Chapter 11

When Learners Lead: Building An Online Community

An Interview with Ryan Shaltry

During the Spring semester of 1997, Ryan Shaltry was a freshman at Michigan State University enrolled in Physics 183 - Physics for Scientists and Engineers I. Though the course was offered in a face-to-face instructional mode, students were also required to spend time each week solving online problem sets. The online problem sets were delivered via asynchronous software called CAPA\(^1\) (Computer-Assisted Personalized Approach) that had been developed by faculty of the College of Natural Science at Michigan State.

It didn’t take Ryan long before he realized that CAPA was missing some important learner-focused elements. He set about developing his own online system, www.allMSU.com, to supplement the CAPA experience.

**Interviewer:** Tell me about the beginnings of allMSU.

**Ryan Shaltry:** The idea started out as a simple discussion board during the Spring semester of 1997. I was enrolled in Physics 183 at Michigan State University. A big part of the grade was the CAPA homework assignments where you would have to go online and complete problem sets. The problem sets were all standardized – the same for everyone. However, when you would sign in the computer would change the values of the problem sets that you were given. In other words, everyone had the same formula to deal with but different values were plugged into the formula. One night, as I was plugging through these homework assignments, I thought it would make a lot more sense if I could set up a simple message/forum system so that my friends and I could share the formulas of the problem sets we were working on. It seemed that the instructors did not want to share the formulas, they wanted the students to “discover” them on their own. I felt this was a waste of time and my own learning style would benefit from knowing the formulas ahead of time. I wanted to be able to understand the formulas and put them to use. I wasn’t interested in going on an expedition to search out the formulas.

---

\(^1\) With CAPA, an instructor can create and/or assemble personalized assignments, quizzes, and examinations with a large variety of conceptual questions and quantitative problems. These can include pictures, animations, graphics, tables, links, etc.. The writing and development is facilitated by numerous templates designed to encourage students to collaborate and discuss concepts while insuring that problems differ for each student to inhibit rote copying.

Students are given instant feedback and relevant hints via the internet and may correct errors without penalty prior to an assignment’s due date. The system keeps track of students’ participation and performance, and records are available in real time both to the instructor and to the individual student. Statistical tools and graphical displays facilitate assessment and course administration.

(http://capa4.lite.msu.edu/homepage/)
By setting up a message forum/discussion board it would allow me and my friends to work independently and then, as we would come up with an understanding of the formula(s) that was needed, we could post it on the message forum and share it with each other. It had a very positive effect on our learning. And, most importantly, it allowed us to do it asynchronously. We were all busy with jobs, classes and other things so we didn’t have times when we could meet together. Sharing our ideas on the message forum fit our lifestyles well.

I set up the entire system on the small computer I had in my dorm room. It was connected to the university’s network and allowed me and my friends to sign into it from wherever we happened to be on campus.

**Interviewer:** What happened next?

**Ryan:** It caught on rather quickly. Physics 183, the only class my system was set up to deal with, was one of those very large lecture classes that had multiple sections. There were probably 700-800 students taking Physics 183 that semester. It didn’t take long before knowledge of our small message forum got spread throughout the class. We never really promoted the website. It just caught on via word-of-mouth between students. It was exciting to see the number of messages and conversations that were being initiated. And most importantly, people were getting the kind of help they needed.

By the end of the semester I received a request from some of the students to put up a new message forum for the next semester’s class – Physics 184. So I added another layer to it. When you signed on to the website you would be given a choice to enter either the discussion board for Physics 183 or the one for Physics 184. Once on the discussion board you would be presented with a simple list of messages for the class that you selected. And, of course, you could post a response to a message if you wanted. It was very straightforward. The system that was used was still the one that was set up for my friends and myself. The other users were a bonus that we hadn’t really planned on. It was working fine for just us and apparently other people were also benefiting from it.

Things started to get rather big by the end of the second semester. We were getting well over 400 students logging in on a consistent basis. Actual feedback on how the users were using the system was pretty minimal. Very little came directly to me. However, I would overhear in-class conversations between students discussing how they were using the website to solve their problems. Everyone seemed to like it.
Interviewer: When did you start to realize the potential of how big your system might become?

Ryan: The reality of what the system could turn into began to occur to me at the end of the second semester. It was at about this time, after two semesters of offering the discussion board, that I started to realize the potential of the system. If it was helping us in Physics 183 and Physics 184 it could probably help lots of others as well in their classes. There had to be other classes that needed a similar service. After all, MSU had over 40,000 students on campus.

At the time MSU was not offering any form of online collaboration system so I felt it was up to me to make something happen if anything was actually going to happen. During the next year we expanded to include 10-12 classes on campus, all of which used the CAPA system, as a way to help students practice the class material.

When someone would request a new class be added to the system I would do a bit of research on the University’s website to learn more about the class. Was it an actual class? Did the class use CAPA? If they did offer CAPA I would be more likely to add it to my system. I knew that students would definitely use my forum if CAPA was being used in their class. I didn’t like setting up message forums that would not yield any traffic. Such a forum would take up space on my server and wouldn’t be helping the students.

Interviewer: Were you still using the same basic discussion board?

Ryan: One of the first major changes I made in the system was to add a registration procedure. As students registered to use the system they were asked to sign an agreement licensing their use of allMSU. Within this licensing agreement are two major concerns.

First, the license had them state that they were not an MSU faculty or staff member. The system was designed exclusively for students and I felt it would only work well if there was a level of trust that existed. And, one way to promote trust is to ensure that only students are participating. Another important reason for keeping faculty out of the system was that I was still a student and I had some level of fear that I might be thrown out of the university for encouraging students to share their ideas about their homework with each other. I remember at one point, after an exam I had in a class, the professor singled me out and wanted to know who I was and who the guy was behind this website. Of course, I had always kept my own identity out of the website, I really wasn’t looking to become famous or popular, I just wanted to set up a meaningful website where MSU students could feel comfortable in sharing their thinking with each other. I felt there was a real need for such a thing. Evidently this professor didn’t think so.

A second concern that the user license dealt with was the issue of copyrighted material. The potential users had to agree they wouldn’t post any copyrighted material from their homework assignments into the discussion board. We wanted to make sure we would not be involved in any intellectual property issues. In the license agreement we clearly stated that all content posted by the system users was their responsibility and those responsible for operating the system assumed no responsibility for the posted content.
Interviewer: How could you possibly police your system to see if students were complying with the rules? After all, allMSU currently has almost 50,000 registered users.

Ryan: Certainly there are violations of the rules. For instance, I really don’t know the exact number of non-students who use the system. However, I suspect that there are quite a few. When it comes to actually policing the system, though, I find that I don’t have to spend a lot of time doing it. It really takes care of itself. Occasionally we get some offensive content that we have to delete. And when that happens we usually get emails from students who are concerned or offended that alert us to what’s going on. We deal with these things on a case-by-case basis. In addition, I have a few friends who regularly monitor the website for problems. We have worked hard to develop a sense of community within allMSU. It’s that community spirit that helps make it work so well.

Interviewer: Certainly the development of allMSU hasn’t been without its problems along the way. For instance, an article written by the developers of CAPA refer to you when they stated, “An enterprising student developed an elaborate web discussion forum where students could get answers and formulas, often with little understanding…” (Kashy, et. al. 2001) They went on to say that students who use allMSU “tended to score lower on midterm exams, quizzes, and the final.” How do you respond to that?

Mixed reaction continues on the MSU campus. The CAPA developers have started calling allMSU a “cheat site” and have included the following on one of their websites. “In addition to the official collaborative venues, such as the helproom and the online moderated discussion groups, a culture of “cheat
Ryan: Once allMSU became popular we started to see a certain level of friction between what was happening on the website and the university faculty. I’ve heard reports of teachers threatening to give students a zero grade for their homework if he/she found out that the students were using the allMSU discussion board to help with their homework. In fact, this semester a professor threatened to give the entire class a zero on their homework assignments if he saw any messages from his students discussing their homework assignments on allMSU. I was able to effectively deal with this threat to the students by changing that particular class section so that when a student would log in and share their questions about their homework it would show that it was from “Anonymous.” So, all postings were done anonymously. That took care of the problem quite nicely. It protected the students and allowed them to continue to get the help they needed.

One aspect of allMSU, that has not yet been substantiated but I think exists, is the idea that students who most need help turn to allMSU more often than they turn to their instructor. This may be because of the hour of the day (or night) when they need the help or the type of relationship they have with their instructor. On the other hand, those students who are doing well and don’t need any extra help are able to move through their class without the assistance that allMSU can provide. This would explain why allMSU students “tended to score lower.” It could be that we’re filling an academic void and working with a “lost” segment of the student population – those who are most in need of help.

I think that the professors/faculty seem to think that they need to take control of the entire learning process. They don’t realize how much learning is going on outside of the classroom and outside of their control. The professors often say that there is lots of misinformation being shared on systems like allMSU. Of course, that’s very similar to life and we have to develop skills in recognizing good and bad information. The allMSU system facilitates real dialogue between students which is so very important for effective learning throughout life.

Interviewer: I understand that CAPA eventually added a message forum/discussion board to their software, much like what you created with allMSU.

Ryan: Yes, that’s true, the CAPA system now has their own message forum to support their drill and practice homework sets. It’s interesting that the same professor that had singled me out in his class and wanted me to tell him who was behind this online system came back to me a year later and asked if I would be interested in creating a similar message forum for including in the CAPA system. He offered to pay me to create just such a system. I accepted the offer and worked for CAPA for almost two semesters – creating a message forum system similar to what I was doing.

sites” has been developing, most notably http://www.allmsu.com/, which currently advertises “73,408 class discussion entries” (Kortemeyer, 2003). The MSU Office of the Ombudsman advises faculty that, though no university policy requires a statement about academic honesty and integrity in their course syllabi, they may consider including the following. “Therefore, unless authorized by your instructor, you are expected to complete all course assignments, including homework, lab work, quizzes, tests and exams, without assistance from any source. You are not authorized to use the www.allmsu.com Web site to complete any course work in this course.” (Office of the Ombudsman, Michigan State University, 2004.) And, to the contrary, the doctoral program in Educational Policy in MSU’s College of Education values allMSU.com and includes a hotlink on their online Resources page (Educational Policy, College of Education, Michigan State University, n.d.). Meanwhile, the campus newspaper reports that, “Created more than five years ago by former MSU student Ryan Shaltry, allmsu.edu has established a strong following with more than 50,000 registered users” (The State News, 2004).
from my dorm room. However, after working there for a couple of months I realized that if I did a good job for them I would probably end up destroying my own system. So, after I created the basic message forum for them I quit the job. Today that message forum is still operating but it does not have nearly the popularity of my own system. The reason, of course, is that the forum that is tied to CAPA is focused exclusively on the homework problem sets and is carefully monitored by faculty and teaching assistants to ensure that it stays focused and accurate. There is nothing on that system that attempts to appeal to other aspects of the lives of the students as we do on allMSU. As such, it seems to have only limited appeal for students. Their website is heavily teacher/content focused whereas my website is heavily learner focused. That makes a significant difference if you’re trying to appeal to people who would like to control their own learning as a part of a community.

**Interviewer:** You have said that allMSU is a community. How were you able to make this happen?

**Ryan:** Certainly this sense of community didn’t happen over night. It took a lot of work and continual adjustments of the allMSU operating system to begin to see the community side of it. For instance, we slowly added a variety of features to allMSU in addition to the message forum for sharing homework. This added tremendous diversity to allMSU – much like the diversity you find in the student body.

I don’t think MSU likes us infringing on their learning process. However, they haven’t been able to come up with anything that caters to the student’s needs as well as we have. We have gone way beyond just establishing a bulletin board. We have worked to establish an online community that allows students to deal with class learning concerns along with a host of other things in their lives.

Students aren’t so narrowly defined as the University thinks they are. They have complete and busy lives and have crazy hours when they are able to join in a community for the sharing of ideas. The asynchronous web-based community of allMSU makes a lot of sense for this type of person. allMSU tries to accommodate and respond to that.

The University’s attempt to provide a forum for the students is limited to just the academic part and isn’t seen nearly as valuable by the students. This may be because the university isn’t interested in getting that involved with that much of a student’s life. I think they see their role as dealing with only the educational part of the person – not the whole student.

**Interviewer:** I’ve had a chance to compare today’s allMSU with what it looked like at the beginning. It has really changed a lot.

**Ryan:** We began to add features to the website as students would suggest them. We added a section of classified ads where students could buy, sell and trade things. As with the other aspects of allMSU there was no charge for the classified ads. We also added a link for users to suggest new message forums so that we could expand to other courses where students felt the opportunity to dialogue would be helpful. We also added some general message forums on topics such as sports and music that we felt could further build the community. There’s now a Dating section, a Used Books section which is very popular at the beginning and end of each semester, and a section where you can Rate Professors you have had in class and share your reactions with...
others. There’s also an Events Calendar where students can post information about upcoming events, and a College Life section which includes apartment reviews, information about computers/technology and dormitory forums. Each of these sections has come about through the suggestions and recommendations of students in the online community.

Recently we added a section to the website called “The Big Green” which is a student run ezine, an electronic magazine. There are 15-20 writers and a number of photographers who now regularly put together this electronic magazine and use our website as the way to disseminate it. We gave them space on our website and created a system whereby they can autonomously administer that section of the website. They can post their stories and pictures, correspond with their readers, and generally maintain their own magazine – at no cost to them. We felt it was another opportunity to support the student electronic community that had been established and, based on the response to the magazine, it was a good decision.

Interviewer: It sounds like allMSU is now dealing with the more popular topics of student life rather than staying with its original focus on helping with homework.

Ryan: No, I’d have to disagree with that. Certainly we’ve expanded as any community would. However, the academic part of the website is the backbone of the community. There are some other online communities available to MSU students, but nothing that has been successful and lasted as long as ours. I think the reason we have been successful is due to our ability to mix academic content and recreational content on the same website. Students can choose which part of the website they want to visit. Depending on their own mood they may choose to work on their homework or, instead, check out the classified ads. The academic section of the website provides a certain degree of substance to this project that isn’t readily seen in other websites that attempt to get students participating.

I have always been concerned about maintaining the focus for allMSU. I think that there is a lot of value in this website for the students and I am concerned that I not lose the focus by getting too absorbed in trying to make money or exploiting the student community in some way. I think that would easily be picked up by the student users and the website would fail immediately. There is a lot of loyalty that the students have to the website and I have to respect that. I try to be honest and straight forward and offer them something that has value for them and their lives. Something that they can really use.

The area that I think that we most contribute to is that of learning how to effectively communicate. After all that is what the website is all about – whether it is sharing thinking about homework problems, posting a classified ad, or sharing information about a professor. The ability to communicate is the key to all of it. Technology is becoming such a large part of our lives and we have to learn how to effectively use the technology to communicate with others.

Interviewer: You’ve been gone from MSU for a few years. Yet, you still are able to maintain allMSU.

Ryan: There was a time after I had moved to Arizona, a period of nine months in 2000, when the site did not exist. I decided that I had other priorities in life and the website really wasn’t my focus at that time. Plus, I was a considerable distance away from MSU and had little contact with the on-campus community of students. However, I started getting personal emails from students wanting to know what had happened to the message forum and why couldn’t they find it
anymore. Where is it? What happened to it? We miss it! So I finally invested a few hours of learning time, made some needed modifications in the software and put it back online.

After I finished the redesign of the website I again used word-of-mouth and a few flyers posted on campus (by some of my friends) to advertise the availability of the message forum. Word just kind of spread by itself.

**Interviewer:** Are you surprised by what you have done?

**Ryan:** Yes, I am surprised by what I’ve done. Not because of the success but because of how easy it was. By merely listening to the students and following their leads and suggestions it has been possible to create a meaningful system that has turned into a vibrant electronic community.

**References**


