

Practitioner Notes

What is already known about this topic:

- Establishing a sense of community among faculty and students in online programs is essential for student satisfaction and success
- Multiple approaches for community formation exist but they often focus on cohorts and courses with vague criteria as opposed to program approaches and specific indicators
- Third place theory identifies specific criteria to evaluate community development and has been partially applied in several online environments

What this paper adds:

- Created spaces never begin as third places
- Third place development exists on a continuum that can be shaped over iterative design, development, implementation, and evaluation cycles.
- Designers should consider user characteristics and needs, space considerations and constraints, and desired activities to further promote and establish third places

Implications for practice and/or policy:

- Community spaces and activities should ultimately focus on opportunities for informal, jovial communication
- Practitioners need to consider community development as a long-term commitment that requires both short and long-term strategies aligned to actionable outcomes.
- Initial violations of third place principles are a part of development processes and become targets for reduction over time

Preprint: Aldosemani, T. I., Shepherd, C. E., Gashim, I., & Dousay, T. A. (2015). Developing third places to foster sense of community in online instruction. *British Journal of Educational Technology*. <http://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12315>

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Developing Third Places to Foster Sense of Community in Online Instruction

Succeeding in an online learning environment is dependent upon a number of factors. Building a community of learners with strong social relationships is critical among these factors (Junk, Deringer, & Junk, 2011; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Rovai, 2002). Sense of community is a feeling of mutual trust, connection, and similarity with others that develops over time (Conrad, 2005; Sarason, 1974). Community is a psychological condition of feeling close to groups of individuals who share membership, influence, common needs, and emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Perrucci, Coscarelli, Balboni, & Cacciamani, 2012). The nature of online learning brings together individuals with opportunities to connect and share in a defined environment. Rovai (2001, p. 2) found community formation in online learning environments simulates “the comforts of home, providing a safe climate, an atmosphere of trust and respect, an invitation for intellectual exchange, and a gathering place for like-minded individuals.” He also identified several characteristics of classroom community:

Classroom community is strong when learners (a) feel connected to each other and to the instructor, (b) manifest the immediate communication behaviors that reduce social and psychological distance between people, (c) share common interests and values, (d) trust and help each other, (e) actively engage in two-way communications, and (f) pursue common learning objectives (p. 322).

When these characteristics are not present, issues may arise. Lacking a sense of community can create a social gap between learners and between learners and their instructor (Kang & Gyorke, 2008; Lehman & Conceição, 2010). Learners’ feelings of isolation, disconnectedness, and lack of social context affect engagement in online classes

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and increase attrition (Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Li & Akins, 2005). Knowing that connectedness and a sense of community are important in online learning environments is insufficient for successful implementations. Instructors and course designers must also understand the attributes of connectedness and community.

Multiple strategies exist to promote sense of community and increase social relationships among learners (McElrath & McDowell, 2008; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee 2007). Palloff and Pratt (2007) discussed the importance of creating social presence, engagement, regular participation, and collaborative activities to develop and sustain online learning communities. McElrath and McDowell (2008) described three stages to enhance learners' sense of community: Creating a supportive environment, allowing interactive introductions, and linking community-building activities to course concepts. The first strategy increases learners' sense of commonality and fosters friendship building. The second enhances learners' knowledge of each other. The third connects personal experience with course outcomes. Liu et al. (2007) highlighted the instructor's role in facilitating the creation and sustainability of online learning communities by establishing a welcoming atmosphere and encouraging student discussion. They concluded that anticipating student interaction and focusing on ways to foster this interaction provide online instructors with effective community building skills.

However, few sources identify how to create online learning communities that extend beyond classroom borders, are professional yet informal, self-sustaining, and less structured. Using principles of third place (Oldenburg, 1989) to characterize sense of community, this paper establishes a framework for the creation of sustainable, informal, online learning communities that promote dialogue and interpersonal relationships. It also

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offers examples, recommendations, and implications for future research. The following questions are addressed:

1. How might third place theory be implemented in distance education settings to promote online learning communities?
2. How can education institutions create online third places over time?

Informal Learning

Informal learning is a constant, lifelong process that often involves “spontaneous structure” (Yaşar & Karadeniz, 2011, p.532). Most informal learning takes place beyond conventional classrooms; it engages individuals in the learning process through non-threatening environments that are less structured, not as confined as mainstream education, and without high-stakes assessments (Cullen et al., 2000; Wynes & Beddie, 2009). A major characteristic of informal learning is its social context (Lin & Lee, 2014; Yaşar & Karadeniz, 2011). As individuals share resources and ideas, formulate and test conjectures, and provide and receive feedback, learning occurs.

Informal learning environments often occur within formal learning settings. Student cohorts, study groups, research teams, and other professional and academic networks jointly experience programs, share ideas, provide support, and help each other progress. With the rise of online education and the physical separation of student groups, informal networks are more difficult to replicate (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Learning communities exist within courses but may not extend beyond them. Frameworks are needed that promote informal community formation beyond course boundaries and provide support systems and networking opportunities for students within distance education programs. Third place theory (Oldenburg, 1989) may provide guidance for these frameworks.

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Third Places

Oldenburg (1989) defined third places as physical, public locations where local residents informally gather to converse with each other. Third places differ from other public venues (e.g., movie theaters, post offices, shopping centers) because emphasis is placed on informal conversation with community members (Halvorason, 2011). This phenomenon contrasts to locations where community members gather but experience minimal interaction (Denning, 2010; Portillo, 2009).

According to Oldenburg (1989), third places share common characteristics that include:

- Accessibility; people can easily access the place
- Existence on neutral ground; individuals can visit without a sense of obligation
- Inclusivity; regulars and new members can converge without regard to rank or class
- A conversational atmosphere; informal, jovial discourse is the main activity
- A low profile; the physical space does not draw attention to itself (away from interpersonal communication)
- A focus on relaxation and support that fosters established psychological feelings of acceptance and comfort

Physical third places include coffee shops like Starbucks because they are accessible, inclusive, maintain a low profile, encourage regulars, and promote personal and professional activities (Denning, 2010). Libraries also exemplify third place characteristics because they provide safe environments, welcome community members, provide communication services, and do not draw attention to themselves (Frey & Codispoti, 2010)..

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The Technology Conundrum

Unlike current online learning environments, Oldenburg's (1989) third places lacked a technological focus. He argued that sound systems, television, videocassette recorders, and other forms of electronic entertainment isolated communities by substituting conversation with one-way broadcasts. Yet, Oldenburg's technological concerns are based on "whatever interrupts conversation's lively flow" (1989, p. 30). Although certain technologies may isolate individuals with passive consumption, recent advances provide greater opportunities for social gathering, communication, and learning.

The Internet, smart phones, social media, voice over Internet protocol (VoIP), and countless other technologies help online learners connect in ways that were impossible a few decades ago. Technology can foster authentic, real-time, group-based conversation and may meet conditions of neutrality and inclusivity. Anyone can create and leverage Facebook groups, YouTube videos, and blog posts to share ideas, communicate with others and promote online learning. These spaces include regular users and maintain low profiles. Supportive, informal, intimate communities develop in technology rich, online environments (Gee & Hayes, 2010; Steinkuehler, Squire, & Barab, 2012).

Physical proximity. Technological advances also blur the line between local and distant space. Online marketplaces provide experiences akin to physical shopping malls. Online courses facilitate information exchange, communication, and professional development. Computer screens become doors into designed communication areas. Indeed, access to these locations may be more local than driving to their physical counterparts. Harrison and Dourish (1996) stated place is determined by the activities of individuals who occupy spaces. As online spaces are occupied by real individuals performing real activities,

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having real interactions, and leading to real outcomes, they become real places.

Despite these claims, some argue the technical nature of online spaces inherently violates principles of a local, community-building profile because they are physically proximate to no one (Soukup, 2006). However, Moore (1991) argued that distance should be defined as a social and pedagogical entity rather than a physical or geographical entity.

Waxman (2006) and Harrison and Dourish (1996) stated community is defined by individual attachment and social interaction as opposed to physical space. Thus, proximity can be measured by social rather than physical distance.

Online Third Places

With the rise of Internet technologies, researchers are exploring possibilities of online third places (Peachey, 2010; Soukup, 2006). Ducheneaut, Moore, and Nickell (2007) and Steinkuehler and Williams (2006) described how third place theory applied to massive multiplayer gaming environments because they provided a neutral space for individuals to congregate, welcomed newcomers, did not consider real-world hierarchies, and focused on shared goals and communication. Soukup (2006) found many Internet tools promote communication, increase user access, and welcome newcomers and regulars.

However, some researchers claim Oldenburg's characteristics are utopian and therefore flexible in physical and virtual settings (Crick, 2011; Denning, 2010; Soukup, 2006; Steinkuehler & Williams, 2006). Denning (2010) stated modern third place examples cannot meet Oldenburg's criteria. He argued these criteria provide a "rough road map of the ideal functions and traits" (p.8) and designers should try to meet as many criteria as possible, but all criteria are not required

Characteristics. Moore et al. (2009) identified four critical factors to build online

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third places: accessibility, social density, activity resources, and hosting resources.

Accessibility is the ease of discovering, entering, and interacting with the space. This moves beyond access to required equipment for entry to include training on equipment use and social norms (Soukup, 2006). Maintaining high social density encourage sociability and interaction (Moore et al., 2009; Soukup, 2006). Activity and hosting resources are materials used to stimulate socialization and are critical for successful third places because they help direct and manage socialization (Moore et al., 2009). Soukup (2006) further claimed presence, perceived comfort, and cultural alignment, also influenced online third place success.

Framework for Online Third Places Development

Although online third place characteristics exist (Ducheneaut et al., 2007), few researchers describe procedures for the creation of these places. Moore et al. (2009) argued, “the idea of identifying the formula for successful public spaces is intriguing and such design principles are badly needed in emerging virtual worlds” (p. 239). As higher education moves farther into online learning, sense of community, socialization, and interaction with others becomes critical to engage learners, reduce feelings of isolation, and increase retention. Successful online learning environments should foster sense of community and stimulate social interaction amongst learners that extends beyond course boundaries and involves students, faculty, and alumni. The following framework for developing third places in online learning environments could fill this need.

Front-End Analysis

Most instructional design projects begin with a detailed front-end analysis (Lee & Owens, 2004; Smith & Ragan, 2005). Designing third places is no exception. Novice

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designers may believe that once a space is developed, the intended audience will automatically use it in ways consistent with their plans. Generally, this does not occur (Smith & Ragan, 2005; Rogers, 2003). Although Oldenburg's characteristics are paramount to the planning process, analyzing stakeholders, organizational contexts, available resources, needs and goals is necessary to establish policies that will attract users and transform a developed, online space into a third place (see Figure 1). Identifying these needs prior to development will help shape space construction, activity design, and promotional materials.

Stakeholders. Designers should identify all stakeholders associated with the space (Lee & Owens, 2004). This includes identifying administrators who will maintain the space, manage user invitations, and coordinate and host activities. Additionally, identifying general users, reasons for using the space, and goals regarding the space should occur. Developers should also ascertain stakeholder technology skills and experience with synchronous and asynchronous communication strategies.

Context. The desired reasons for third place should be examined. Developers should identify organizational missions and goals, intentions for the place, desires for community formation, common communication approaches in both formal and informal settings, and training norms and procedures. Context should also include organizational policies and procedures that govern the use and management of Internet-based resources.

Needs and goals. Although intent to form a third place represents an organizational goal, this must be refined to identify the specific purposes and activities that will be accepted in the developed space. Distinct organizational operations, purposes, and activities should align with organizational missions. Following identification, designers must determine the extent purposes are being achieved in current spaces, identify gaps between

reality and desired practice, and prioritize gaps based on available support, anticipated duration, and potential return on investment.

Resources. Designers should also examine the technology infrastructure of the organization. They should identify available resources, determine their accessibility to intended stakeholders, integration with current organizational workflows, and projected costs for further development and maintenance?

Design Cycles

Third places rarely develop on their own. Locations that currently meet Oldenburg's criteria assumed them over time. The creation of online, informal spaces aligned to formal education programs may require cycles of activity to reach a critical mass of users (Moore et al., 2009; Rogers, 2003) and transform locations into third places. Even Facebook was not always accessible, neutral, playful, and leveling (Vaughn-Nichols, 2014). Rather, Facebook gained these traits through cycles of development, implementation, and evaluation.

After identifying purposes, goals, organizational norms, stakeholder ideas and roles, skills, expectations, and available resources, designers can begin planning and development. This may require compromise among diverse stakeholder perspectives. At this point in the framework, third place is an organizational goal communicated to (but not necessarily shared by) all stakeholders. Learners, educators, or others may not appreciate the need for these informal spaces or the professional/personal networks they are meant to develop. The base of the pyramid represents the online space at the beginning of development. To promote participation and foster critical mass, the space may be populated with users that are mandated by education programs to participate in conversation-based activities. At this stage of development, third place may appear a utopian ideal (Soukup, 2006). Designers

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should incorporate as many characteristics of third places as they can (Denning, 2010) but not become discouraged if several characteristics are unmet. After gaining awareness and exploring the space through these activities, intended users are more likely to continue use if they are able to repurpose activities to meet personal needs (Rogers, 2003).

Through an iterative series of design, development, implementation, and evaluation cycles focused on users, activities, and the space, designers can build upon previous work to transform potentially closed, hierarchical, dictated spaces into third places, adding additional third place characteristics as social density is reached (see Figure 1). The following sections describe the iterative nature of third place construction based on the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of the space, users, and activities.

Space

Space is the online location where users congregate. Ultimately it becomes a third place through the inclusions of socially constructed and accepted rules, norms, and activities (Harrison & Dourish, 1996). Developers should seek to align the space with principles of third place theory. Following Oldenburg's (1989) characteristics, this space should be accessible and user friendly, designed to facilitate conversation, exhibit a low profile, and ultimately reside on neutral ground where the organization assumes a minimal role in fostering and monitoring conversation. As the space is designed and developed, consideration should be given to stakeholder competencies, goals, and available resources. Developers should select tools and locations that leverage familiar skill sets, align with organizational workflows, and promote access (Liu et al., 2007; Smith & Ragan, 2005). They should also consider and establish available communication exchange options that align with organizational norms (Rogers, 2003). Hyperlinks or portals to the space should be

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housed within existing organizational tools (e.g., learning management systems, websites, blogs, wikis) to facilitate access and encourage use. As users enter the space, they should be familiar with available resources and tools so they can focus on communication exchange as opposed to technical skill formation.

To promote informal learning communities among students in online degree programs at one university, the learning management system was leveraged to create a group site that all students and faculty could access external to regular courses. The space mirrored many functions of their online courses (e.g., group discussions, announcements, content topics, instructional videos). The design of this space was purposeful. It was situated within an existing resource that stakeholders visited on a regular basis. They were familiar with the site's functions and means of communication. Additionally, as enrolled students graduated to alumni status, they had developed a history of routine tool use and retained access to the space, enlarging the scope and purpose of the community.

The designed space should encourage communication while maintaining a low profile. This does not mean the space should appear bland or unoccupied (Ducheneaut et al., 2007; Peachey 2010). To foster multicultural communication between English learning Saudi students and native English speakers, a one-room building was developed in Second Life that contained furniture placed in a circular pattern around a traditional Saudi tea setting. Room décor included pictures and objects relevant to prearranged conversation topics. These objects and pictures provided conversation topics for participating users. Only elements that shift attention from shared exploration or communication (e.g., single player games, complex control schemes) should be minimized.

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Users should also be allowed to personalize the space with pictures, videos, blog entries, virtual objects, and other resources. Personalization establishes user familiarity and comfort, draws attention to user interests, and provides topics for conversation.

Personalization may also visually encourage users to repurpose the space for their own needs and promote sustained adoption (Rogers, 2003). After focusing on host-derived conversation topics within multicultural sessions, for example, users in the Second Life sessions began bringing their own objects and pictures to facilitate communication and multicultural exchange.

Although the design, development, implementation, and evaluation of this space will evolve through multiple cycles, developers should consider potential uses, accessibility, conversation, and profile in the initial design. Taking these considerations into account during early design and development cycles may reduce or eliminate later time-consuming modifications (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Additionally, because various stakeholder goals are considered during space development, it is unlikely users will initially consider the space neutral. Through iterative cycles where users gain more control to suggest, develop and promote activities, organizational hierarchies are reduced and neutrality emerges.

For example, instructors may establish a space and initially require user participation to promote use and communication. As users gain familiarity and social ties within the space, the instructor role diminishes. Users reinvent activities and communication approaches to meet their needs, promote their activities, and participate voluntarily. At this point, instructors may omit required interactions or implement them less frequently.

Although instructors and other organization administrators retain a presence in the space,

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the conversation expands beyond their initial uses, reducing their importance and promoting a sense of neutrality.

Users

Users are individuals that access the space. Hosts (e.g., instructors, program coordinators, site administrators) should strive to trigger user curiosity and interaction via planned activities. This requires hosts to consider user demographics, technology proficiencies, interests, anxieties, and attitudes towards authority, the space, competition, and cooperation (Lee & Owens, 2004; Smith & Ragan, 2005).

Because learners may not recognize or share goals and objectives associated with organizational uses of the space, incentives or mandates may be necessary during initial development phases to promote social density, communication exchange and community development (Rogers, 2003). When a social network in Ning was developed to promote department community and informal interaction within online programs, all students and faculty were invited to participate. To increase interest, the site housed cross-disciplinary discussion topics, recent job posts, graduate forms, recommended reading lists, and other resources. Despite these resources, the site initially received few visitors. To remedy this problem, course instructors began mandating participation in the site. Only when users became more familiar and accepting of the space were mandates removed.

User interests, proficiencies, and anxieties affect curiosity and interaction. These characteristics may be leveraged to develop and provide participation incentives. As hosts consider user characteristics, they can develop activities that leverage or extend skillsets and interests, increasing likelihood of user participation. User curiosity successively promotes exploration and emotional involvement. Users may browse members' profiles and statuses,

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view photo albums, follow links to recommended content, and so forth. Exploration helps physically distant users discover similarities and establish social connections, repurposing their usage to meet individual needs. Once these connections are established, the likelihood for regulars to occupy the space with their own activities increases and the need for organization incentives or mandates reduces.

Within the Second Life example, a learner analysis revealed that Saudi students had minimal informal contact with native English speakers despite living in the United States. This lack of interaction made certain social activities awkward (e.g., attending sporting events, purchasing groceries, camping, hiking) because Saudi students were not taught how to behave in these situations. Additionally, native English speakers learned about Muslim culture through news media outlets that focused on extremist groups and ideas as opposed to mainstream practices. With these learner characteristics, developers attracted users through activities focused on common cultural activities in English. The incentive to gain cultural awareness among both groups was sufficient to attract voluntary participation which resulted in some participants inviting others to the sessions.

Activities

Designers must also consider activities within the online space. Activities should focus on building community, enhancing social engagement, and establishing a sense of place. Careful activity design establishes atmosphere and defines the third place (Waxman, 2006). Although Harrison and Dourish (1996) stated place building is not the job of designers because occupants give their own expression to designed spaces, designers can shape user attitudes and atmosphere through designed activities and instruction (Smith & Ragan, 2005). Restaurants, movie theaters, and hotels establish atmosphere through lighting,

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décor, and other amenities. Within the learning management space, degree program faculty included copies of course syllabi, three-year program plans, and other academic resources to encourage site use. Although program specific, these resources encourage students and faculty to access the site at various times during their program. As they examine these resources, additional activities encourage additional participation.

Hosts must plan initial activities, encourage participation, and set expectations. These activities should focus on playful conversation that aligns with identified goals for the space. Activities may also incorporate competition (Oldenburg, 1989) and gamification (e.g., virtual scavenger hunts, photography competitions, group puzzles).

Although students were first mandated to create profile pages in the Ning site, post a link to their electronic portfolios and participate in cross disciplinary discussions, site administrators also considered and presented activities that encouraged optional participation. One activity encouraged users to post recent vacation pictures. Another asked them to post pictures or video associated with their residential community. Users voluntarily commented on others posts which often sparked the sharing of additional pictures. Additional activities asked users to recommend books for recreational and professional reading, complete language puzzles and other social games, and lead discussions regarding topics of their interest.

As users gain familiarity with the space and its policies, the host extends opportunities for users to develop their own conversational activities (e.g., public and private chats, blog topics, games, announcements). When user-developed activities rise, the host's role in activity formation diminishes, moving towards voluntary participation with an established set of regulars.

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Voluntarily and Regular Participation

The goal of third places is to attract regular and optional visits where members come for socialization purposes. In formal, online learning environments, this is not easily achieved. Optional participation may occur after cycles of mandated use where activities facilitate playful interaction and encourage individual and group initiative. Organizations should not expect immediate voluntarily participation until they establish an attractive atmosphere and implement appealing activities that encourage users to visit the page regularly. Yung-Cheng et al. (2010) defined this sense of regular attendance and participation as a virtual community's loyalty. If users feel a sense of membership and shared community, psychological attachment occurs and visitations increase. As developers consider stakeholder needs, goals, and resources while designing and evaluating spaces over time, they can implement activities that focus on user communication and establish membership. Through multiple design, development, implementation, and evaluation cycles spaces that originate with hierarchal, mandated, formal, organization-centric traits can assume more characteristics of third place until they ultimately become one.

Conclusion

Determine Framework Position

Designers should begin the third place planning process by evaluating their current position in the framework. Practitioners might find themselves in the top, middle, or bottom of the framework by assessing how and to what extent their learning space aligns with third place characteristics. Once position is determined, designers can work on progressing up the pyramid framework through design, development, implementation, and evaluation cycles. This process embraces ideas by Denning (2010) and Crick (2011) who stated third places do

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not require all of Oldenburg's characteristics while still providing opportunities to meet these characteristics over time—retaining the original definition (Oldenburg, 1989).

Establishing characteristics over time may increase instructor motivation to develop them, mitigating frustration levels when all characteristics are not immediately met. **Expect**

Challenges

Designers should expect challenges at all stages of the framework. Little research has examined time expectations required to transform virtual spaces into their places.

Further, anticipated outcomes might require extended implementations to solidify.

Maintaining user interest and providing long-term access to the space might tax organizational resources if substantial gains are slow to materialize or not recognized.

Moore et al. (2009) stated advantages of applying theory in online environments cannot be reached or ensured without examining and experimenting with different online mediums and application strategies. Additional research is needed regarding timing associated with framework progression in various settings and using various spaces.

This paper provided a framework for third place development in online learning environments. We propose that virtual third places can meet all criteria established by Oldenburg (1989). As mentioned by Denning (2010), third places can be used as a planning tool for creating and sustaining communities of practice. To achieve this goal, organizations should make conversation-centric spaces accessible to intended users, serve as hosts in the setting, encourage participation (which should ultimately become voluntary), and stimulate conversation. However, the development of third places only occurs over time. Violations of third place characteristics are part of the development process. However, these violations should be eliminated over time through continuous evaluation, modification, and

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implementation of the space, users, activities, and organizational needs, goals, and resources. Indeed, successful creation and maintenance of virtual third places requires a learner-centered shift of power in the role of the host, activities, and presented content (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Using principles of Oldenburg's (1989) concept of third place to characterize sense of community, this paper established a framework for the creation of sustainable and informal learning communities that promote dialogue and interpersonal relationships. This paper discussed Oldenburg's theory of third place and presented a framework to implement online third place communities in educational settings.

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Figure 1. Developing Third Place Model

