

**BUILDING AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY:
A MAJOR COMMUNICATION COMPONENT OF THE
VIRTUAL ASSISTANT CERTIFICATE**

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my children and my grandchildren. They bring me so much joy. As I have believed in them and their potential, they have supported me in all my endeavours.

I also dedicate this work to my many friends. They have helped me put things into perspective. They have been my champions during the good times and the times of growth.

And, lastly, I dedicate this work to my mom. She has taught me that hard work, perseverance, and a loving heart are all that you need to succeed in life.

Abstract

The purpose of this project is to answer the question: “Should the Virtual Assistant Certificate have a strong collaborative component interlaced throughout all the online courses?” Three years ago a search of the Internet for more information as to whether anyone was providing training in how to start and run a successful administrative professional business from home lead to the discovery of a relatively new term: Virtual Assistant. This Internet search showed a growing trend towards contracting to outside office support specialists. Because the majority of Office Administration students are female and because many of them see full-time employment and raising a family as realities in their future, being “connected” from a distance to their place or places of work would be ideal. Information obtained from experienced Virtual Assistants helped determine the course content and gave a hint as to how the material should be delivered. Although there were no journal articles specific to the topic of Virtual Assistants, it was possible to perform a literature review on the topic of building collaborative online learning communities—a delivery strategy recommended for successful online learners. The instructors who would deliver the online courses were provided with training in building collaborative online learning communities. Survey instruments were prepared and administered part way through the first semester of the online courses to experienced Virtual Assistants, online instructors, and online Virtual Assistant students. The results of these surveys indicated that while the working Virtual Assistants and the online instructors could see the benefits of collaboration, the online Virtual Assistant students needed more experiences interacting in collaborative online learning communities in order to become more successful in their online businesses.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Virtual Assistants are defined as: private business owners who provide administrative and personal support while working in long-term collaborative relationships with selected clients. Using telephone, facsimile, and the Internet, Virtual Assistants (VAs) support their clients without having to ever step foot inside the clients' offices (Santa Rosa Junior College, 2002).

This project will examine the need to have a strong collaborative component as the core of the eleven online courses being developed for the Virtual Assistant Certificate. Working with the premise that it is essential, the Virtual Assistant instructors will receive training in designing courses that build community. A separate website will be created that encourages involvement from students, instructors, employers, and working VAs (see Appendix 5). The success of the efforts to build community will be determined through a questionnaire of instructors and students registered in the Fall 2003 VA online courses and through data collected from WebCT's tracking capabilities. These results will be compared with survey results obtained from working Virtual Assistants to identify similarities and differences, which will indicate the need for building community. If working VAs are actively involved in virtual communities, providing and encouraging a similar level of community involvement for online students should assist them in creating a successful virtual business.

Background/Rationale

For a number of women, a desire for children and the necessity of a job to help augment the family's income can be a source of tension and stress. For centuries women have had cottage industries (sewing, laundry, crafts, baking, milk and eggs) that have

allowed them to remain at home, nurturing their children, and to have an additional source of income to help support their families.

With the introduction of the typewriter in the 1800s, women joined the workforce as secretaries in increasing numbers during the 1900s. With the introduction of the computer and other forms of electronic communication—telephone, facsimile, Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), the Internet, cell phones, and a whole host of new hardware continually being developed—women need not leave the home to earn an income. This equipment is affordable to the average person. As well, the technical expertise is within the scope of the average person.

Employer Advantages and Disadvantages

Employers are beginning to see the advantages and possibilities of a virtual workforce:

- They save money by not having to worry about the added expenses that are associated with having an in-house assistant (i.e. office space, equipment, employment related expenses).
- They also save money by only paying for time worked. Most Virtual Assistants bill on a minute-by-minute basis and do not bill for idle time.
- They can concentrate on increasing their revenue and building their client bases while the Virtual Assistant handles their non-core tasks.
- They get experienced assistance when they need it.
- They do not have to worry about training the employee.
- They can count on working ‘with’ a professional who is dedicated to helping their business grow (Ennen & Poelker, 2003).

Not all employers have embraced the concept of virtual assistance. Some of their concerns are:

- Managers cannot manage people that they cannot see.
- Virtual employees are not available for meetings.
- Working virtually is just a fad (Bredin, 1996).
- A virtual assistant may have difficulty separating work and family life and will, therefore, be less professional (Priesnitz, 1995).
- A quick change to documents is not always possible and can lead to a loss in production time.
- Without face-to-face contact, it is time consuming to relay instructions for work assignments.
- The virtual employee may not always be available when needed.

Successful working Virtual Assistants would argue that there are misconceptions about working virtually and there are counter-arguments for each of the above disadvantages.

Virtual Office Trend

Business surveys conducted over the past ten years have shown the trend towards telecommuting and virtual offices. Bredin points out a number of reasons for this growing trend, including: the shift from a manufacturing economy to a service- and information-based economy, the increased power and affordability of office technology, baby boomers' demands for more flexible work arrangements, and the massive downsizing in corporations (1996). While most of the statistics have come from the United States, the trend is growing in Canada as well. An Internet search in 2001 using the search term

“Virtual Assistants” resulted in several hundred hits. One year later that same search term brought up thousands of hits. The sites are composed of women opening their own businesses on-line, associations for Virtual Assistants, newsletters, and training opportunities. Many of the national and international conferences for Administrative Professionals have included at least one session on virtual offices. The newly formed International Virtual Assistants Association (IVAA) held its first conference the Fall of 2002 in Las Vegas. Another recent association, the International Association of Virtual Office Assistants (IAVOA), hosted its second annual conference in the Fall of 2002, at Dallas, Texas.

An Internet search in 2002 for how to start and run a successful administrative professional business from home indicated that the term “Virtual Assistant” was becoming a popular job title. Because the majority of the Office Administration students are female and because many of them see full-time employment and raising a family as realities in their future, being “connected” from a distance to their place or places of work would be ideal.

Virtual Assistant Training

In the Fall of 2002 there were only a few places offering training to become a Virtual Assistant. Santa Rosa Community College in the United States was a government recognized facility; the others were all associations (for example, see:

<http://www.assistu.com>; <http://www.ivaa.org>; <http://www.iavao.com>;

<http://www.canadianva.net/>), offering a few courses and certifying their members, or

individuals who provide mentoring for anyone wanting to start their own virtual business (for example, see: <http://www.mjva.ca>). Appendix 2 illustrates the comparison of

program offerings by Santa Rosa Junior College, VATP, Virtual Assistance U, and the Virtual Wizards. It became clear that the Canadian market could benefit from a certificate being offered by one of the Canadian colleges. Among both potential employers and potential employees, the interest in virtual assistance is there; the demand is there; and yet how are Canadian colleges responding to this opportunity? A training program that also gave a credential and was delivered by a Canadian college should provide the “proof” to potential employers that they are dealing with an intelligent, experienced, and professional individual. To determine what the curriculum should consist of, a small sampling of six Canadian Virtual Assistants was selected to survey (see Appendix 9). From those encouraging results, the administration at Red Deer College supported the idea, provided a budget for the new initiative, and prepared the paperwork for Alberta Learning approval.

The most crucial decision came about as the survey results of the Canadian VAs showed a need to focus not only on what was being taught but how it was being taught. In teaching Virtual Assistants, they should be encouraged to understand the benefits of virtual collaborative associations with other VAs. The Virtual Assistant students would first need to understand what a Virtual Assistant was, the types of services provided, and the associations already available to VAs.

What is a Virtual Assistant?

According to Findlay (2202) a Virtual Assistant (VA) is:

Virtual Assistants are home-based professionals. A Virtual Assistant works closely with the client while meeting their administrative support needs. A Virtual Assistant is a person you may never meet, and yet will hopefully become like your right arm. They give busy people the freedom to focus on the core issues of their business and personal lives by taking advantage of today’s technology, specifically the Internet and the ability to

exchange information at our fingertips.

The services a Virtual Assistant could provide are: word processing, desktop publishing, web page design, electronic presentations, bookkeeping/payroll services, Internet research, bulk mailing, newsletters, database management, event planning (meetings, conferences, trade shows), resumes and cover letters, and travel planning. Naturally, the services offered would depend upon the expertise of the VA; not all would or could offer a complete set of services. Although not restricted by the town or city they reside in, some have chosen to cater to the local market, while others have clients in foreign countries.

So who are these Virtual Assistants and why have they chosen to be entrepreneurs? Currently, they are located primarily in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand. They are highly skilled in their profession, but they may have specialized skills, such as bookkeeping, medical and legal transcription, and research. The Virtual Assistant profession is attracting a variety of administrative professionals, including young mothers who want to have a flexible work schedule, wives of military personnel who need a “portable” career, and women who are looking for opportunities to increase their status and choices through the entrepreneurial route.

A growing trend for more experienced and entrepreneurial-minded VAs is to take on associates and to coach those wanting to start their own business. Michelle Jamison of MJVA & Associates (<http://www.mjva.ca/>) is an example of someone who started out small and has grown her business to the point where she now has four associates and offers a variety of value-added services, including a newsletter, teleconference mentoring

sessions, and a self-help series of books for Virtual Assistants (Website 101, Marketing 101 and 102, and Business Development 101).

Virtual Assistant Associations

As the interest in and the reality of Virtual Assistants have grown over the past five years, associations are being formed to provide a contact network, to offer credentials, and to promote virtual assistants. The associations (five were found in June 2002 and over a dozen in November 2003) are also offering value-added services. The International Association of Virtual Office Assistants (IAVOA) offers at its website a free 23-page Ebook “How do I Become a Virtual Assistant?” It also provides a chat room for members and a directory of its members with links to the members’ e-mail and website addresses. A Clayton’s Secretary (an Internet home-based secretaries network out of Australia) has a free newsletter, a list of books with links to where they can be purchased, a list of upcoming seminars in various locations, and a request form to match up their members with employers seeking translation services in Afrikaans, German, Latvian, Punjabi, and nine other languages. The At-Home Secretary’s Organization has a Discussion Board at its site, allowing its members to post questions and advice. As well, members are allowed to post their “calling card” (a brief description of their business and how to contact them) at the organization’s site.

The advantages of belonging to an association are apparent from the variety of services provided: mentorship, training, certification, socializing, business contacts, advertising, and networking.

Online Collaborative Learning

The collaborative process can and should begin during the training of Virtual Assistants. A caring, supportive learning environment should be initiated and supported by the online instructor. Just as in recent years instructors have been encouraged to be the “guide on the side” rather than the “sage on the stage” in the regular face-to-face classroom, effective online courses should move the student from being a mere participant to being a “reflective practitioner” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 131). Palloff & Pratt refer to this change as Mezirow’s transformative learning where students engage with and reflect on the course content and engage in discussion with their peers and the instructor. Views and perspectives are changed in the transformative learning process (Cranton, 1998). Cranton recommends “the learning group must be supportive and caring of each other, creating an atmosphere of openness and trust” (p. 199). This style of learning has also been referred to as collaborative where computer-mediated communication has the potential to create a “respectful interdependence where the student takes responsibility for personal meaning as well as creating mutual understanding in a learning community” (Stacey, 1999, p. 15).

The online instructor needs to create a learning environment that is supportive—an environment where students and instructor care for each other, with openness and trust built into the design of the online course. That environment could have a bit of progressivism with students interacting with their environment and learning by reflecting on their experiences, a bit of humanism with students controlling their own lives and learning, a bit of behaviorism with instructors designing an environment that elicits desired behavior, and a bit of a radical orientation with students reflecting in dialogue

with others and then acting on that reflection (Scott, 1998).

Having participated in a collaborative learning environment while taking the Virtual Assistant Certificate online courses, the graduates will be better prepared to communicate virtually with other virtual assistants who will become their support network.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Terms and Keywords

Each of the terms used in the title (*Building an Online Learning Community: A Major Communication Component of the Virtual Assistant Certificate*) of this project are defined below:

Communication component. Communication in an online environment, or computer-mediated communication, is defined as the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information through e-mail, chat, discussion boards, computer conferencing, and online databases (Curtis & Lawson, 2001).

Online learning community. Rovai (2002) cites the following definition of community from the book *Habits of the Heart* by Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton:

A community is a group of people who are socially interdependent, who participate together in discussion and decision-making, and who share certain practices that both define the community and are nurtured by it. Such a community is not quickly formed. It almost always has a history and so is also a community of memory, defined in part by its past and its memory of the past (pp 41-42).

Rovai (2002) also quotes from Bielaczyc and Collins who describe a learning community as one that embodies a “culture of learning in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding” (p 42). The same features evident in learning communities can and should be created in online courses.

Virtual Assistant Certificate. The Virtual Assistant Certificate, newly approved by Alberta Learning, is described at the Red Deer College website as:

Trends in telecommuting, the growth of the Internet, and corporate downsizing have contributed to the growth of the virtual assistant profession. This online program will provide opportunities for students to gain entrepreneurial skills, attitudes, technology skills and related knowledge to adapt to providing office services virtually from their home offices. Students will learn how to create and market a viable home-based business using their technological skills to contract office support to for-profit businesses and not-for-profit agencies. The eight core courses include a practicum placement. In addition, a one-course specialization will allow students to select from other major support areas: Automated Accounting, Web Design, and Electronic Spreadsheets (Red Deer College, 2004).

Definition of Terms

The following additional terms are used throughout this paper:

Virtual Assistant - VAs are private business owners who provide administrative and personal support while working in long-term collaborative relationships with selected clients. Using telephone, facsimile, and e-mail, VAs support their clients without having to ever step foot inside the clients' offices (Santa Rosa Community College, 2002).

Virtual Office – Any worksite outside of the traditional office in which people still do the work associated with a traditional office. The virtual in the term virtual office implies the use of technology (Bredin, 1996, p. 3).

Cyber Secretaries – Another not-as-common name for a Virtual Assistant.

Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) – These are multifunction device, which may perform calendar, memo-pad, calculator, and scheduler functions as well as paging and e-mail (Bredin, 1996, p. 111).

The descriptors and key words used to review the literature both on the Internet and in journals were: Collaborative Learning, Learning Communities, Community, Technology Based Instruction, Distance Education, Online Learning, Web-based Learning, and Virtual Assistants. An initial review of the literature supported the need for building a community of online learners (Barab, MaKinster, Moore, & Cunningham, 2001; Conrad, 2002; Curtis & Lawson, 2001; Rovai, 2001; Rovai, 2002; Schwier, 2001; Stacey, 1999). There is a process of community building in online courses that should be followed. Schwier (2001) suggests that communities do not just happen nor can they be created; rather, they emerge when conditions nurture them. Just as in a regular classroom where community does not evolve all on its own, the instructor needs to create a learning environment that encourages interaction through community-building activities. Appendix 1 lists ten elements of virtual learning communities and describes how they can be incorporated. Those elements include a blend of establishing individual and group identity, the need for participation from everyone to achieve learning outcomes, and the mutuality of shared ideas and shared problem solving. The difficulty is that in attempting to nurture the community, Schwier cautions there is a tendency to impose a structure (2001). Too much structure imposed by the instructor can stifle student interdependence and efforts to collaborate.

Students in Conrad's (2002) study stated that the instructor should get the community started and then step back and allow the group to take over. Community building is more than just using all the tools available in a program such as WebCT and assigning grades to assignments completed using those tools. Parker (1999) describes the role of the instructor and student in an online learning community as being transparent. Students will seek information from peers as well as from the instructor. Instructors are also knowledge seekers; they too are learners. In order to ensure the success of online learners, opportunities for interaction among learners need to be created and encouraged so that students feel part of the group and that they learn from each other (Conrad, 2002; Parker, 1999).

Effective Online Learning Communities

The terms "collaborative online learning" (Stacey, 1999; Curtis & Lawson, 2001), "interaction in distance education" (Parker, 1999), "virtual learning communities" (Schwier, 2001), and "online community building" (Conrad, 2002; Rovai, 2002) are used in the literature to describe current practices for online courses. According to Parker (1999) and Rovai (2002), the instructor creates effective online learning communities by:

- providing many topics for discussion
- allowing for feedback from students and experts
- providing links to sources of pertinent information
- encouraging cognitive interaction with the course material
- acting as a "provocateur" who motivates and encourages self-direction
- including some humour
- including "real life" stories

- constructing group assignments to allow the students to discuss, problem-solve, and debate the material
- facilitating productive interactions
- providing timely feedback
- providing clear, detailed feedback
- using text emotives to provide the missing non-verbal cues (i.e. <grin>)
- holding, where possible, a face-to-face orientation and where not possible, early group work
- creating a beginning activity where students introduce themselves to the whole group and then respond to other students' introductions
- focusing less on the delivery of instruction and more on the learners collaborating with the medium and with each other to construct knowledge
- posting the complete syllabus at the beginning of the course
- providing clear guidelines for posting assignments and for discussions
- establishing a rubric for assignment expectations
- providing examples or templates for assignments

Moore's three types of interaction, as cited in Parker (2002), include: student interaction with the content, with the instructor, and with other students. Student interaction is encouraged through the use of computer-mediated communication tools available in programs such as WebCT. Those tools are broken down into the categories of synchronous (happening at the same time: chat rooms, teleconferencing, instant

messenger, and voice-over conferencing) and asynchronous (not synchronous: e-mail and discussion boards).

Student Benefits

Parker (1999) and Stacey (1999) suggest that students benefit in a number of ways when collaboration is built into online courses:

- higher levels of motivation
- higher academic recall
- more positive attitude toward the course
- students are empowered to become an autonomous developer of personal knowledge
- more self-reflective learning
- enhancement of cognitive skills
- feelings of isolation are removed
- the space provided allows for collective thinking and access to peers for socializing and communication

With the foregoing benefits being achieved in well-crafted virtual classrooms, Spencer (1998) points out distance education “can no longer be defined as ‘an education without a classroom,’ nor perhaps even as ‘the separation of teacher and student’” (p. 351). It is possible to have students and instructors committed to a collaborative learning community through shared intellectual and social goals without the need of bricks and mortar.

Developing Community

Saragina (1999) offers an interesting method for developing the virtual learning community. She begins by creating a personal working definition of what the learning community would look and feel like:

Various kinds of individuals interacting in a common location for the purpose of gaining knowledge in, understanding of, or skill in a subject matter through instruction, study, and/or experience by the creation of a social state and condition that nurtures and encourages learners.

The online course is then developed, keeping in mind that each portion of the definition must be addressed. For example, the concept of interacting is fully described by the instructor answering the following questions: “How will this happen? Do I want to have collaborative work groups or teams? Why? How should the students be grouped? Is emphasis on quantity and quality?” (Saragina, 1999, p. 2). Answers to each of the foregoing questions will assist the instructor in designing a course that deliberately and consciously encourages the creation of an online learning community.

The content and learning objectives of each course should drive the selection of the various communication devices available (Boaz, 1999). Because of time differences and other difficulties in scheduling, an instructor may not make use of synchronous forms of communication such as video conferencing, teleconferencing, chat rooms, and occasional face-to-face meetings. Experienced course developers suggest that learning communities can be formed that do not require face-to-face communication or other forms of synchronous delivery, but they all agree that a number of key features should be

incorporated into online courses, facilitating the building of collaborative learning communities.

This type of community building takes time and careful planning. In any given online course, there may be students with little computer expertise to students who have taken a number of online courses previously. Colleges and universities have tackled the problem of assisting new online learners in a number of ways. Saragina (1999) uses the first few weeks of her course for class introductions, an online self-assessment test, and short lectures on learning styles, time management, and organizational skills that introduce students to the technology before getting into the course content. Other colleges and universities require that the students either take an online orientation course or require that the students perform a number of tasks to display their familiarity with the web tools prior to beginning the online course.

Building Community

Rovai (2002) indicates “online instructors need to increase learner feelings of: (a) similarity of learner needs, (b) connectedness, (c) friendship, and (d) group identity; and they need to reduce feelings of confusion in course discussions” (p. 53). Keeping all of the above key attributes in mind, the following steps should ensure student success and build a collaborative learning community:

Step 1: Course Framework. The first step in building a collaborative learning community is providing a detailed course outline with a list of assignments, due dates, and weighting of each. As well, students should know how and when to reach the instructor through a variety of methods (e-mail, telephone, facsimile, and mail). Conrad (2002) points out that learners just beginning an online course are not concerned about

building community. Rather their major concerns are “mastering the business of the course: understanding course demands on them, determining schedules and assignments, and making sure that they are in possession of all instructions and materials” (p. 13). Accordingly, students should be provided with clear guidelines for individual and group assignments.

Step 2: Introductions and Learning Expectations. The instructor should begin the course by posting an introduction to the discussion board and/or sending an e-mail that is a blend of both personal and professional information about the instructor, instructions on how and where to post student introductions, and instructions on responding to other students’ introductions. The instructor should then allow the first week of class as an opportunity for students to post information about themselves and to answer a few questions about their learning expectations for the course. The questions should be relevant to the learning objectives of the course. For example, the Virtual Assistant course, *Starting a Virtual Assistant Business*, has the following questions: Why are you interested in becoming a Virtual Assistant? What is your experience with learning in a distant format? What do you think is most challenging for Virtual Assistants? What is your biggest concern about starting a VA Business?

During that first week the students also have the opportunity to get to know the other students in the course by reading and responding to their introductions. At the end of that first week the instructor should further promote relationship building by acknowledging the contributions of each class member (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Just as most instructors in a face-to-face class attempt to learn the names of each student during that first week of class, online instructors should use student names.

Step 3: Preinteraction. Boettcher & Conrad (1999) recommend having the students complete the first assignment individually. As they explain, “this will give students time to get to know one another through the introductory exercises and to become familiar with the basics of the technology before adding the stress of coordinating activities with a peer or group” (p. 92). An example of first assignment could be to have students write a short paper describing their philosophy about a key course topic. The instructor would gain valuable information about what the students already know about the topic as well as finding out the students’ writing capabilities. The students would have their first opportunity putting into writing their thoughts around the topic as well as a trial run at posting their responses to the discussion board.

Step 4: Forming Teams. The next step in building a collaborative learning community is to create teams for the purpose of small-group discussion and peer assignments. As students work through the process of analyzing and solving problems, interdependence is developed as they brainstorm, negotiate, and discuss ideas. Typically, during small-group discussion the instructor should be available to clarify and help resolve disputes but does not need to lead the discussion. Boettcher & Conrad (1999) indicate “in a learning community, the faculty member is a community member with a consulting role” and “learners turn to each other first for problem resolution and knowledge building before they seek information from the faculty” (p. 89). In order for students to engage in a meaningful discussion, the instructor must carefully construct the questions so that the students can draw upon information from the course readings and their own experience. The questions should relate to real-life situations that allow this blend of new knowledge and past experience.

The peer assignments could include an evaluation of a peer's written assignment based upon a criteria established by the instructor, a paper written by two or three students on a topic proposed by the students or selected from a list provided by the instructor, peer response to a research question posed by the instructor, or any number of other ideas that best fulfill the course objectives and allow students the opportunity to collaborate.

As students complete peer assignments and participate in group discussions, a sense of community is developed. Conrad (2002) suggests that "participation in online learning activities exist *before* community, that it contributes to community, that it is the vehicle for maintaining community, and that it eventually becomes the measure of the health of the community" (p. 16).

Step 5: Grading Assignments. For small-group discussions, roles such as facilitator, negotiator, scribe, and timekeeper may be assigned by the instructor or be chosen by the team members. The roles may be rotated through several online discussions during the course. As well as having students evaluate their own performance and those of their peers, an instructor may want to develop a rubric for grading individual participation in each of the discussions. Some instructors may not choose to assign roles but rather may allow the individual student to determine his/her own level of involvement within the discussion groups. In that case, grades would be based upon a rubric developed and posted by the instructor. The most important factor for student success is instructors providing timely and detailed feedback.

Step 6: Student Feedback. Instructors teaching in a face-to-face environment use a variety of methods to obtain student feedback. The feedback might be as simple as a

quick visual check or asking students to raise their hands to indicate agreement, or the instructor might devise feedback instruments with open-ended questions or a Likert scale. Obtaining feedback in the online classroom is simple and quick. WebCT has a quiz feature that allows instructors to ask open-ended questions such as “What worked well for you this week? What did not work well? What suggestions would you make for improvement?” Regular perception checks will allow the instructor to adjust and improve the quality of learning.

Collaborative Behavior

Through analysis of text contributions made by group members in their online interactions via e-mail messages and discussion board postings, a list of student behaviors was created (Curtis and Lawson, 2001):

- giving and receiving help and assistance;
- exchanging resources and information;
- explaining elaborating information;
- sharing existing knowledge with others;
- giving and receiving feedback;
- challenging others’ contributions (cognitive conflict and controversy leading to negotiation and resolution);
- advocating increased effort and perseverance among peers;
- engaging in small group skills;
- monitoring each others’ efforts and contributions (p. 26).

The above behaviors are clearly evidence of effective collaboration in the online learning environment. Murphy and Laferriere (2003) state “the collaborative virtual space presents

occasions to consider alternate perspectives, contrary ideas, and new insights that might sometimes confirm existing conceptions and ideas, and other times challenge them” (p. 80). Opportunities to engage in collaborative learning activities build community and benefit students’ learning and understanding of themselves, others, as well as the course objectives.

Training for Online Instructors

Teaching and learning in a collaborative online environment is not entirely similar to teaching and learning in a face-to-face classroom. Before instruction begins, there are a number of issues to be addressed in order for students to be successful online learners. Student issues consist of accessing online student services and understanding online classroom operations. The most important issue is the training of online instructors in building collaborative learning communities.

With the proliferation of online courses in adult education, one of the concerns about this relatively new learning environment is that it needs to provide the same level of learning and support as that experienced in the regular “brick and mortar” institution. While online students will not experience problems finding parking on campus, they will still need help registering for classes, obtaining student loans, and buying their books. They will still need help “finding” their classroom, “meeting” their instructors and fellow classmates, and “completing and handing” in assignments.

Finding their classroom in the online environment will require some previous online and computer experience. Students who do not already have that experience may require prior training in order to feel totally comfortable in this environment. While some institutions do provide opportunities for instructors and students to have at least one face-

to-face meeting during the semester, distance may prohibit this from happening for some or all students in a particular course. For some online students, they may only meet fellow students and instructors at graduation or not at all. Instructions for completing assignments is often similar to what a student would experience in a brick and mortar institution, but even more attention must be paid in providing clear, explicit instructions and reminders throughout the course. As well, handing in assignments typically includes sending them by e-mail or posting to a discussion board, rarely placing the papers in the instructor's hands.

For instructors new to teaching online, the best method of understanding the differences between teaching face-to-face and teaching online is to enroll in an online course. Becoming an online student reflective of the learning process is an enlightening experience. Results of Gold's (2001) training of new online instructors concluded "teachers exposed to the course significantly changed their attitudes toward online instruction seeing it as more participatory and interactive than face-to-face instruction" (p. 35). On that same page, he also claims that "teachers must have the actual experience of online learning before they can be expected to be online teachers; otherwise, they will map traditional practices onto the new medium with little of the transformation necessary in the teaching process." A unique method of encouraging the Virtual Assistant Certificate instructors to incorporate community-building strategies into their courses was to hold online training meetings. The first step was a Needs Assessment (see Appendix 3) to determine the expertise of the six instructors and to find out what areas they would like to receive training in. The questions were developed to encourage the instructors to use a variety of tools not just the ones they were already familiar with. Hence, listing all of the

available tools and then asking for their level of expertise and what they were willing to share with the rest of the instructors was a means of gaining a “buy in” from everyone.

Chapter 3: Research Study

Research Question

The main question of this project is: “Should the Virtual Assistant Certificate have a strong collaborative component interlaced throughout all the online courses?” A number of sub questions will also need to be answered: How is an online learning community defined? How is an online learning community developed? What are the key characteristics of effective online courses that build online learning communities?

Methodology

In order to answer the research question posed above, the following methods will be used:

A questionnaire will be administered to instructors and students registered in the Virtual Assistant Fall 2003 courses to determine their attitudes and opinions about the level of community involvement (see Appendices 7 and 8). The survey instrument prepared will be a blend of quantitative and qualitative questions. In order to determine trends and themes in building online learning communities, an analysis of their responses to open-ended questions and an analysis of the numeric data will be performed.

Next, the WebCT tracking capabilities will be used to objectively determine community involvement. Analysis will involve quantitative data based on the number of discussion boards postings and e-mails. This should provide information as to the amount of community involvement in three of the online courses being offered in the fall of 2003.

Finally, a questionnaire will be administered to working VAs to determine the level of involvement in virtual communities (see Appendix 6). The survey instrument will be a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions to determine trends and

themes in online community involvement. If working VAs are actively involved in virtual communities, providing and encouraging a similar level of community involvement for the online students should assist them in creating a successful virtual business.

Survey Instruments

Online classes began in the fall of 2003 with instructors prepared to provide a collaborative learning environment for their students. Part way through the semester, students, instructors, and working Virtual Assistants completed online questionnaires that attempted to determine the levels of online community involvement.

With permission from Dr. Alfred Rovai, the Sense of Classroom Community Index 2nd Edition questionnaire was revised by using fewer questions and changing some of the wording to better suit the purposes of this study (Appendix 10). As well, after each question, the respondents were asked to explain their response—thus the questionnaires collect a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. Determining the subscales of Spirit, Trust, Interaction, and Learning were still maintained in the revised questionnaires with three questions being asked for each subscale.

Three questionnaires were prepared for the three different audiences: Virtual Assistant Certificate Student Questionnaire, Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructor Questionnaire, and Working Virtual Assistants Questionnaire. All three questionnaires were administered online. At the beginning of November 2003, an e-mail was sent to each of the 12 students registered in the four Virtual Assistant Certificate online courses offered in Fall 2003, requesting that they complete the survey for each course they were registered in. Each of the three Virtual Assistant Certificate instructors were also e-

mailed and asked to complete the Instructor's online questionnaire. Members of CVAN (Canadian Virtual Assistant Network) and IVAA (International Virtual Assistant Association) were contacted and asked to complete the online questionnaire for Working Virtual Assistants. Although the total membership of these two associations is close to 100, 29 members responded to the survey.

Chapter 4: Results and Analysis

Instructor Training Results

Providing training for the Virtual Assistant Certificate instructors began the process of building a collaborative online learning community. The steps followed in that training included: performing a Needs Assessment, determining Agenda topics, holding regular online meeting/training sessions, and allowing for instructor feedback on those sessions.

Needs Assessment Results. Four of the six instructors responded to the Needs Assessment questionnaire. The results were as follows:

- a. All four had taken courses online.
- b. Three of the four had taught online courses.
- c. On the next page are the results of Questions 5 through to 8:

Table 1: Instructor Training Needs Assessment Results

n=4

5. Please rate your level of expertise as a student/user with the following online tools:					
Discussion Boards	0 Never used	2 Some	2 Experienced		
E-mail	0 Never used	1 Some	3 Experienced		
Chat Rooms	0 Never used	4 Some	0 Experienced		
Group Assignments	2 Never used	2 Some	0 Experienced		
Virtual Field Trips	3 Never used	1 Some	0 Experienced		
Web Cam	4 Never used	0 Some	0 Experienced		
Teleconferencing	3 Never used	0 Some	1 Experienced		
Videoconferencing	4 Never used	0 Some	0 Experienced		
Other (please specify)	4 Never used	0 Some	0 Experienced		
6. Please rate your level of expertise teaching using the following online tools:					
Discussion Boards	0 Never used	1 Some	3 Experienced		
E-mail	0 Never used	0 Some	4 Experienced		
Chat Rooms	0 Never used	2 Some	2 Experienced		
Group Assignments	3 Never used	1 Some	0 Experienced		
Virtual Field Trips	4 Never used	0 Some	0 Experienced		
Web Cam	4 Never used	0 Some	0 Experienced		
Teleconferencing	3 Never used	0 Some	1 Experienced		
Videoconferencing	4 Never used	0 Some	0 Experienced		
Other (please specify)	4 Never used	0 Some	0 Experienced		
7. Which of the following online tools do you plan on including in the Virtual Assistant course you are developing? (Please check as many as apply.)					
4 Discussion Boards	4 E-mail	4 Chat Rooms	3 Group Assignments	1 Virtual Fields Trips	0 Web Cam
2 Teleconferencing	0 Videoconferencing	0 Other (specify)			
8. Which of the following online tools would you feel comfortable sharing your expertise with the group of Virtual Assistant instructors? (Please check as many as apply.)					
3 Discussion Boards	3 E-mail	3 Chat Rooms	2 Group Assignments	0 Virtual Fields Trips	0 Web Cam
1 Teleconferencing	0 Videoconferencing	0 Other (specify)			

The results indicated that there was some expertise in the group that could be drawn from. As well, there were tools that the group was unfamiliar with and would need some training in. A few of the tools may never be used due to either the expense or the usefulness: videoconferencing and web cam.

Meeting Agendas. What had begun as regular every second Friday meeting times to discuss curriculum coordination now became virtual meetings/training sessions to share expertise and to obtain a united focus in teaching strategies.

The WebCT shell course became the meeting area where the instructors could share resources (copies of instructor introductions and course outlines) and learn the various tools available. The decision to begin first with chat rooms was made because the tool is one everyone was familiar with (hoping to obtain a buy in from everyone) and the two instructors use the chat room for different instructional purposes: one teaches three desktop publishing software packages and the other uses a student-moderated discussion about an Internet “hot” topic.

The first item on the agenda was to bring everyone up-to-date on what one of the participants was planning for the Virtual Assistant Community Site. He shared his plans for the site and asked for questions and suggestions from the group. This item will quite likely appear on all the meeting agendas to allow for input and feedback from the members of the Curriculum Development Committee (Virtual Assistant instructors/course designers). The topic of online community building will be discussed while building a community of online instructors. Being involved in community building should provide the instructors with insights into how they could build community in their own courses.

Meeting/Training Sessions

- First online meeting. Topics: VA Community Site and Chat Rooms
- Second online meeting. Topics: VA Community Site and Teleconference session on the needs of Virtual Assistants using Yahoo Messenger's audio capabilities and a PowerPoint presentation loaded into the WebCT VA Shell
- Third online meeting. Topics: VA Community Site, Groups Assignments, and Discussion Boards
- Fourth online meeting. Topics: VA Community Site, Virtual Field Trips, and E-mail

Instructor Feedback. At the conclusion of each meeting, the instructors were asked to go to the quiz section of the VA shell and complete an evaluation of the meeting (see Appendix 4). Analysis of the feedback on the first online meeting showed that the comments were positive. Already the instructors were commenting on the usefulness of meeting online, the opportunity to find out more about Virtual Assistants, suggestions for next meetings, and a willingness to experiment with the various tools. It was evident that there was buy in to the concept of meeting online. Several suggestions made by the participants needed to be followed up on: instructors visiting each other's courses to obtain ideas (3 online courses will be offered this coming fall), more information about the 11 courses being developed so that everyone can see where each course fits, and more instructional ideas for using chat rooms.

After the first meeting, two of the instructors e-mailed items they felt the rest of the group might find useful: Chat Room Techniques and Evaluating Student Participation

in Online Courses. The WebCT VA Shell has become a “library” of resources for the Virtual Assistant instructors/course designers. Shortly after the end of the first meeting, the “minutes” of the meeting (chat room dialogue) were posted to the shell site so that one of the instructors, who was not able to attend the first meeting, would be able to read the whole conversation. The next two meetings proved to be as effective as the first (the last meeting has been delayed until late August). The instructors had a clear idea of how to use the online tools, how to incorporate those tools into each of the online courses, how to build an online learning community, and how each course could support the Virtual Assistant Community Site.

With the instructors trained in how to develop a collaborative online learning community, the next step in the process was to survey the students, instructors, and working Virtual Assistants during the first semester of classes in the Fall of 2003. The survey results would indicate whether a collaborative online learning community had been established.

Questionnaire Results

In Tables 2, 3, and 4 are the results of the questionnaires administered to students enrolled in the program, shown in percentage value. (Please note the questions are in abbreviated format. See Appendices 6, 7, and 8 for the expanded version.)

Table 2: Virtual Assistant Certificate Students Questionnaire Results
n=12

Virtual Assistant Certificate Students Questionnaire Results					
Questions	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not Applicable (0)
2. Care about each other	25%	67%	8%	0%	0%
3. Feel safe and speak openly	33%	58%	8%	0%	0%
4. Contribute to learning process	25%	67%	8%	0%	0%
5. Promotes friendships	8%	75%	17%	0%	0%
6. Rely on each other	8%	50%	42%	0%	0%
7. Opportunities for online socializing	8%	84%	8%	0%	0%
8. Depend on each other	0%	17%	58%	8%	17%
9. Ample opportunities to learn	42%	58%	0%	0%	0%
10. Group identity created	0%	58%	25%	0%	17%
11. Timely feedback from each other	0%	67%	8%	0%	25%
12. Others important sources of learning	17%	50%	33%	0%	0%
13. Interact easily with each other	17%	83%	0%	0%	0%
14. Collaborative component interlaced	8%	51%	33%	0%	8%

Questions 3, 6, and 8 addressed the issue of Trust, the feeling that the community can be trusted and feedback will be forthcoming and constructive. With 91 percent indicating that they feel safe and can speak openly (Question 3), trusting each other does not appear to be an issue. But with 42 percent of the students indicating that they do not rely on each other (Question 6) and 58 percent indicating that they do not depend on each other (Question 8), there is cause for concern with regard to feedback. The reliance and dependence on each other could have something to do with the way the courses were structured. The instructors would need to be questioned as to what assignments and/or methods they used to encourage students to rely on each other for feedback and assistance.

Table 3: Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructor Questionnaire Results
n=4

Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructor Questionnaire Results					
Questions	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not Applicable (0)
2. Care about each other	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
3. Feel safe and speak openly	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%
4. Contribute to learning process	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
5. Promotes friendships	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
6. Rely on each other	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%
7. Opportunities for online socializing	0%	75%	25%	0%	0%
8. Depend on each other	0%	50%	50%	0%	0%
9. Ample opportunities to learn	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
10. Group identity created	0%	100%	0%	0%	0%
11. Timely feedback from each other	0%	25%	25%	0%	50%
12. Others important sources of learning	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%
13. Interact easily with each other	25%	75%	0%	0%	0%
14. Collaborative component interlaced	75%	25%	0%	0%	0%

Two of the four instructors responded “not applicable” to Question 11 about students’ receiving timely feedback from each other—an indication that not all the courses had been designed to encourage student interaction through providing feedback to each other. This could account for the low scores in the students’ responses to questions 3, 6, and 8.

Table 4: Working Virtual Assistants Questionnaire Results
n=29

Working Virtual Assistants Questionnaire Results					
Questions	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not Applicable (0)
5. Care about each other	66%	34%	0%	0%	0%
6. Feel safe and speak openly	46%	54%	0%	0%	0%
7. Contribute to learning process	36%	43%	18%	3%	0%
8. Promotes friendships	59%	41%	0%	0%	0%
9. Rely on each other	41%	52%	7%	0%	0%
10. Opportunities for online socializing	38%	52%	10%	0%	0%
11. Depend on each other	21%	73%	3%	3%	0%
12. Ample opportunities to learn	62%	35%	3%	0%	0%
13. Group identity created	45%	52%	3%	0%	0%
14. Timely feedback from each other	49%	45%	3%	3%	0%
15. Others important sources of learning	68%	29%	3%	0%	0%
16. Interact easily with each other	32%	64%	4%	0%	0%
17. Collaborative component interlaced	52%	48%	0%	0%	0%

Although a small sampling was obtained from each of the three groups, it is believed that the data will aid the Virtual Assistant Instructors in making the necessary changes to the curriculum. In Table 5 is a comparison of the average subscales or components of classroom community—Spirit, Trust, Interaction, and Learning—for each group. Rovai describes each of those subscales as follows:

- *Spirit*, the first component, is the feeling of belonging and acceptance, of group identity.
- *Trust*, the second component of classroom community, is the feeling that the community can be trusted and feedback will be forthcoming and constructive.
- *Interaction*, the third component, is the feeling that closeness and mutual benefit result from interacting with others.

- *Learning*, the final component, is the feeling that knowledge and meaning are actively constructed within the community, that the community enhances the acquisition of knowledge and understanding, and that the educational needs of its members are being satisfied (pp. 34-35, 2001).

Table 5: Comparison of Sense of Classroom Community Subscales – Average Scores

Comparison of Sense of Classroom Community Subscales – Average Scores					
Spirit (A mean percentage was calculated from Questions 2, 5, 10 of the student and instructor questionnaires and a mean was calculated from Questions 5, 8, 13 of the Working VA questionnaire)	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not Applicable (0)
Virtual Assistant Certificate Students n=12	11%	67%	17%	0%	5%
Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructors n=4	0%	92%	8%	0%	0%
Working Virtual Assistants n=29	57%	42%	1%	0%	0%
Trust (Questions 3, 6, 8 from the student and instructor questionnaires and Questions 6, 9, 11 from the Working VA questionnaire)					
Virtual Assistant Certificate Students n=12	14%	42%	36%	2%	6%
Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructors n=4	17%	66%	17%	0%	0%
Working Virtual Assistants n=29	36%	60%	3%	1%	0%
Interaction (Questions 7, 11, 13 from the student and instructor questionnaires and Questions 10, 14, 16 from the Working VA questionnaire)					
Virtual Assistant Certificate Students n=12	8%	79%	5%	0%	8%
Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructors n=4	8%	58%	17%	0%	17%
Working Virtual Assistants n=29	40%	53%	6%	1%	0%
Learning (Questions 4, 9, 12 from the student and instructor questionnaires and Questions 7, 12, 15 from the Working VA questionnaire)					
Virtual Assistant Certificate Students n=12	28%	58%	14%	0%	0%
Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructors n=4	58%	42%	0%	0%	0%
Working Virtual Assistants n=29	54%	36%	8%	1%	0%

Spirit is strongest for the working VAs (99%). While the instructors felt *Spirit* had been developed (92%), only 78% of the students felt this way. Again the working VAs rated *Trust* higher (96%). And again the instructors felt there was greater trust (83%) than the students (56%). The students rated *Interaction* higher (87%) than the instructors (66%). The results are more similar for all three for *Learning*: VAs (90%), instructors (100%), and students (86%). Perhaps the reason for the differences between working VAs and students is that the working VAs are comprised of both experienced and inexperienced VAs who are able to draw upon each other's knowledge and experience. The students may still view the instructor as the source of expertise. This student attitude is quite typical of an educational setting even though most instructors have moved toward a guide-on-the-side model of teaching. Because Virtual Assistance is a relatively new field, most students will not have a lot of experience to share with the group. These findings may change, as well, when the students are more knowledgeable about the field and have completed more courses towards the Virtual Assistant Certificate. The differences between instructor and student scores will be discussed with the instructors to gain further insights.

The following results were obtained from the final question: Collaborative learning encourages interaction between all group members and allows students to use personal interests and experiences. Should the Virtual Assistant Certificate have a collaborative component interlaced throughout all the online courses?

Table 6: Responses to the Research Question

Responses to the Research Question					
	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not Applicable (0)
Virtual Assistant Certificate Students n=12	8%	51%	33%	0%	8%
Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructors n=4	75%	25%	0%	0%	0%
Working Virtual Assistants n=29	52%	48%	0%	0%	0%

It would appear that the Instructors and Working VAs are in agreement that any training program for Virtual Assistants should include a collaborative component. Thirty-three percent of the students did not agree that it was necessary. It is apparent that online students need to be informed to the value of building collaborative communities. Perhaps when the virtual community is established for the whole certificate as outlined in Appendix 5, the scores on this question will increase. With such a small student sampling, this questionnaire should be run again in a year's time when there are more course offerings and more students registered.

Theme Analysis

The qualitative responses to each of the questions were analyzed using a thematic approach. The Virtual Assistant students' comments to the *Spirit* component questions elicited the following positive theme words with regard to their peers: "considerate," "feedback," "support," and "concerned." Two negative themes were evident in their feeling that "casual conversations with peers were a 'hi & bye' type" and that "the connectedness and sense of community identity may not last beyond the course." The *Trust* component positive theme words were: "open sharing" and "student help." The negative theme words suggested that the students tended to "rely on the instructor more

than other students” and that some felt they “could complete the course on their own without peer reliance.” The *Interaction* component positive theme words were: “work well together,” “check how week went,” and “could e-mail peers.” The negative theme words indicated that some students “chose not to socialize” and that interaction was a “course requirement,” such as the bulletin board postings and, therefore, not spontaneous. The *Learning* component positive theme words were: “variety of background and experiences,” “share ideas,” and “critique each other’s work.” There were no negative themes noted. In response to the research question--Should the Virtual Assistant Certificate have a collaborative component interlaced throughout all the online courses?—there were a number of negative themes that support the quantitative data in Table 6. Negative theme words, such as: “not necessary,” “not for this course,” and “do not need to succeed in my goal,” were offset with the positive theme words: “essential to this course.” One interesting student comment that requires some further reflection on was: “I do not know if that matters very much. If all the courses were interlaced, then it would just be a communication tool and not a learning tool, right?” The last question in the Virtual Assistant Certificate Student Questionnaire was “What did the instructor do to help create a collaborative learning community?” This resulted in a number of positive theme words: “beginning introduction of each other,” “peers critiqued each other’s work,” “friendly chatting,” “input from everyone,” “relevant VA topics,” and “interesting discussion postings.” The overall theme of the students’ comments was that “a learning community had been built but it may be temporary,” “the instructor was the lead,” and “other students were friendly and helpful.”

The themes evident in the Instructors' comments to the *Spirit* component included the following positive theme comment: "students received constructive feedback from each other." Two negative themes emerged: "a sense of group identity was not strong" and there was "low-level student interaction with each other." The *Trust* component theme words were: "respect for each other," "used humour," "thorough and timely feedback," and "relied on each other to model techniques." One negative theme was evident: "they do not depend on each other." Only one positive theme emerged for the *Interaction* component: "students conversed easily when instructor was absent." The one negative theme was: "very little interaction, only in bulletin board discussions." For the *Learning* component, the positive themes were: "students shared their experiences," "researched additional information to share," and "received feedback from each other." The research question, #14, elicited several positive themes: "they learn from other's experiences," "build a bond that will last beyond the course," and "the instructors can reinforce learning between courses." One comment that merits more reflection is: "Yes, however, it must be designed so as not to limit the flexibility offered in online learning." The instructors' responses to the last question about what they did to create a collaborative learning community included the following themes: "drew on students' interests and unique characteristics," "encouraged peer feedback," "bulletin board postings for sharing ideas," "built connections with working VAs," "held regular chat discussions about course material," and "used teleconferencing for synchronous, voice interaction."

The Working Virtual Assistant Questionnaire included four additional questions about their involvement in virtual communities. The themes that emerged in response to

the first question about what virtual communities they participate in in relation to the operation of their business included comments about particular organizations they belonged to and methods of conversing. They belong to a number of organizations: IVAA, Virtual Business Group, IAVOA, REVA, RYZE, AssistU, CVAN, CVA Success, VBG, WEC, Coach-Ville, and CVAC (several of the acronyms are unfamiliar but merit further research). Six of the respondents indicated that they belonged to more than one organization. Their methods of conversing with their virtual communities include: e-mail correspondents, discussion boards, chat rooms, teleconferences/teleclasses, telephone, listservs, IMS, newsletters, forums. E-mail corresponding was the most popular, noted by 15 of the 29 surveyed.

Two people responded to Question #2 (If you are not involved in a work-related virtual community, please explain why.). The first person commented, "The scope of my work extends beyond the typical definition of virtual assistance and therefore do not find the level of support I require" but then continued to respond to the remainder of the questionnaire. The second person responded, "I do not know of any in my area" and then did not complete the remainder of the survey.

Several themes emerged in response to Question #3 (How often do you interact with these virtual communities (number of times per week and length of time)?). The majority (13) responded that they check daily for e-mail with 3 responding that they check several times in a day for e-mail and 6 responding that they check many times in a week. Three responded that they attended teleclasses 2 to 3 times per month. Two responses that illustrate the variety of contact and the amount of time are: "Every day: e-mail (1.5 hrs), listserv (45 mins), discussion boards (3-45 mins), IM (30 mins) Weekly:

chat room (meetings, 2 hrs, IM (meetings) 2 hrs.” “3-4 times a week about 45 minutes to an hour a day, reading my newsletters from several associations I am involved with. Submitting comments and suggestions to these associations. Along with communicating with other VA’s and discussing relative business issues and ideas with each other.” It is evident that there is ongoing contact with the members of their virtual communities.

In response to Question #4 (Describe how you became involved with these virtual communities.), several themes were evident: “researched the Internet” (appeared most often), “fellow members of associations recommended,” “training programs involved in,” and “through employment with a Virtual Assistant business.” Below is one respondent’s thorough and valuable response:

“My first experience with a virtual community was with Business Know-How's Secretarial Service board on AOL. This was in 1996 and two years before I opened my VA practice. The lessons learned and ideas shared by veteran service providers were inspiring and invaluable. Their pearls of wisdom gave me insight on things to do and what to avoid as I started, grew and developed my business. When Business Know-How left AOL in 2000, my virtual mentors disbanded as well. I began to investigate other VA board and community alternatives. I joined several VA organizations and have found an excellent mix of newbie and veteran participation. I now actively volunteer 5 to 10 hours a week to help newcomers to the industry. In the meantime, I learn about technological advances, how to handle projects and resolve client dilemmas. Once I found the communities that "felt right" to me, involvement became a win-win situation.”

This Virtual Assistant’s experience with virtual communities is what the Virtual Assistant students need to understand about the VA industry: others mentor new VAs until they are successful, then they help mentor others, and both the veteran and the newbie benefit from the relationship.

The theme words for the *Spirit* component include: “supportive assistance and advice,” “sharing,” “informative,” “refer work and clients,” “non-competitive,” “closest

friends,” “exciting mix of abilities,” and “creating a VA identity.” There were very few negative comments and those made, each person tried to balance with a positive statement. When asked about a group identity in Question #13, a few responded with comments similar to this one, “I agree that there is an identity but I don’t think it is very strong yet as the industry has not pulled together enough to become a singular voice.”

For the *Trust* component, the theme words that emerged were: “reliable,” “non-judgmental,” “safe environment,” “positive energy,” “listened to,” “honest,” “open,” “supportive,” “respect,” and “others depend on me.” Many VAs have come to rely on their virtual communities to help solve their business problems. A few negative comments were expressed that indicated there were office politics even in the virtual world.

Determining themes in the *Interaction* component was more difficult. Most felt they received quick responses to their questions from their virtual community. A few commented that there were a lot of opportunities to interact, but they were often too busy to get involved in everything available.

The central themes for the *Learning* component were: “learn daily from someone,” “a lot of resources available,” and “individuals willing to share.” Specifically, in response to Question #7 about everyone contributing to the learning process, one respondent’s comment captures the overall message:

“I find that a core group regularly contributes to the virtual community. Every so often a lurker will come forward with valuable pearls of wisdom. However, most members remain anonymous and choose not to contribute to the overall learning process but rather learn from others.”

Very few negative comments were made, although a few seasoned VAs felt there was little left for them to learn from the community.

WebCT Tracking

The online course, VA 130 Starting a Virtual Assistant Business, was designed to analyze the amount of community involvement during the Fall 2003 semester. Below in Table 7 are the scores for the students registered in VA 130 who responded to the Virtual Assistant Certificate Student Questionnaire. Comparing these scores to the average student responses in Table 5 showed similar results. The VA 130 students scored 2% less for *Spirit*, 11% higher for *Trust*, 5% higher for *Interaction*, and 6% higher for *Learning*. Looking then to the WebCT tracking capabilities for all student involvement in VA 130, provided little illumination as to how involved the students were compared to the results in Table 7. During a regular Chat Room session with the students, one indicated that she often read the bulletin board postings made by other students but did not always reply. The tracking evidence supports that comment, an average of 138 articles were read but only an average of 17 were posted. What is not evident in the data is how many times a student may have re-read a particular posting. Because the VA 130 scores in Table 7 were not different from the information obtained from all of the VA students, there did not appear to be a need to compare WebCT tracking information in the other Virtual Assistant Certificate courses taught in the same semester. Information obtained from the WebCT tracking capabilities was not particularly useful in determining the amount of community involvement.

Table 7: VA 130 Student Responses to Sense of Classroom Community Subscales
n=4

VA 130 Student Responses To Sense of Classroom Community Subscales					
	Strongly Agree (4)	Agree (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly Disagree (1)	Not Applicable (0)
Spirit (Questions 2, 5, 10)	17%	58%	17%	0%	8%
Trust (Questions 3, 6, 8)	17%	50%	0%	0%	8%
Interaction (Questions 7, 11, 13)	0%	92%	8%	0%	0%
Learning (Questions 4, 9, 12)	25%	67%	8%	0%	0%

Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusion

Despite small numbers, the Working Virtual Assistants responded positively to the research question, 100 percent were in agreement that a Virtual Assistant training program should have a collaborative component interlaced throughout all the online courses. Therefore, there appears to be little need to resurvey a wider audience. But there is a need to resurvey the Virtual Assistant students during each term. These same questionnaires will be used again at mid-point in the Winter 2004 semester (January-April).

Each instructor needs to carefully examine the Virtual Assistant Certificate course objectives to ensure that there are opportunities for students to interact and receive feedback from each other, not just from the instructor. What needs to be addressed with the instructors is that the students felt there were few opportunities to rely and depend on each other.

What still needs to be determined is how to achieve an interlaced collaborative component. The focus should not be just for social interaction and a communication tool, but should be focused on learning. Because the working VAs recognize the benefits of participating in collaborative learning environments, their comments should be shared with the Virtual Assistant students.

Many of the working Virtual Assistants belong to a formal association with a web presence. The VirtualAssist.ca website is one feature that could model this by building student connections between the eleven Virtual Assistant courses. The primary objective of the website (described in Appendix 5) is to assist the VA students in creating an online identity for their VA business and to foster relationships and partnerships with other

students, instructors, VA mentors, and potential clients. As well, it is hoped that the students will gain experience managing a website where they will help moderate bulletin board discussions, hold virtual meetings, research topics, write articles of interests to Virtual Assistants, and connect VAs with potential clients. Maintaining the website will be part of their regular coursework. Instructors will select assignments that both meet the course requirements and fulfill the mandate of the website. It is hoped that VirtualAssist.ca will foster a more collaborative online learning community.

While there are still a number of areas for improvement in the offering of the online courses for the Virtual Assistant Certificate at Red Deer College, the research question has been answered. The certificate needs to encourage and support a collaborative learning environment where there will be a natural transition from the learning environment to the working environment. As students begin to recognize the benefits of online collaboration, they will likely be more successful in their online businesses. “The power of community is great. The power of a learning community is even greater, as it supports the intellectual as well as personal growth and development of its members” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 163). The development of collaborative online learning environments is of potential benefit not only to the Virtual Assistant Certificate students, but to all online learners.

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Appendix 1

Representative Implications of Elements for Virtual Learning Communities

(Schwier, Richard A.)

Element	Implications for Virtual Learning Communities
Historicity	Incorporate what members have done in the past, and make their stories part of the community culture. Explicit mention of the culture, value and context of the virtual community. Make public the history of the community.
Identity	Use team-building exercises, develop community logos, and publicly acknowledge accomplishments by the group and individual members within the community. Articulate the focus or purpose of the community, and outline the requirements and rituals accompanying membership in the community.
Mutuality	Include group exercises, assignments, activities that require each member to contribute to the final product. Ask leading questions that encourage members of the community to invest in concerns held by other members, and to share ideas and possible solutions.
Plurality	Encourage membership and participation from and association with groups related to the learning focus. These might include businesses, professional associations, or groups in other countries exploring similar issues.
Autonomy	Foster individual expression and comment explicitly on its value. Set up protocol for respectful communication and reach consensus in the group. Create strategies for settling disputes or inappropriate behavior.
Participation	Allow members of the group to shape learning agendas. Give guidance to new community members, and promote opportunities for established members to go outside the boundaries of the learning event or focus. Encourage lurkers and voyeurs.
Integration	Articulate a set of belief statements, and identify group norms as they emerge and evolve. Adopt and firmly adhere to a learner-centered philosophy, and employ pedagogy that celebrates individuals while building a group identity.
Future	Identify direction of learning. Ask participants to describe ways they will use what they have learned in the community in the future. Conduct “visioning” exercises to determine new initiatives to be undertaken by the community.
Technology	Employ technology that allows meaningful communication, and which is easy for participants to use. Promote communication approaches that are compatible with older, less costly equipment where communities intend to be inclusive.
Learning	A community moderator should remind participants of learning intentions and intervene when interaction drifts too far away from the learning focus. Encourage individuals on the periphery of the community to contribute their tacit knowledge to the explicit knowledge of the community.

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Program Comparison

Santa Rosa Junior College - Virtual Assistant Program

17.5 units

Core Requirements

Business English	3.0
Creating a Virtual Office	3.0
Marketing Yourself as a VA	3.0
MS Word Core or Expert	1.5
MS Access Core or Expert	1.5
Writing Strategies	0.5
Customer Service Skills for Business	0.5
Time Management Skills	0.5
Small Business Plan	0.5
Computer Keyboarding/Skillbuilding	0.5

VATP (Canadian site out of Ontario)

Module 1 - Tools of the Trade
Module 2 - Enter the VA Community & Picture the Vision
Module 3 - Client Ready - Part 1
Module 4 - Client Ready - Part 2

3 Units from one of the following concentrations:

Administrative Support: International Business Practices,
MS Excel, Business Etiquette, Ethics in Business, Work
Experience Internship, MS PowerPoint, Management of Office Systems

Bookkeeping: Computerized BBK, QuickBooks, MS Excel,
Business Etiquette, Ethics in Business, Work Experience Internship

Promotional/Marketing: MS PowerPoint, MS Publisher,
Business Etiquette, Ethics in Business, Work Experience Internship,
Designing Internet Web Pages

Home office set up, Equipment required, Office organization

Associations, Developing your community, Learning from others,
Establishing rates, Defining your client, Strengths & weaknesses,
Mission, vision and tagline

Company image, Marketing materials, Web site

Networking, Getting the word out, Administration procedures

Module 5 - Client Relationships	Communications, Developing the relationship, Learning curves, Solution focused
Module 6 - Where to Start	First steps, Assessing needs, Where to begin, Resources in place, Regular connection
Module 7 - Priority Management	Time management, Wasting time, Planning & scheduling your time, Daily decisions
Module 8 - Next Steps	Creating systems, Ghost writing, Marketing & growing the client business, Strategic planning
Module 9 - Raising the Bar	Managing systems & processes, Delegation, Team building, Office management

Virtual Assistance U (AssistU community)

20 weeks (No focus on computer skills or software)

Topics:

Virtual Assistance defined
 Writing a Business Plan
 Skills & equipment needed
 Set standards
 Set your fees
 Juggling several clients
 Marketing
 Creating strong relationships
 Handling conflicts
 Setting up your home office
 Keeping your business fresh: specific direction for your business & client relationships
 Cyberskills
 Writing Skills
 Extreme Self-Care

The Virtual Wizards

20 weeks

Module 1: Orientation

Tele-bridge Protocol, Confidentiality, Overview, Buddies, Q & A

Module 2: Technology Basics

Zoning, Business License, Taxes, ISP's, DSL & Cable modems, Browsers & Search Engines, Backing-up of Computer, Accessories (webcam, microphone, scanner, tape recorders, PDA's, Pocket PC's)

Module 3: Your Support Team	Building your support team, Marketing (ongoing component of every module)
Module 4: Neuro-Linguistic Programming	Introduction to NLP, Your NLP results & key words
Module 5: Your Business Foundation	S.W.O.T. Analysis, Identify your core competencies, Introduction to Integrated Strategic Intention System (ISIS)
Module 6: Your Business Foundation (cont'd)	Using ISIS to develop Business Plan, Working your plan (Setting S.C.H.M.A.R.T. Goals & Creating Performance Standards)
Module 7: Organizing in Outlook	Outlook folders, Setting up mail filters
Module 8: Information	Newsgroups, ezines, forums, Newsletters, Online magazines, Webtools for streamlining information, Storage of knowledge (Yahogroups, Visto, etc.)
Module 9: Remote Access To Client Machine	Available software, Web resources
Module 10: Staying on the Cutting Edge	Video conferencing, MS Office XP, Windows XP, Online Presentations, Online Whiteboards, Online Surveys, Evites, Online Meetings
Module 11: Time & Project Management	Using Outlook as a time & task management tool, Virtual Project Management
Module 12: Ready to Launch!	Ducks in a Row, Review of final, practical assignments
Module 13-14 Assignment with Alexia	Q & A
Module 15 - Assignment with clients	Q & A
Module 16 - Assignment with clients	Q & A, Deadline for handing in bio & photo, Ongoing Support from The Virtual Wizards

Appendix 3
Needs Assessment
of Virtual Assistant Instructors

“The key ingredient to a successful online course is communication—instructor/student communication and student/student communication. On the Internet, as in the classroom, the instructor is essential. The nature of the interaction may have changed, but the interaction is still there and may well be richer than in a traditional class.” This quote is from RDC’s Distributed Learning Standards and Guidelines for Online Courses.

Because Virtual Assistants rely strongly on building a business from a distance—sometimes never meeting their clients face-to-face—it is essential that they not only learn about how to communicate and work at a distance, but that they develop those skills through the method of “learning by doing” using a variety of tools. Building an online learning community is the heart of the Virtual Assistant Certificate.

Our plan is to offer a minimum of four online training meetings over the next few months. These training meetings are designed to help teachers make the transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. The meetings will be held **virtually** with each instructor logging into the WebCT Virtual Assistant training site from their own office computer. Your experience and insight are at the center of that effort. We appreciate your participation in these training meetings.

This survey asks you some questions about your experience to date. It also asks you about your recommendations.

1. Have you taken courses online?	Yes	No	
2. If you answered “Yes” above, please indicate the name and length of those courses.			
3. Have you taught courses online?	Yes	No	
4. If you answered “Yes” above, please indicate the name and length of those courses.			
5. Please rate your level of expertise as a student/user with the following online tools:			
Discussion Boards	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Chat Rooms	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Group Assignments	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced

Virtual Field Trips	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Web Cam	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Teleconferencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Videoconferencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced

6. Please rate your level of expertise **teaching** using the following online tools:

Discussion Boards	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Chat Rooms	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Group Assignments	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Virtual Field Trips	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Web Cam	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Teleconferencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Videoconferencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced
Other (please specify)	<input type="checkbox"/> Never used	<input type="checkbox"/> Some	<input type="checkbox"/> Experienced

7. Which of the following online tools do you plan on including in the Virtual Assistant course you are developing? (Please check as many as apply.)

<input type="checkbox"/> Discussion Boards	<input type="checkbox"/> E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Chat Rooms	<input type="checkbox"/> Group Assignments	<input type="checkbox"/> Virtual Fields Trips	<input type="checkbox"/> Web Cam
<input type="checkbox"/> Teleconferencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Videoconferencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify)			

8. Which of the following online tools would you feel comfortable sharing your expertise with the group of Virtual Assistant instructors? (Please check as many as apply.)

<input type="checkbox"/> Discussion Boards	<input type="checkbox"/> E-mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Chat Rooms	<input type="checkbox"/> Group Assignments	<input type="checkbox"/> Virtual Fields Trips	<input type="checkbox"/> Web Cam
<input type="checkbox"/> Teleconferencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Videoconferencing	<input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify)			

9. Does every second Friday at 1:00 to 2:00 p.m. still work for you as a meeting time?

 Yes

 No

10. If you answered "No" above, please suggest another day and time.

11. Comments, Concerns, Recommendations...

Appendix 4	
Evaluation of Virtual Assistant Instructor Training Sessions	
Topic:	Date:
I learned...	
Most helpful...	Least helpful...
I would like to learn...	Appreciations, Concerns, Suggestions...

Appendix 5

VirtualAssist.ca

(A Web-Based Portal to Support the Virtual Assistant Students at Red Deer College)

1-YEAR BUSINESS PLAN

Beginning September 2003

Table of Contents

1. Executive Summary
2. Background
3. Key Personnel
4. Operations
5. Marketing
6. Financial Plan

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Employers are beginning to see the advantages and possibilities of a virtual workforce: no sick days to pay, no office furniture and equipment to purchase, and no on-going training expenses. The cartoons may poke fun of the worker in a bathrobe, visiting the refrigerator and losing the ability to communicate with others; but many companies and employees are beginning to see the real possibilities and potential savings of a virtual office. Recent surveys have found that over 40% of workers would like to spend a significant amount of their working hours working from home. Almost 80% of companies believe that telecommuting is more efficient than simply working from an office environment.

The Office Administration program at Red Deer College (RDC) is launching a new Virtual Assistant training program that will be offered online beginning this fall. The program will provide students with a number of valuable skills needed to start and operate their own business, succeed in today's fast-paced business world, and provide a fresh alternative to employers.

Virtualassist.ca will be a companion web page for students in the VA program at RDC. Based upon the "Pacific Rim" publication produced by Langara College students, the students of the Virtual Assistant program Red Deer College will write, edit, design and produce an online VA magazine (www.virtualassist.ca). During the semester, the students will be expected to submit links, articles, assignments, etc. related to the VA profession and operating a home-based business. These articles will make up the primary content that will be published on the page. Assignments and projects from VA courses at RDC will serve as a starting point for constant content generation.

Students, under the direction of a moderator, will take on a role or roles in the production of the online magazine: editor, designer, ad traffic manager, production director, ad copywriter, etc. The students and moderator will be expected to hold meetings and make their own editorial and design decisions about the look and editorial mix of the magazine. Faculty may offer guidance during classes, lab sessions and meetings; but on the whole, the magazine becomes what the students make of it. The web may include sections on topics such as:

- Entrepreneur Secrets & Innovative Solutions
- Home Business Mistakes
- Teleworking articles from other successful individuals
- Bookstore session – good books to read
- Teleworker tools
- Teleworker business agreements with customers, etc.

Teleworking ethics

Virtualassist.ca was started with seed money from Red Deer College, in an attempt to find a "heart" for the Virtual Assistant program. The primary objective will be to create an easily accessible portal for VA students to create an online identity for their VA business, and to foster relationships and partnerships with other students, instructors, VA mentors, and potential clients.

The secondary objective will be for students to gain practical "real world" experience by managing and operating an online business. The Alberta Government speculates that, once the SuperNet infrastructure is in place, there will be many opportunities for web-development and site hosting in local communities

The primary investment of \$500 (by RDC) will cover initial design and hosting for one year. The financial goal of the first year will be to cover the production costs for the year. A specific breakdown of revenue is available in section 6 of the business plan.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 RDC's Virtual Assistant Program

RDC's Virtual Assistant program is an innovative online program, training people to provide off-site administrative support to employers. It is the first program of its kind offered in Canada. The program will provide students with a host of valuable skills needed to start a home-based business and succeed in today's fast-paced business world, while providing a fresh alternative to employers.

This online Virtual Assistant Certificate program will provide opportunities for students to gain entrepreneurial skills, attitudes, technology skills, and related knowledge to adapt to providing office services virtually from their homes. This program will provide students with leading-edge skills and expertise, bringing them success in their career.

Virtual Assistants are a growing trend in the business world. They provide office support to businesses or individuals from an off-site location. This career is ideal for administrative assistants who wish to be in charge of their own business, rate of pay, and hours of work. It is ideal for their clients because there are no overhead costs, only payment for the job done. Although not restricted by the town or city virtual assistants reside in, some have chosen to cater to the local market, while others have broad client-bases, including serving customers in foreign countries.

Students will learn how to plan and organize an effective home office, operate and troubleshoot a variety of office equipment, network with other virtual assistants, market themselves and their business, and complete a 120-hour virtual practicum. Courses range from introductory levels for those who are new to this type of field to more advanced courses for those who already have experience in an office career. The students' background will determine the length of the program; however, it could be completed in as little as one year.

The Virtual Assistant Certificate will transfer to the second-year of the Office Administration Diploma Program at Red Deer College or to any other Alberta college.

2.2 Virtualassist.ca

The virtualassist.ca web page will be developed and delivered in consultation and partnership with the Virtual Assistant program. Ideally, the external web page will create an easily accessible portal for VA students to create an online identity for their VA business, and to foster relationships and partnerships with other students, instructors, VA mentors, and potential clients.

This will be an ongoing project for students of the VA program at RDC. The web page will be evaluated by an adjudication committee at Red Deer College (RDC student marketing group / web development committee?) on a yearly basis. Should the project meet RDC standards and guidelines, virtualassist.ca may be placed on the official RDC page and receive associated promotional support.

This unique online project is being developed specifically for the VA students at RDC. It was apparent to the administration of the program that VA graduates would need practical experience and a platform to develop the identity of their VA business while in the program. The creation of an external "affiliate" web page satisfies this need.

Virtualassist.ca is based upon a successful physical publication produced by Langara College students in Vancouver, B.C. The "Pacific Rim" publication is produced entirely by Langara College students. This includes graphic designing, production, writing, editing, photography, and advertising sales.

Students of the Virtual Assistant program Red Deer College will manage, write, edit, design and produce a complete online VA resource site and magazine (www.virtualassist.ca). During the semester, the students will be expected to submit links, articles, assignments, etc. that will be published. Students, under the direction of a moderator, will take on a role or roles in the production of the online offering: editor, designer, ad traffic

manager, production director, ad copywriter, etc. The students and moderator will be expected to hold meetings and to make their own editorial and design decisions about the look and editorial mix of the magazine. Faculty may offer guidance during classes, lab sessions and meetings; but on the whole, the magazine becomes what the students make of it.

A constantly updated web page will ensure a high listing on various search engines, supporting the program and our VA students.

The vision for this online magazine evolved from the perceived need to provide an organized process for students to build their skills while producing online content and supporting their online business. The goal is to allow students to experience the constraints and intensity of online marketing, publishing and support, along with the satisfaction of creating a tangible, professional looking product.

3. KEY PERSONNEL

3.1 Volunteer Support

For its first year, the moderator of the web page will seek out volunteers (faculty, administrators, support staff and students from various Red Deer College departments) to assist in the production of the web page. The moderator and volunteers will become a board of directors for www.virtualassist.ca.

Virtual Assistant instructors with expertise in the following areas will be able to assist students in the operation of the magazine: document formatting, communication skills, basic bookkeeping, starting a virtual assistant business, office management, marketing, coaching/mentoring, desktop publishing, spreadsheets, automated accounting, and web design.

A volunteer from the RDC office of Marketing and Communications will also be available to advise VA students.

3.2 Compensation & Ownership

The initial investment of \$500 by RDC entails full ownership of www.virtualassist.ca. This investment has gone towards initial web design and hosting services for one year (See operations section). The hosting contract will be renegotiated (based on actual traffic and involvement of the hosting company) along with a complete review of the project at the end of the first fiscal year.

Considering the minimal start-up expense of www.virtualassist.ca, it is possible that a minimal profit may be realized in the first year of operations. Involved VA students, as management and operations staff, will be entitled to equally divided shares of 40% of any profit generated. RDC, as initial and sole investor, will be entitled to 60% of any profit generated.

4. OPERATIONS

4.1 RDC Values and www.virtualassist.ca

Red Deer College is dedicated to certain values and guiding principals. These values and guiding principals will be followed in the operations of www.virtualassist.ca in the following ways:

Exploration

- Open to new ways of doing, being and thinking
- Foster a spirit of adventure and inquiry
- Encourage innovation and risk-taking

Inclusiveness

- Create a welcoming environment
- Accessible to diverse learners
- Honour diversity

Excellence

- Provide a high-quality learning experience
- Staff demonstrates subject area expertise
- Improve learning opportunities

Integrity

- Open and honest communication
- Fair and equitable process
- Encourage personal responsibility

Community

- Foster a sense of community with VA students, instructors and potential clients
- Offer a rich social, cultural and intellectual environment
- Involve our students in local, regional and global communities

Accountability

- Foster the development of practical skills of VA students
- Responsive to the needs of our learning community and business partners

4.2 Initial Hosting and Design

Red Deer College will hire Redwhite Technology to provide web design and hosting services for the Virtual Assistant External Web page on a

contract commencing June 15, 2003, and ending June 30, 2004, for a price of \$500 plus GST. The following conditions will apply:

Activities and Outcomes:

1. Initial design and site development of web page for the Virtual Assistant Program.
2. Registration of the virtualassist.ca domain name
3. One year website/e-mail hosting (July 1, 2003 - June 30, 2004) that provides:
 - up to five actual e-mail addresses
 - unlimited virtual e-mail addresses including forwarding
 - limited ongoing support for VA students
 - twenty megabytes of web disk space
 - one gigabyte monthly traffic
 - unlimited ftp access for on-line web page creation and maintenance

Payment of Fees:

1. Payment of \$250.00 plus GST on June 30, 2003, upon completion of initial web page development.
2. Payment of \$125.00 on December 31, 2003, for services from July 1 - December 31, 2003.
3. Payment of \$125.00 on June 30, 2004, for services from January 1 - June 30, 2004.

Other Terms and Conditions:

1. In a fee for service Contract, it is the responsibility of the individual/company to have their own insurance and/or Worker's Compensation coverage.

All opportunities for programming and contracts generated remain the property of Red Deer College

4.3 Costing and control

VA students involved in the project will decide upon all costing and control issues. The Board of Directors must approve all decisions.

4.4 Employees

VA students involved in the project will decide upon all employee issues. The Board of Directors must approve all decisions.

4.5 Content

VA students involved in the project will decide upon all content issues. The Board of Directors must approve all decisions.

4.6 Equipment

VA students will be expected to own a variety of equipment for the operation of their business. Deficiencies in equipment will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. VA students involved in the project will decide upon all purchasing issues. The Board of Directors must approve all decisions.

5. MARKETING

Initially, www.virtualassist.ca will have no budget for marketing. The model used for the development of www.virtualassist.ca is designed to slowly increase the rating of the page on a variety of search engines as content and external visitors increase.

VA students involved in the project will develop a circulation marketing strategy. The Board of Directors must approve all decisions. Target audience for the page will be potential and existing Virtual Assistants, clients, and visitors looking for office related support and information. This could include several types of support.

This publication will provide a unique perspective that no competitor is currently providing.

6. FINANCIAL PLAN

The initial investment of \$500 by RDC entails full ownership of www.virtualassist.ca. This investment has gone towards initial web design and hosting services for one year (See operations section). The hosting contract will be renegotiated (based on actual traffic and involvement of the hosting company) along with a complete review of the project at the end of the first fiscal year.

Considering the minimal start-up expense of www.virtualassist.ca, it is possible that a minimal profit may be realized in the first year of operations. Involved VA students, as management and operations staff, will be entitled to equally divided shares of 40% of any profit generated. RDC, as initial and sole investor, will be entitled to 60% of any profit generated.

Advertising rates and financial planning will be the responsibility of VA students involved in the project. The Board of Directors must approve all decisions

Appendix 6

Working Virtual Assistants Questionnaire

Introduction:

The purpose of this study is to determine your level of involvement in and satisfaction with a virtual community that is related to the day-to-day operation of your business (communities you participate in where you do **not** meet face-to-face).

For any information that you provide, confidentiality is assured and the results will be reported anonymously. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all of the questions; however, your opinions are of great interest to us and your participation is important to the success of this study.

The data gathered from this survey will be used to determine trends and themes in the online community involvement of Virtual Assistants and to determine whether the Virtual Assistant Certificate courses offered online by Red Deer College should provide a similar level of community involvement.

The data gathered will be stored in the Researcher's private office, in a locked cabinet, and will be put into the confidential shredding disposal at Red Deer College upon the expiration of five (5) years from the date of administration of the survey.

There is a possibility that the research findings may be reported either in a professional journal article or in presentations in the future. As well, the research findings may be shared with the Virtual Assistant Certificate instructors at Red Deer College.

For your information, this survey is being conducted under the Guidelines of the Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act of Alberta. If you have any questions about this Act you can contact Rhonda Pylychaty at Red Deer College (403) 342-3422. It is important to note that all participants may make inquiries concerning the research, and choose to withdraw from the project at anytime without penalty or further inquiry. Contact persons include the researcher, Beverly Pederson, at (403) 342-3357 or e-mail bev.pederson@rdc.ab.ca, Dr. Marlo Steed at (403) 329-2189 or e-mail marlo.steed@uleth.ca, and the Chair of the Human Subjects Research Committee, Dr. Cathy Campbell, at (403) 329-2459 or e-mail cathy.campbell@uleth.ca.

While IP Addresses are being collected to ensure non-duplication, confidentiality will be maintained. By completing this survey, you are giving your consent for participating in the review. All responses will be dealt with in confidentiality and used only to garner trends of group responses. Your privacy will be fully respected and is guaranteed.

Thank you for participating in this survey. The survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

<p>1. What virtual communities do you currently participate in that relate to the operation of your business? (Format examples could include: e-mail correspondents, associations, discussion boards, chat rooms, teleconferences, etc.)</p>
<p>2. If you are not involved in a work-related virtual community, please explain why?</p> <p>(Note: you can skip the rest of the survey questions, scroll to the bottom, and click Submit.)</p>
<p>3. How often do you interact with these virtual communities (number of times per week and length of time)?</p>
<p>4. Describe how you became involved with these virtual communities?</p>
<p>Select one of the work-related virtual communities, preferably one where you spend the most time interacting with the members. Please rate your response to statements 5 through 17.</p>
<p>5. I feel that members of my virtual community care about each other.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>6. I feel safe and can speak openly with the members of my virtual community.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Agree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>

7. I feel that everyone in the virtual community contributes to the learning process.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

8. I feel the virtual community promotes friendship amongst its online members.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

9. I feel that I can rely on others in the virtual community.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

10. I feel that there are sufficient opportunities for online socializing amongst members of the virtual community.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

11. I feel that members of the virtual community depend on me.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

12. I feel that I am given ample opportunities to learn in the virtual community.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

13. I feel that a group identity has been created in the virtual community.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

14. I feel that I receive timely feedback from members of the virtual community.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

15. I feel that other members of the virtual community are important sources of learning.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

16. I feel that members interact easily with each other.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

17. Collaborative learning encourages interaction between all group members and allows students to use personal interests and experiences. Should a Virtual Assistant training program have a collaborative component interlaced throughout all the online courses?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

Appendix 7

Virtual Assistant Certificate Student Questionnaire

Introduction:

The purpose of this study is to determine your level of involvement in and satisfaction with a virtual online learning community (a community where participants do **not** meet face-to-face).

For any information that you provide, confidentiality is assured and the results will be reported anonymously. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all of the questions; however, your opinions are of great interest to us and your participation is important to the success of this study.

The data gathered from this survey will be used to determine Virtual Assistant Certificate students' attitudes and opinions about the level of community involvement in the online courses. As well, the data will be compared with the data collected from working Virtual Assistants involved in virtual communities.

The data gathered will be stored in the Researcher's private office, in a locked cabinet, and will be put into the confidential shredding disposal at Red Deer College upon the expiration of five (5) years from the date of administration of the survey.

There is a possibility that the research findings may be reported either in a professional journal article or in presentations in the future. As well, the research findings may be shared with the Virtual Assistant Certificate instructors at Red Deer College.

For your information, this survey is being conducted under the Guidelines of the Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act of Alberta. If you have any questions about this Act you can contact Rhonda Pylychaty at Red Deer College (403) 342-3422.

If you have any questions about the survey, you may contact Cathy Campbell, Ph.D., Chair Human Subject Committee, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge at 403-329-2459 or Marlo Steed, Ph.D., Masters Supervisor, University of Lethbridge at 403-329-2189.

If you wish to inquire about the results of the survey, please contact the Researcher, Beverly Pederson, at 403-342-3357 or e-mail bev.pederson@rdc.ab.ca.

This survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

1. What is the name of the course you are registered in:

- OADM 200 Desktop Publishing
- VA 100 Document Formatting
- VA 110 Communication Skills
- VA 130 Starting a Virtual Assistant Business

2. I feel that students in this course care about each other.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

3. I feel safe and can speak openly with the students in this course.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

4. I feel that students in this course contribute to the learning process.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

<p>5. I feel this course promotes friendships amongst the online students.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>6. I feel that I can rely on the other students in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>7. I feel that there are sufficient opportunities for online socializing amongst students in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>8. I feel that the other students in this course depend on me.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>

<p>9. I feel that in this course I am given ample opportunities to learn.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>10. I feel that a group identity has been created in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>11. I feel that I receive timely feedback from students in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>12. I feel that other students are important sources of learning in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>

13. I feel that students interact easily with each other in this course.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

14. Collaborative learning encourages interaction between all group members and allows students to use personal interests and experiences. Should the Virtual Assistant Certificate have a collaborative component interlaced throughout all the online courses?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

15. What did the instructor do to help create a collaborative learning community?

Appendix 8

Virtual Assistant Certificate Instructor Questionnaire

Introduction:

The purpose of this study is to determine your views about the level of student involvement in and satisfaction with the virtual online learning community developed in the course you instructed.

For any information that you provide, confidentiality is assured and the results will be reported anonymously. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all of the questions; however, your opinions are of great interest to us and your participation is important to the success of this study.

The data gathered from this survey will be used to determine Virtual Assistant Certificate instructors' attitudes and opinions about the level of community involvement in the online courses. As well, the data will be compared with the data collected from the Virtual Assistant Certificate students and working Virtual Assistants involved in virtual communities.

The data gathered will be stored in the Researcher's private office, in a locked cabinet, and will be put into the confidential shredding disposal at Red Deer College upon the expiration of five (5) years from the date of administration of the survey.

There is a possibility that the research findings may be reported either in a professional journal article or in presentations in the future. As well, the research findings may be shared with the Virtual Assistant Certificate instructors at Red Deer College.

For your information, this survey is being conducted under the Guidelines of the Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act of Alberta. If you have any questions about this Act you can contact Rhonda Pylychaty at Red Deer College (403) 342-3422.

If you have any questions about the survey, you may contact Cathy Campbell, Ph.D., Chair Human Subject Committee, Faculty of Education, University of Lethbridge at 403-329-2459 or Marlo Steed, Ph.D., Masters Supervisor, University of Lethbridge at 403-329-2189.

If you wish to inquire about the results of the survey, please contact the Researcher, Beverly Pederson, at 403-342-3357 or e-mail bev.pederson@rdc.ab.ca.

This survey should take approximately 20 minutes to complete.

1. What is the name of the course you are teaching:

- OADM 200 Desktop Publishing
- VA 100 Document Formatting
- VA 110 Communication Skills
- VA 130 Starting a Virtual Assistant Business

2. I feel that students in this course care about each other.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

3. I believe students feel safe and can speak openly with other students in this course.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

4. I feel that students in this course contribute to the learning process.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

<p>5. I feel this course promotes friendships amongst the online students.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>6. I feel that students can rely on each other in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>7. I feel that there are sufficient opportunities for online socializing amongst students in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>8. I feel that students in this course depend on each other.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>

<p>9. I feel that in this course students are given ample opportunities to learn.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>10. I feel a group identity has been created in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>11. I feel that students receive timely feedback from each other in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>
<p>12. I feel that students view each other as important sources of learning in this course.</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Agree <input type="checkbox"/> Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Strongly Disagree <input type="checkbox"/> Not Applicable</p>
<p>Please explain</p>

13. I feel that students interact easily with each other in this course.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

14. Collaborative learning encourages interaction between all group members and allows students to use personal interests and experiences. Should the Virtual Assistant Certificate have a collaborative component interlaced throughout all the online courses?

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- Not Applicable

Please explain

15. What did you do to help create a collaborative learning community?

Appendix 9
Virtual Assistant Program Feedback Study
Red Deer College

(This survey is to be completed by practicing Virtual Assistants only
and submitted NO LATER THAN OCTOBER 31, 2002)

- The purpose of this study is to determine the basic competencies for a virtual assistant as part of our program development initiative for the Virtual Assistant Program being planned at Red Deer College.
- For any information that you provide, confidentiality is assured and the results will be reported anonymously. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you may choose not to answer any or all of the questions provided; however, your opinions are of great interest to us and your participation is important to the success of this study.
- For your information, this survey is being conducted under the Guidelines of the Freedom of Information and Privacy Protection Act. If you have any questions about this Act you can contact Nick Kooman who is the Freedom of Information Coordinator at Red Deer College: (403) 342 – 3181.
- The following virtual form has been prepared so that the respondent can tab from one question to the next to enable quick and accurate responses.

PROFILE OF VIRTUAL ASSISTANT CORRESPONDENT

1. How long have you been a VA?
2. How many clients do you presently support?
3. What is your administrative background?
4. What do you enjoy doing as a VA?
5. What do you not enjoy doing as a VA?
6. What are your office/working hours?

**DRAFT COMPETENCY STATEMENTS OR “AREAS” for BEGINNING
VIRTUAL ASSISTANTS:**

Please choose from the following responses and place the corresponding letter in the space provided for each:

- R** **Required competency for all virtual assistants**
- P** **Preferred where options are given (e.g. software)**
- U** **Unnecessary competency for beginning virtual assistants**

Creating a Virtual Office

- R Review options and plan for an organized and effective home office environment
- R Choose office equipment to meet your needs but with room to grow your business
- R Choose the best options and operate a computer
- R Operate office equipment: FAX
- R Operate office equipment: a photocopier
- R Operate office equipment: a digital scanner
- R Operate office equipment: a digital camera
- R Choose efficient options and operate a telephone
- R Operate teleconference equipment
- R Operate a machine transcriber
- R Troubleshoot equipment problems
- R Learn principles of priority and time management
- R Create basic systems for organizing and backing up files electronically
- R Use CD burners
- R Use Zip drives
- R Use tape drives
- R Use floppy discs
- R Use mail and courier services:
 Canada Post, FEDEX, UPS, Greyhound, e-mail, Purolator
- R Network with other VA's
- R Join and participate in VA professional associations
- R Understand and use telecommuting
- R Understand and use procedures for “hotelling”

Starting a Canadian Home-based Business

- R Establish your personal interests, strengths and specialties
- R Define your client(s)
- R Establish competitive rates for your VA services
- R Learn to write effective and comprehensive business plans
- R Learn to build a clientele through reputation on specialties and strengths
- R Review pertinent Canadian and provincial laws affecting home-based businesses
- R Review basic copyright laws and understand their implications and restrictions for publishing
- R Create a file of basic tax laws affecting small business practices
- R Understand business etiquette & ethics

Marketing/e-Business

- R Learn the basic principles of marketing
- R Learn to market yourself as a VA
- R Perform market research for others
- R Master the use of the Internet and harness Web resources
- R Perform Internet research and analysis based upon client specifications

Business English

- R Have a good command of written English
- R Compose business letters
- R Proofread and edit business letters and reports
- R Prepare resumes
- R Write business plans
- R Write and submit press releases

Keyboarding

- R Use a computer keyboard effectively (by touch rather than “hunt & peck”)
- R Type business letters and forms
- R Type and format business reports
- R Type and format academic reports
- R Type and format business plans

Web Site/Digital Imaging/Graphic Design

- R Build web sites for clients
- R Perform ongoing maintenance of web sites
- R Develop copy for client web sites
- R Design images for use on the web or on printed documents
- R Provide client intranet/chat line services
- R Understand basic digital photography
- R Learn to scan and manipulate documents and photographs
- R Understand the basics of graphic design

Bookkeeping/Accounting

- R Use Accounting Software: Simply Accounting
- R Use Accounting Software: Quicken
- R Use Accounting Software: QuickBooks
- R Use Accounting Software: MYOB
- R Offer bookkeeping/payroll services
- R Process mail invoices and statements
- R Perform cheque book balancing
- R Offer invoice paying services
- R Offer basic income tax services
- R Perform collection calls for clients
- R Understand GST and PST laws and procedures

Advanced Office Procedures

- R Offer event planning services
- R Perform basic travel arrangements and itineraries
- R Schedule meetings

Word Processing

- R Have a workable understanding of the capabilities of Microsoft Office:
Outlook, Word, Excel, PowerPoint, Internet Explorer, Front Page,
Access, Publisher, Projects, Photo Editor
- R Create and send correspondence for signature
- R Transcribe general and/or legal and/or medical correspondence

- R Create PowerPoint presentations
- R Create and provide presentation binders
- R Create and provide presentation handouts

Desktop Publishing

- R Customize brochures and flyers
- R Customize business cards
- R Customize business forms
- R Produce newsletters
- R Produce catalogues
- R Produce menus
- R Create letterheads and customized envelopes
- R Create animated banners for web production or presentations

Database Management

- R Create and maintain databases
- R Prepare bulk mailing and merge mailings
- R Create and maintain contact lists
- R Maintain mailing lists and labels
- R Use selected applications from: MS Access
- R Use selected applications from: ACT
- R Use selected applications from: Goldmine
- R Use selected applications from: Lotus Organizer
- R Use selected applications from: Maximizer
- R Offer reminder services for deadlines and appointments

Competencies Missed Above

Appendix 10

SCCI2 Test Booklet

Sense of Classroom Community Index

2nd Edition

Developed by

Alfred P. Rovai, PhD, Robert A. Lucking, PhD, and Dean Cristol, PhD

Copyright © 2001 by Alfred P. Rovai, PhD, Robert A. Lucking, PhD, and Dean Cristol, PhD. All rights reserved.

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It is your legal responsibility to compensate the copyright holder of this work for any reproduction in any medium. You have permission to use one copy. If you need more than one copy you may obtain a written license to reproduce the test for one year by contacting the authors.

Directions

Reproduce and distribute the two-page survey and then read aloud the following directions to your subjects:

The survey you have in front of you consists of two pages and should only take you a few minutes to complete. You may use either a pen or pencil. It pertains to: [Identify specific course, cohort, or school]

This survey is voluntary. Its purpose is to conduct research in order to help improve teaching and learning. Your honest responses to each item will help us achieve this purpose. It will not be used to evaluate your teacher. Taking or not taking this survey will have no affect on your course grade.

[If students are to provide an ID read the following paragraph]

The first page includes some information about yourself. Let me assure you that your responses will remain confidential should you choose to complete this survey. Under no circumstances will your responses be revealed to anyone. Results will be reported in group form only. Near the top of the survey you will see fill-in-the-blank items marked ID, A, B, C, and D. In the space next to ID write the last four digits of your student ID now. Leave the spaces next to A, B, C, and D empty. [or specify contents] Also answer the three questions about yourself. [Pause]

[If students are not to provide an ID read the following paragraph]

The first page includes some information about yourself. Let me assure you that your responses will remain anonymous should you choose to complete this survey. Near the top of the survey you will see fill-in-the-blank items marked ID, A, B, C, and D. Leave these spaces blank. [or specify contents for A, B, C, and/or D] Answer the three questions about yourself now. [Pause]

The survey also includes a number of statements with each statement followed by a scale. Examine one of the items on the first page of your survey. [PAUSE for a moment or two] You will note that each item consists of a statement followed by a scale represented by five pairs of parentheses. Carefully read each statement and place an “X” in the first pair of parentheses if you strongly agree with the statement, mark the second pair if you agree with the statement but to a lesser degree, mark the third pair if you neither agree nor disagree with the statement or are uncertain about how to respond, mark the fourth pair if you disagree with the statement, or mark the last pair of if you disagree strongly with the statement. Only mark one pair of parentheses for each statement. The letters between the parentheses are there to help you identify the scale. As you complete this survey please make sure you place an “X” in the appropriate space for all items. Do not skip any items. You may now start.

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SURVEY

Please complete the following based on verbal instructions you receive:

ID: _____ A: _____ B: _____ C: _____ D: _____

Next, please check all the categories that apply to you:

1. Age: (1) 25 or less (2) 26 - 30 (3) 31 - 40 (4) 41 - 50 (5) over 50
2. Gender: (1) Male (2) Female
3. Race or ethnic group: (1) White (includes Arabian) (2) African-American (3) Hispanic
(4) Asian (includes Pacific Islanders) (5) Native American (6) Bi-racial

DIRECTIONS: Below you will see a series of statements concerning a specific course or program you are presently taking or recently completed. Read each statement carefully and place an X in the parentheses to the right of the statement that comes closest to indicate how you feel about the course or program. You may use a pencil or pen. There are no correct or incorrect responses. If you neither agree nor disagree with a statement or are uncertain, place an X in the neutral (N) area. Do not spend too much time on any one statement, but give the response that seems to describe how you feel. ***Please respond to all items***

1. I feel that students in this course care about each other (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
2. I feel safe..... (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
3. I feel that discussions are not valued in this course (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
4. I feel that this course results in only modest learning (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
5. I feel that there is no group identity (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
6. I trust others in this course (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
7. I feel that I am encouraged to ask questions (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
8. I feel that everyone in this course contributes to the
learning process (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
9. I feel connected to others in this course..... (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
10. I feel that others are not genuinely concerned with my welfare(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
11. I feel that there is a free flow of diverse information (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
12. I feel that this course does not help me learn new concepts (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
13. I feel that this course does not promote friendships (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
14. I feel that I can rely on others in this course (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
15. I feel that there are sufficient opportunities for socializing (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
16. I feel that learning is important to everyone in this course..... (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
17. I feel important in this course..... (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
18. I feel uneasy exposing gaps in my understanding (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
19. I feel that others do not pay attention to me..... (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
20. I feel that I should help others learn (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)

21. I do not feel a spirit of community(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
22. I feel that members of this course depend on me.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
23. I feel that students don't help each other(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
24. I feel that I am given ample opportunities to learn.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)

(OVER)

25. I feel that this course is like a family.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
26. I feel reluctant to speak openly(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
27. I feel that it is hard to get help when I have a question(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
28. I feel that I am not encouraged to learn by others.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
29. I feel isolated in this course.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
30. I feel that other students are not reliable.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
31. I feel that I receive timely feedback(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
32. I feel that my educational needs are not being met.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
33. I feel recognized(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
34. I feel uncertain about others in this course(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
35. I feel that discussions are mostly one-way(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
36. I feel that other students are important sources of learning.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
37. I feel out of place in this course(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
38. I feel confident that others will help me(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
39. I feel that students interact easily with each other.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
40. I feel that this course does not promote a desire to learn.....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)

(END OF SURVEY)

Scoring Key

Overall SCCI2 Raw Score

SCCI2 raw scores vary from a maximum of 160 to a minimum of zero. Interpret higher SCCI2 scores as a stronger sense of classroom community.

Score the test instrument as follows to obtain the overall SCCI2 score:

For items: 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 9, 11, 14, 15, 16, 17, 20, 22, 24, 25, 31, 33, 36, 38, 39

Weights: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Neutral = 2, Disagree = 1, Strongly Disagree = 0

For items: 3, 4, 5, 10, 12, 13, 18, 19, 21, 23, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32, 34, 35, 37, 40

Weights: Strongly Agree = 0, Agree = 1, Neutral = 2, Disagree = 3, Strongly Disagree = 4

Add the weights of all forty items to obtain the overall SCCI2 score.

SCCI2 Subscale Raw Scores

SCCI2 subscale raw scores vary from a maximum of 40 to a minimum of zero. Calculate SCCI2 subscale scores as follows:

Spirit.....Add the weights of items 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, 33, 37

Trust.....Add the weights of items 2, 6, 10, 14, 18, 22, 26, 30, 34, 38

Interaction.....Add the weights of items 3, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, 31, 35, 39

Learning.....Add the weights of items 4, 8, 12, 16, 20, 24, 28, 32, 36, 40