining membership, establishment and enforcement of rules regarding community behavior, interactions among members and a level of trust, respect and support among community members (Vesely, Bloom & Sherlock, 2007).

The problems associated with student retention mentioned above can all be solved by building an online community to co-exist along with face to face offerings at "A Step to Gold." The dissemination of information can be facilitated by social networks, notably Facebook and an instructional blog. Personal attention can be paid to students in a variety of ways including

highlighting student achievements online, or just by offering another forum for students to communicate their problems.

Furthermore, community building has been tied to an increase in student motivation in distance education classes. While this does not directly correlate with "A Step to Gold," as they are a traditional dance school, they could still enjoy the motivational benefits from creating such a online community. This positive motivational impact on distance learners was observed in a study conducted among graduate students at a Big Ten university (Holder, 2005, p139).

Motivation was defined as the length and direction of effort expended by learners in pursuit of achievement (Holder, 2005, p.139). Holder (2005) speculates that by creating strong online learning communities, distance education programs should experience benefits such as lower turnover rates, higher participation and greater commitment to group goals due to greater peer social interaction, communication and understanding of materials from discussions (p.141).

These are exactly the results desired by various stakeholders at "A Step to Gold." Therefore, by crafting an online learning component to the already rich in person offerings they could create a more sustained learning experience and increase student retention which addresses the majority of the concerns of the stakeholders.

### **Choosing Blended Learning as a Framework to Enhance Social Media Quality**

Preparing to build an online learning community is a complicated process that can be visualized like building a house. Construction of a house requires a house plan, materials, tools and expertise. Construction of an online learning community is no different. The plans are the idea and vision the community founders wish to create. The materials are the students, staff and other contributors to the community. The tools are the online components like a website,

Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or blog. Finally, the expertise comes in the form of experienced moderators guiding the newer users that will eventually take on those same roles.

The vision for "A Step to Gold" is a form of blended learning. This framework will aid the school in marketing and directing their social media efforts. The term "blended learning" refers to a combination of face to face learning experiences, i.e. in class events, and online learning experiences (Poon, 2011, p.131). Driscoll (2002) describes four ways in which blended learning may occur, these include: a mixing of various web-based technologies; a mixing of pedagogical approaches; a combining of instructional technology with face to face teaching; and a combining of instructional technology with on-the-job tasks (Driscoll, 2002, p.1).

The benefits of this style of learning are immense. Professor Curt Bonk of Indiana University makes the case for blended learning very well in an online webinar series. He comments on how by blending online instruction and face to face instruction students receive the best of both worlds. They have the time to reflect on materials asynchronously and the ability to interact personally with an instructor in person (Bonk, n.d.). Bonk (n.d.) improves upon the definitions of blended learning by describing some ways in which blended learning may occur.

The areas of blending of interest to "A Step to Gold" are the Bookend Model and the enhancing blend concept described by Bonk. In the Bookend Model, instruction begins before class with some web content to setup an upcoming class, then a class meeting which would be followed by some after class activities to enhance knowledge transfer. The enhancing blend is simply supplementing lessons with additional online course materials.

The idea of blended learning was alien to the staff at "A Step to Gold." They had not previously thought to engage their customers with learning experiences online to enhance their learning, choosing instead to solely use social media as a marketing tool to advertise. By

opening the door to these blended learning ideas, the school suddenly saw social media in a different light. The marketing would be a byproduct of the educational experience and would seek to draw in new customers impressed by the content of the school's online offerings rather than by its advertising specials.

Under this blended learning strategy, the staff will select resources to engage students and through this engagement generate interest in the school. While students would be a key resource in this endeavor, the school would gain recognition by way of the student conversations and sharing of learning to their friends across their social networking circles. The school would also post resources openly on their own social media accounts to further promote the school and allow new students to discover all the school has to offer.

The use of social networks to facilitate communication also means students are free to post their questions or to communicate with the school freely as questions arise. This would help instructors gain feedback on lessons, the school to gauge interest in course offerings or to even allow the school to address any customer service related issues before they became a reason for a student disappearing. By reaching out to the students with these methods, the school would address their issue of student engagement and retention by keeping communication channels open between all stakeholders, i.e. student to student; and student to instructor.

### **Factors for Successful Blended Learning**

Researchers at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia, identified four factors critical to both the success of e-learning and face-to-face learning. These four factors include: having a personal touch with students; providing prompt feedback; supporting teachers in their knowledge transfer endeavors; and use of technologies to motivate learning (Sridharan, Deng & Corbitt, 2010, p.272-273).

The idea of having a personal touch with the students is nothing new in education circles, but for blended learning this adds a new dimension. Sridharan, Deng and Corbitt (2010) provided several ways in which instructors can show a personal touch with students. These strategies included making personal calls, sending private emails, and personal written or audio feedback (p272-273).

This type of personal touch is typical of the experience at "A Step to Gold." Instructors frequently give students feedback and praise during lessons. Transferring this experience to carefully crafted online learning experiences would allow students to engage the instructors in a public forum to promote the schools expertise and customer service skill. The key here would be to craft suitable learning experiences where instructors could comment publically yet not embarrass or distance the student. Further, the use of social media in this regard would allow for student to student exchanges giving the students a chance to learn from one another.

The next factor, providing prompt feedback is a frequently cited truism in education literature. The idea of prompt feedback would definitely need to be addressed as more learning experiences were added online. This would create the need for the school to monitor the new social media spaces and reply appropriately. Luckily there is already a member on staff who frequently handles these types of duties and the occasional comment would not significantly increase her workload.

The third factor cited of supporting teachers in their knowledge transfer endeavors will be the hardest to accomplish in the scope of the blended learning opportunities at A Step to Gold. This refers to allowing learners an opportunity to demonstrate their learning to the real world (Sridharan, Deng & Corbitt, 2010, p.273). While this is the hardest to accomplish it is not

impossible and social media could be leveraged to make this not only possible but very productive to the overall learning community in general.

Finally, the fourth factor the use of technologies to motivate learning is the easiest to implement. A Step to Gold already has experience with many forms of technology. They are experts in email and office productivity. The staff is proficient with Facebook and other social networks. They are familiar with video although only limited with their editing capabilities. This said, overall the staff is very eager to learn new technologies and are adept at acquiring these new skills.

The real obstacle for implementing a blended learning environment at A Step to Gold really seems to be generation of ideas for content, and the selection of appropriate strategies to facilitate development of this new online community. Also of note, is the possibility the current students will not be receptive of these efforts. This might require some form of encouragement through extrinsic rewards in order to begin the ball rolling. Even if adoption by current students is negligible, hopefully the new crop of students gathered from social networks will help speed the development of the community.

### **Survey of Blended Dance Instruction**

The idea to implement a blended dance instruction began as a way to marry graduate study efforts with the budding hobby of ballroom dance. The idea seemed a natural one due to the vast amount of dance videos on YouTube and the variety of commercial learn to dance DVDs available from sites like Amazon. Surprisingly, there seems to be very few dance schools engaging in real blended learning efforts.

Traditionally dance instruction involves teaching a specific set of steps for each dance. These step lists are known as the syllabus. Each syllabus is then broken into levels referred to as



bronze level, silver level and gold level. Each of the syllabi are meant to be progressively more difficult with bronze being the easiest and gold being the hardest. Further complicating matters is the difference in International and American versions of the dances (Ballroom 101, 2011, p.3-4).

The only school that seems to attempt blended learning is Dance Hampton Roads based in VA. The Dance Hampton Roads site has videos for many of the steps of the American syllabi. The videos are hosted on YouTube, but organized on the site first by category of dance, then by specific dance and finally by level. There are also music recommendations on the site for people to practice to. The page serves as a prototype as to what online dance instruction could become. This is not to imply that other schools do not have an online presence or even use social media, but Dance Hampton Roads seems to have created this page with the intention of supplementing their instruction. There are examples of videos in the series where the instructor is clearly responding to viewer requests.

### **Instructional Blogging at A Step to Gold**

A Step to Gold has maintained a blog since January of 2012. The blog postings mostly are advertisements for events and some are short enough to have been "tweets" instead. A conversation revealed a desire to blog but a lack of how to begin. This is where the idea for turning the blog into an instructional resource began. In turning the blog into an instructional resource the school has a natural way to create new content for the website and it will still accomplish the goal of advertising events but in a way that is more subtle to the audience.

The blog has previously been a tool for advertising and this makes sense. Schools feel the need to advertise their offerings and to self-promote. Research suggests this is an ineffective practice. Individual acceptance of ideas is based on "who said it" meaning it is important to first

gain the trust of the audience before attempting to market to that audience (Doyle et al, 2011, p.197). According to the research conducted by Doyle et al. (2011), consumers assess trustworthiness in the online domain quickly and through signals transmitted through the author's profile page, mention of awards, through third party testimonials, and from cues indicating experience (p.204).

Further research upon this idea turns up the concept of "social capital." The idea is that through blogging the user develops social connections which in turn lead to development of trust through reciprocal relationships. This social capital theory implies that those blogs with more followers are seen to be more trusted (Vaezi, Torkzadeh & Chang, 2011, p. 39). The lesson here is followers will trust your advertising only after establishing yourself as a trustworthy source. This can best be demonstrated through the quality content that demonstrates expertise and by developing a third party following with commentary affirming expertise.

Blogs are "a means to kick-start a collective around conversations about ideas that spring from the personal" (Thomas and Brown, 2011, p65). By encouraging the staff to create blog entries from their personal experience as teachers, and posting under their own profiles, the school creates "experts" to be trusted for their advertising efforts. The nature of the blog also creates an opportunity to invite the creation of a community to grow around the blog. With the commenting features turned on third party feedback can be gathered to improve perception of the school. This further enhances the image of trust and establishes the school as a definitive source for learning in the community. Fostering community in this manner is a symbiotic relationship where a well kept blog is the perfect platform from which to spread ideas and the blog is a key component in spreading a subtle advertising message to the public.

### **Gagne's Nine Events as a Guide to Blogging**

Once the school realized the potential of the blog the next step was to help design a formula for blog postings. A writer will develop their own individual style over time but in order to give articles the right tone and to help fledgling bloggers get started the idea is to provide a framework from which to write. Bloggers must remember the goal is not for total instruction, but to use the blog to supplement in person offerings as research among adults indicates no desire for replacement of face to face offerings (Poon, 2011, p.144). One way to achieve this are blog entries written around aspects of Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction.

In 1965, Robert Gagne's book *The Conditions of Learning*, identified the mental conditions for learning and from these conditions Gagne created his nine-step process called the events of instruction. The nine events are: 1) Gain Attention; 2) Inform Learners of Objectives; 3) Stimulate recall of prior learning; 4) Present the content; 5) Provide "learning guidance;" 6) Elicit performance; 7) Provide Feedback; 8) Assess performance; 9) Enhance retention and transfer to the job (University of Florida, 2013). These nine steps need to be considered when developing instructional materials, but inclusion of all nine are not necessary for all lessons (Clark, 2004). The staff has been frequently observed demonstrating these events subconsciously during face-to-face instruction. The key is to make them aware of these habits so they might apply these same skills to the blogging process.

Some of the events will be more difficult to translate to the blogging process than others but through practice most if not all of these events can be transferred in some way. The success here will largely lie with the creativity and experience of the bloggers and their understanding of each of the events.

The "Gain Attention" phase is essentially an introduction that grabs the learner's attention and focuses the learner so they are receptive to the lesson. This might be done using a story,

presenting a problem, demonstration, doing something wrong so instruction can show the "correct" way or by implicitly stating the lesson's importance (Clark, 2004). Other suggestions for gaining attention are: start with a quiz, statistic, question, or a famous quote (Al-Eraky, 2012, p. 677). In face-to-face instruction, teachers at "A Step to Gold" frequently relate tales from their dance instruction when beginning a lesson to gain the audience's attention. Another habit is before teaching a pattern or series of steps, instructors demonstrate the steps with a partner so students can see the end result. Instructors might choose to film a video clip as a lead in or to select a favorite YouTube video to embed into their blog posting. Transferring this skill to their online teaching contributions should be easy.

The "Informing learners of objectives" event refers to the practice of telling the learner what they are going to learn. This event is evident in all dance lessons as students are introduced to the day's lesson by a being told what dance they will be learning about, and what step they will learn for that dance. Often, the third learning event is tied to the second as instructors frequently cite previous dance steps from which the current lesson builds. Instructors frequently break lessons down to the "Five basic steps" so learners feel confident they have the tools to succeed (Clark, 2004). This would not be hard to implement into a blog posting as instructors could relate their entries to a shared common knowledge experiences.

The "presenting the material" stage simply refers to the meat of the lesson. This is where instructors discuss whatever materials they wish to teach. The instructors can choose to draw from their own experiences here or from professionally developed dance syllabi materials at this stage depending upon topic. The best example of this in the face to face interactions is the teaching of the actual footwork patterns involved in a series of dance steps, through

demonstration. When moving this material online instructors might choose to use pictures, charts or video to illustrate their points.

Stage five, "provide guidance for learning" is about providing instructions on how to learn specific content. This is the most confusing concept for those unfamiliar with Gagne's research. The idea is to provide the student with a metaphor, mnemonic or a way to chunk the material to make it more understandable (Al-Eraky, 2012, p. 677). In face to face interactions, this might take the form of having students count their steps in various ways. For example, a step that requires two beats of music is a slow and a step that requires one beat of music is often referred to as a quick. Rather than having students count the beats using numbers the instructor might have a student learn first by saying "quick, quick, slow" to help in a dance like Rumba. These types of mnemonics could be expanded upon and shared online.

In stage six, "elicit performance" the learner does something with the new behavior. In the course of dance instruction they demonstrate the new move successfully with a partner. This will be the most difficult to achieve for most instructors. Ways to achieve this learning event will vary greatly based on the topic of the blog. If the blog post was about technique or footwork, readers might be encouraged to record themselves demonstrating the move in a simple choreographed routine or during an event. Dance instruction involves more than footwork and one part is understanding music, therefore another way to elicit performance might be for an instructor to design a short musicality quiz, where the bloggers attempt to match songs with dances. This could be done through a poll on the blog, or through the comments section.

The seventh event of providing feedback will be simple. The instructor simply needs to be responsive to comments or messages from students. This can also be accomplished through activities like providing the answers to the aforementioned quiz from step six.

The "assess performance" stage is not likely to be used in the context of blogging at "A Step to Gold." This could be done by having the readers complete a test of some kind, but this would likely be detrimental to the purpose of a fun learning community. Also, performance is generally accessed through occasional spotlight parties where students perform for a master instructor in order to test out into the next stage of their program, i.e. advance from Basic Bronze to Bronze One.

The "enhance retention and transfer" stage is likely to be an event that could translate into frequent blog postings. This event refers to assigning practice or giving learners similar problems to solve. Dance is frequently taught with the idea of cross-training. Instructors frequently cite how learning a series of steps can be transferred to another dance. This could become a recurring theme for the blog and it would be centered around this learning event.

### **Facilitating Community**

Great content will be a cornerstone to building community in this newly enhanced blogging environment but content alone will not build community. The staff at "A Step to Gold" has been working to gain traction in the online community for some time. As mentioned previously the school does an excellent job maintaining a Facebook and YouTube presence. The information is out there but the community hasn't developed. This might be due to the staff working too hard. The staff is the primary contributor to content on the sites but this is mostly in the form of pictures and video. The answer should rely in the marriage of the instructional blog and the social media.

Pictures are a great way to gain people's attention but they do not necessarily invite conversations to develop. Video is much the same way. The blog will help to provide a conversation piece that can be shared out through social media to increase involvement and build

community. The section on blended learning and the section on the nine events of instruction provide some insight on how this might develop, but the blog having appropriate content along will not foster the desired community development.

The ideas of Curt Bonk of Indiana University might provide some details on how this might develop. In an online lecture, Bonk laid out the following community building opportunities:

- Course introductions and social icebreakers.
- Celebrating accomplishments.
- Creating shared history, belongingness, course identity and membership
- Weekly rituals.
- Building trust and respect.
- Sharing knowledge and learning.
- Member collaboration and team products.
- Giving and receiving information.
- Member influence and participation
- Embedded practices and the real world
- Post pictures and profiles

This list of community building activities provide an excellent resource for generating blog content in conjunction with the nine events of instruction (Bonk, 2010). The practical implications are bloggers at "A Step to Gold" will have an initial pool of topics or activities to draw from to scaffold their forays into learning to blog through a variety of activities that encourage student participation.

### **Possible Implementations**

The following paragraphs will outline a few ways instructional blogging based on the principles outlined in this document could be applied to the "A Step to Gold" Wordpress site and how this site would serve as the nexus from which their other social offerings to Facebook, YouTube and Twitter flowed to generate the sought after community that would drive interest in the school.

A first step could be establishing the "weekly ritual" of using the blog to introduce the class offerings for the upcoming week. Instructors could use the blog to cover the first three or four learning events of Gagne's Nine events of instruction. Their blog entries could be posted at the beginning of the week or on the day before a class with just a brief mention of the dances to be covered in the upcoming class, an outline of objectives or steps to be taught, a mention of dance elements to be built upon and they might even include a video demo. If these are produced by the instructors this could also serve to illustrate their expertise and teaching style to promote the school. Students would be welcome to express excitement, or even fears about the upcoming class which could inform instructors decisions concerning the remaining learning events, such as presentation of materials.

Another idea more along the lines of community building would be for the school select a student of the week/month. This would allow the students to get to know each other better and encourage the selected student to participate in online activities. These student profiles could be shared by the student among their own groups of friends further enhancing the reputation of the school and the student. Over time this would create a shared history between the school and its students leading to a sense of belonging and school identity. Selected students could also be invited to write a guest blog entry speaking of their experiences in which they share their own knowledge back to the community, further enhancing their status in the community.

Finally, using the blog to introduce new students to the school could be a great way to encourage retention and help those students break the ice. One of the biggest reasons many people hesitate to take dance lessons in my experience is overcoming the awkwardness of the social experience. An introduction to the school's community through the blog would allow students the chance to virtually meet other students and hopefully lessen their anxiety when



attending their first group classes. Also, the sense of belonging to the community this type of activity should generate should lead to a higher degree of personal investment in the community.

### **Will community develop?**

The result of implementing instructional blogging at "A Step to Gold" in order to enhance community development will only be determined with time. Research suggests that blogging efforts will be successful provided favorable conditions to facilitate blogging are cultivated. The major considerations appear to be ease of use and enjoyment (Hsu and Lin, 2008, p.71). This corresponds with the teachings laid out by "A New Culture of Learning" suggesting that play is the driving factor to online community building.

Another concern is the degree to which the blog becomes a tool for marketing. Hsu and Lin (2008) revealed the primary motivational factor to people sharing on blogs is altruism and individual reputation (p.72). The conclusion here for "A Step to Gold" is the need to recognize users who contribute in some way to ensure their continued efforts. The tool must not become just a tool for the school's advertising, but a way to showcase the happenings at the school which will in turn promote the school but without the appearance of that being the point.

Further, the school has a vested interest in aiding users to be seen as trusted sources of information. Blogging has become the new word-of-mouth in advertising circles (Hsu, Lin & Chiang, 2012, p70). For the school, it will be important to craft opportunities for students to play the role of informant or recommender of a service as this has been shown to have the most positive correlation with influencing purchases (Hsu, Lin & Chiang, 2012, p.80). The take away for "A Step to Gold" is to allow the community to market the products and resist the urge to self-market.

### **Final Thoughts**

The time spent researching the Raleigh dance community this semester has also been of great importance in influencing my ideas concerning A Step to Gold. The Triangle has a very vibrant and diverse community of dancers. Within the area, the most prominent dance communities are the latin/salsa scene, the traditional ballroom dance scene and the swing dance scene, but there are others.

During my research of dance opportunities in the area, I have been struck at how isolated different dance communities seem to be. There is no shortage of teachers, students and goodwill in the Raleigh dance community, but overall this does not transcend to the virtual world in a meaningful way. There are numerous Facebook, and Meetup sites which are helpful in locating events, they do not promote education as well as one would like. Perhaps "A Step to Gold," in solving their own problems will lead the way for this community to extend their reach beyond Raleigh.

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