

**Design of an Online Community for Newcomer English Language Learners through
Alianza Bilingüe After School Program**

<https://sites.google.com/view/alianzabilingueclub?usp=sharing>

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Introduction

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2018) states, “the population of English Language Learners (ELLs) in public school increased from 2 million in 1990 to 4.8 million in 2015 and by 2025, ELLS will be expected to represent a quarter of the entire student population.” However, academic institutions continue to lack support and resources for newcomer ELLs. Providing resources for newcomer ELLs is crucial in ensuring they achieve a successful and equitable education. We must be mindful of the many socio-emotional challenges that newcomer ELLs face when entering a new school environment. “Social integration has been a constant struggle for ELLs” (Velinda, 2020, p.5). Some of the common behavioral troubles of newcomers are anxiety, isolation and the pressure to assimilate to mainstream school and culture. Furthermore, researchers Vazquez and Holme (2013) state, “ELL’s suffer from “triple segregation”, isolation by poverty, color and language” (Vasquez and Holme, 2013).

As a result, online communities are developing new purposeful approaches and skills in academia in order to empower participants to become experts in their own learning.” (Palloff & Pratt 2007). Researchers Yuan et. al (2019), have shown that “digital spaces can also be a source of social empowerment for ELL’s...creating and sharing digital content can encourage students to develop a greater sense of pride in their work.” The Alianza Bilingue online community was developed to bridge the academic and digital divide that exist with newcomer ELLs. The vision for this online community strives to coach and mentor newcomer ELLs to successfully develop and use their bilingual capabilities to have an active voice in 21st century learning. The website was developed through the use of Google Apps such as Google Sites, Google Meet, Google Classroom and Google Jamboard.

Design & Methodology

Wegner et al., (2009) indicates the importance of creating a productive online community through “the implementation of one's vision of sharing and supporting inter-connected experiments and the use of technology within the community; giving us the framework and language to see technology from a community perspective and the community from a technology perspective.” As an educator for ELLs, I strongly advocate the importance of allowing newcomer ELLs to have creative outlets to develop socially and emotionally beyond their four classroom walls. Technology brought about a substantial transformation in education showing improvement in the methodology of language learning and how to successfully teach ELLs. Being that newcomer ELLs struggle with feeling a sense of belonging and embracing their cultural identities in a new learning community, the key elements of community-based online learning facilitates ELLs interactions with other peers, their teachers and promotes collaborative learning.

The design of the Alianza Bilingue website was to empower ELLs through digital literacy. Creating a Google Classroom embedded into the website allows students to interact and collaborate with their peers via the class stream, Google Meet and Google Jamboard. Studies have shown that “Google Sites promotes social computing and collaboration allowing students to enhance their digital literacy and work in an open and distributed manner, ideal for group activities” (Roodt & de Villiers, 2012). The mission of Alianza Bilingue online community is to provide effective language and digital development for newcomers to become active leaders in their learning community. The cultural learning dynamics in online communities encourages students to take a more active role in their learning while amplifying meaningful relationships with the learning materials, subject matter and their peers (Chen & Moradi, 2019). Although the

tools that communities use evolve over time as the number of participants grows and technology continues to advance, I will be adjusting and adding different tools in order to provide more up-to-date and collaborative learning and resources that prepare my newcomer ELLs to compete in the 21st century. (Wenger, et al., 2009).

Palloff and Pratt (2007) state online communities provide the organizational structure through which participants can engage with content and one another through a flexible and creative format. The homepage welcomes students with the vision, mission and goal of our online community. According to Kraut and Resnick (2016), hundreds of studies have shown that people work harder when they implement specific goals as an objective than when they have no goals or only vague goals. The website was designed in a way that was easy for newcomer ELLs with little to no experience with technology to have quick access to information such as membership tab that indicates membership guidelines and the norms of the online community. Alianza Bilingue provides flexible hybrid learning. It allows the opportunity for relationship building and collaborative interactions to happen anywhere through the implementation of a Google Classroom. Under the resource tab you can find Alianza Bilingue's Google Classroom where members can join Google Meet and participate in group discussions and activities online or in person.

Alianza Bilingue's social area runs on Google Jamboard and Google Meet allowing students to have a space to share ideas and collaborate with one another. Newcomer ELLs received a Google Classroom tutorial before engaging in the social interaction activities through Google Classroom, Meet and Jamboard. This collaborative component of our online community is paramount as newcomer ELLs highly benefit from being able to easily access information and socially connect with others to enhance their sense of belonging and purpose in the community

with ease regardless of their second language acquisition development (Kraut & Resnick, 2016). Moreover, Kraut and Resnick state that engaging students in collaborative activities allows for “friendly interactions with existing community members soon after joining a community and promotes sustainability.

Alianza Bilingue online community norms are easily accessible under the membership tab of the website. Highlighting the community’s expectations of its members is salient in establishing a culture of respect and learning. These rules are meant to keep the community a safe, trusting and welcoming environment while encouraging members to display positive characteristics. In doing so, members of the community will continue to remain active and will sustain newcomers. (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). The resource tab provides students and parents alike with additional resources such as online netiquette, an interactive metacognitive website on bridging native and second language through a contrastive analysis, the importance of culturally inclusive classrooms and navigating Google Classroom.

Comparison to Existing Communities

When reviewing other online communities for English language learners results indicated a more informational and marketing approach. Websites included themes such as the benefit of being bilingual, bilingual books for sale and resource links for translation. One out of six provided current events, webcasts and recommended readings for teachers and parents. The others were not as interactive and lacked depth in providing an easy to navigate and welcoming environment for its members. A few required a fee to get access to some of its content while others provided resources through links of other online platforms, making the environment feel very commercial and less meaningful.

The Alianza Bilingue online community goal is to prepare English language learners to explore and utilize technology in order for members to be able to bridge their two worlds into one success story. This goal is evident throughout the entire community as it strives to help ELLs become digital natives and promote active collaboration through hands on learning such as socio-emotional activities using Google Jamboard, interactive discussions through Google Meet, foundational second language acquisition activities and hands-on learning through the creation of personal narrative with WeVideo software. “Technology integration in language teaching advocates for engagement, improvement in academic ability, assessment shift and collaborative learning enhancement.” (Riasati et al., 2012).

Alignment to Course Objectives

Wenger, et al (2009) emphasize that through meetings, open-ended conversations, projects, content, relationship building, individual participation and community cultivation, digital communities can offer an array of support allowing members of the community to be fully immersed as active participants. The integration of an online community for my Alianza Bilingue after school club, “supports the connection of experimenting of technology in digital communities” (Wenger, et al 2009). It is important to be able to implement different digital tools within an online community in order to bridge various platforms and create active members under the same online learning environment.

Alianza Bilingue online community is dedicated to providing information and resources for newcomer students to support them in acculturating into their new learning environment through e-learning collaborative activities. Alianza Bilingue was designed with the principles aligned to our course objectives. It puts its members in the forefront of interaction, collaboration and hands-on learning in order to better equip them to be active leaders in society. It aims to

establish a welcoming and positive learning environment through the guidelines of norms and etiquette that all members are required to follow. Most importantly, it is interconnected with the principles of community of practice, digital habits and the online communities explored through the course literature.

This project reinforces the design principles that were implemented into my Alianza Bilingue online community. This assignment gave me the opportunity to take my in-person club to another level; making it a hybrid community through the implementation of my online community design. Incorporating technology “celebrates newcomers' diverse life experiences by helping them connect as a community and build valuable and diverse background knowledge” (Sienko, 2022).

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