# Learning Assistants' Functions and Effects: All-round Tutoring in Online Learning Community

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**Abstract:-** Learning assistants is the main part of online learning community, and the key function of them is to offer emotional support and academic assistance. The paper aims to explore social functions and teaching effects of learning assistants in the process of online learning operation. On the basis of survey and practice, the paper points out that the organization of a higher-levelled learning assistants' community is the premise of organizing qualified online learning community, and the application of various resolutions and strategies to cope with emotional problems and academic difficulties is the prerequisite of undertaking smooth online learning activities. Those strategies cover encouragement strategy, participation strategy, cultural strategy, normalization strategy, cohesion strategy, feedback strategy, collaboration strategy, and conflict resolution strategy. Online learning assistants have to learn to adopt optimized strategy in accordance with proper contexts and specific problems in order to guarantee a cultural and well-organized online learning community.

**Keywords:-** Online learning assistants' community, online learning community, Growing-up English QQ Group, function, effect, strategy.

## I. INTRODUCTION

At present, online learning, or E-learning has developed into an indispensable component of modern education; more and more teachers and learners throw themselves into the vigorous interactions of online learning community. In the process of online learning, due to its specific learning environment where learners are short of social sense of presence, they are apt to encounter such psychological problems as isolation, anxiety, irritation, and resistance, which tend to result in decline and disappearance of the learners' learning motivation and interests. How to cope with these emotional problems and achieve the better performance through online learning activity? One of the answers is to build online learning community and establish all-round tutoring system in which learning assistants offer not only timely academic guidance but also precious psychological assistance. For all this, due to inexperience in online learning assistance and uncertainty of online learning process, at present stage, learning assistants cannot play their complete and due roles in terms of organization and maintenance of this learning community, let alone assistance in solving learners' psychological difficulties. In view of the actual state, the article aims to explore and analyze the learning assistants' social functions and their interactive effects on this innovative learning platform, proposing strategies and models to perfect the organization and maintenance of online community, and thereby improve online learners' mood. This is a tentative experiment and an immediate reflection on the author's online tutoring experience, which can offer readers a new perspective and some practical recommendations to better online learning effect and stimulate online leaning potential.

## II. ANALYSIS AND EXPLORATION OF SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF ONLINE LEANRING ASSISTANTS

### A. The Survey of Online Learners' Emotional Problems and Causes

On the basis of the comparative study of traditional teaching model characterized by face-to-face communication and modern one featured by the combination of classroom teaching and online self-study, it's not difficult to find a series of newly-emerged problems. The highlight of online self-study is learners' emotional problem reflected in negative moods, such as the sense of isolation, anxiety, worry, boredom, and irritability. According to the author's survey on her Growing-up English QQ Group members, 63 percent hold that it is the modern teaching method, especially online learning that makes them separated from teachers and other classmates owing to the lack of face-to-face communication and emotional experience. And 71 percent believe that insufficient non-verbal communication and social presence directly result in the decline of learning interests.

In general, there are two causes leading to emotional problems, for one thing, those part-time learners who have to work and study simultaneously cannot resolve the contradiction of work and study, in particular, the time allotment, which brings about physical exhaustion and psychological maladjustment; for another, the network learning environment, in fact, is a separated space with teachers and students being unable to realize face-to-face and non-verbal communication, which leads to the difficulty and cease of emotional transmission and heart-to-heart touch. More and more online learners cannot convey their trust, encouragement, forgiveness, and praise to their teachers or partners online, while, on the contrary, these emotional expressions are easily conveyed in the traditional class. All in all, the online learners' insufficient sense of social presence is the fundamental cause to bring emotional problems and psychological barriers into existence.

**B.   The Social Interactive Functions of  Online Learning Community**

Online learning community, as the counterpart of the actual community, is a brand-new living and life space where a group of people with the same aspiration and interest interact with each other via network communication. Owing to its peculiar characteristics in similarity, interaction, trustful and cultural atmosphere, online learning community members are embedded with equal status which facilitates the establishment of interpersonal relationship. Once this interpersonal network formed, community members can reap team support and help. With frequent communication and mutual assistance among members, the friendship and cohesion will be steadily on the increase; the favorable cultural atmosphere will accordingly come to take shape. Meanwhile, online community helps learners construct their identities to overcome anxiety and isolation caused by online learning model, and thus promotes emotion exchanges. As a result, from the perspective of social communication, online learning community can perform such tasks as supporting interpersonal communication, establishing learning atmosphere and community culture, and most of important of all, providing all-round emotional assistance, which contributes to the formation of social belonging and social identification.

**C.   The Social Functions of Online Learning Assistants**

According to online researcher Jennifer Oarock, the online learning assistants should help learners solve those problems which influence their learning, but being irrelevant to the contents. [1] Considering learners' emotional problems and learning moods, the learning assistants should be equipped with the capability of building social communication environment, and apart from that, the capability of guiding and organizing the learners to conduct deep-levelled social interaction. The learning assistants, by means of creating the environment and atmosphere similar to the real social interaction, help learners share similar feelings of face-to-face communication filled with real, natural and direct emotional experience, and hence, the learners' social presence is reinforced significantly.  This social presence not only increases the learners' online retention, but also strengthens information flow in learning community, the members' support and cooperation, and simultaneously, the learning satisfaction and achievement. All these above-mentioned capabilities can be boiled down to the social functions of online learning assistants and its essential task is to develop learners' social presence, and therefore cut down the chances of causing  emotional problems.

## III.   LEARNING ASSISTANTS' ALL-ROUND TUTORING  MODELS IN ORGANIZING AND MAINTAING ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

**A.   The Organization of Online Learning Assistant's Community**

Under the guidance of Palloff who pointed out seven principles to establish online learning community in 1999, [2] Johnson indicates that the formation of an online community generally undergoes four circulatory phases including organization, normalization, operation, and conflict resolution. [3] On the basis of above-mentioned theories, researchers in our country develop the theories to six elementary phases involving focus, understanding, take-in, normalization, performance, and adjustment. [4]

The first mission of organizing online learning community is to establish a high-standard online learning assistant's community.  This particular community is the premise of building online learning community. It's a professional collaborative community in which learning assistants share information technology, exchange online teaching experience, and explore updated techniques and strategies to set up online learning space. The virtual community is a space influenced and interacted by technological environment, resources environment, service environment, and social network environment. For this reason, online learning assistant's community should be established in accordance with these four elements. Figure 1 displays this community model.
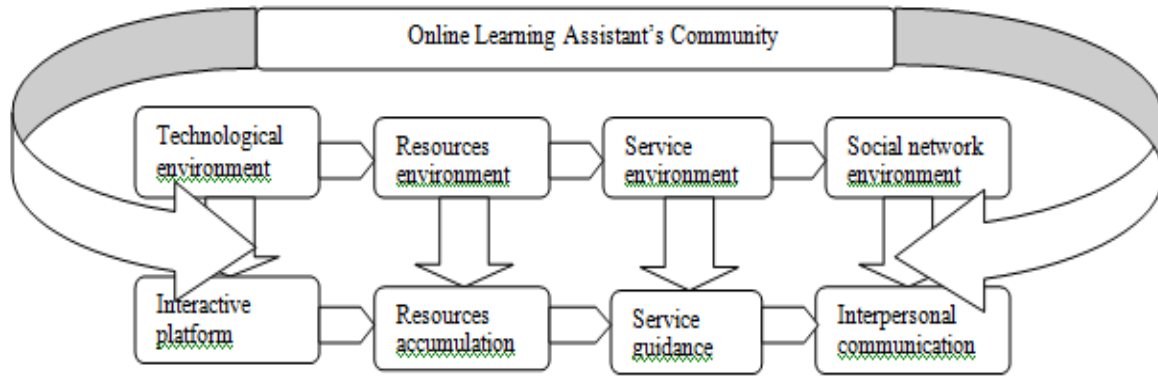
**Fig. 1:** The online learning assistant's community model in creating learning soft environment

The virtual learning community offers an interactive platform for learning assistants to fulfil the missions of academic assistance and emotional support. The technological aid is the guarantee of creating the community to perform seamless interaction. In the process of establishment, diversified services are provided to ensure the quality of this soft environment, such as professional information guidance, interpersonal network resources, as well as personalized communication. In order to realize the goal of community's generativity development, it's of great necessity to manage community resources, focusing on resources cluster and personalized push. Learning assistants coming from various regions, sharing diverse experiences and similar professional backgrounds, can establish mutually supportive and interdependent relationship which contributes to the resolution of professional questions and the enhancement of professional wisdom and teaching skills.

The second mission is to formulate strategies of constructing learning assistant's community. As a mature professional community, it should achieve two basic goals: for one thing, it should fulfil some concrete tasks, for another, it should improve its professional levels in any aspect. The author believes that the community can adopt the following strategies: (1) to reinforce lifelong-study awareness, and to improve drive in professional development; (2) to formulate the community norms, and to build harmonious and interactive network space; (3) to create collaborative cultural atmosphere, and to enhance community members' artistic appreciation; (4) to generate formative assessment strategy, and to assess the actual professional levels; (5) to perfect information platform, and to provide updated and valuable education recourses.
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**B. The Resolutions and Strategies of Online Learning Assistants to Cope with Emotional Problems**

The online learning community under the guidance of a group of learning assistants is different from other common communities owing to such peculiar characteristics as relative closure, definite purpose, positive enlightenment, emotional support, and compelling activities as well. These unique features determine that online learning community not only adheres to the general pattern, but also pioneers some special forms. Leaning assistant's social functions and their resolutions to cope with online learners' emotional problems are listed in the following Table 1.

**Table 1:** resolutions and strategies of online learning assistants in different learning stages

| Social functions | Emotional problems | Resolutions and strategies |
|---|---|---|
| Organization of online learning community with interaction and communication. | Lack of the sense of belonging, trustfulness, and achievement. | Help online learners to build personal communication network; to formulate the community regulations and normalize the community activities; to hold colorful activities to absorb community members. |
| Creation of unique cultural atmosphere. | Lack of the sense of identity and trustfulness. | Help online learners to develop noble cultural views; to standardize the communicative etiquettes; to create unique and attractive cultural atmosphere: friendliness, trustfulness, mutual-respect, tolerance, elegance, learning from each other. |
| Fulfillment of high-leveled interaction and communication. | Lack of the sense of confidence, achievement, and identity. | Encourage online learners to express their points of views confidently and critically, to offer their timely feedbacks and recommendations, to conduct open dialogue and multi-sided interaction. |

Evidently, online learners will be confronted with different emotional problems in different online learning stages, for instance, on the outset, online learners are short of the sense of belonging and trustfulness, and consequently, learning assistants should give priority to create warm, friendly and cohesive learning atmosphere to render community members to feel at home. With the deepening of online learning process, online learners will be obsessed with the sense of achievement and identity, and concerning these problems, learning assistants should improve the dynamic of academic assistance and expand the breadth and depth of teacher-to-student online interactions in order to meet the learners' psychological needs.

**C. The Practice and Effects of Online Leaning Assistants in Growing-up QQ English Group**

The author, her colleagues, and her academic companions coming from different universities have established an online learning assistant's community where every learning assistant can exchange their teaching theories and teaching experiences, sharing latest information technology to build a high-end platform for assistant's interaction and improvement. On the basis of this platform, learning assistants create an English online learning community titled Growing-up English QQ Group. After one-year operation, it has achieved good results in different respects. According to the recent survey in our group, 35 of English group members pass CET-6 or CET-4 once only (70 student members in all), and the highest score in CET-4 is Fly (her screen name) with 607. The passing rate of CET-4 has attained the highest level in the author's teaching history. In fact, Growing-up contributes a great share in this academic achievement. From Figure 2 and 3 we can recognize this point deeply.



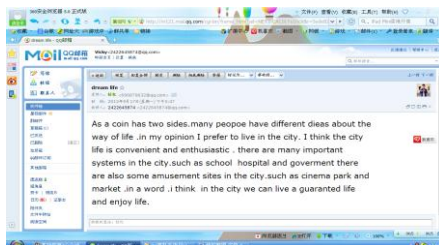**Fig. 2:** The pre-exam assistance in how to write high-quality CET-4 composition.



**Fig. 3:** The learner's writing assignment for assessment in learning assistant's QQ e-mail box.

Apart from those academic satisfaction and confidence that learning assistants can help learners to obtain through positive online interaction, online learners can also realize emotional communication and obtain emotional encouragement to stimulate their learning zest. Learning assistants can adopt a great variety of strategies mentioned in the previous part to prevent those negative emotional problems from appearing in the bud. For example, the author (as the group leader) delivered the following speech to celebrate the establishment of Growing-up in warm, friendly, and equal tone. Most of community members (more than 85 percent) hold that their senses of isolation, indifference, inferiority, and suspicion frequently happened online have been swept away thanks to the learning assistants' painstaking efforts and elaborate design including encouragement strategy, participation strategy, cultural strategy, normalization strategy, cohesion strategy, feedback strategy, collaboration strategy, and conflict resolution strategy.

Vicky (the author's QQ name): 13:31:33 [5]

Hi! My old and new friends! 😃   First of all, let's celebrate the creation of this English QQ Group named as Growing-up. The name was created because of my inspiration this morning. I sincerely hope every one of you can grow up mentally and academically through beneficial communication and friendly collaboration in this English Group. As your English teacher and close companion, I'll go to great lengths to provide you a colourful and interactive English learning space. 🤗

# IV. CONCLUSIONS

To organize and maintain online learning community is the chief function of online learning assistants, and to resolve online learners' emotional problems and academic difficulties is their obligatory duty. In different process of online learning operation, learning assistants assume different tutoring tasks. How to build and strengthen community awareness, how to create and develop unique community culture, how to maintain and prompt community cohesion, and how to encourage and stimulate online learning motivation have been research focuses of present and future online learning. Under the guidance of leaning assistants' cultural nurturing, learners' social presence is intensified, and so is their learning interest and self-confidence. In brief, online tutoring is an elaborate and toilsome mission which challenges assistants' intelligence and endurance. Only by means of flexible approaches, effective strategies, and passionate contributions can assistants provide online learners with a cultural and well-organized online learning community.

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