Facilitating Connected Knowing Through Virtual Learning Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Generally believed critical to facilitating multi-dimensional instructional experiences for participants in a range of educational environments (for example, as accessed through academic institutions, corporate staff development, professional organizations, and so forth), the use of *learning communities* as an important instructional method is widely recognized across academic disciplines, teaching approaches, and delivery media. In fact, Lave and Wenger (in McPherson & Nunes, 2004) argued that learning is, by nature, an activity by which one engages knowledge in many forms, through which one becomes a "member of the community of knowledge" (p. 305). As such, *communication*, *collaboration,* and *interaction* become essential methods in facilitating instructional partnerships. Extending beyond a social context, the ongoing relationship building, advising, and mentoring generated through participation in learning communities provide a foundation for continued cognitive development and *knowledge construction* (Rovai, 2002; Wegerif, 1998). Such environments facilitate both ongoing discovery and a personal relationship to learning; enable interpersonal connections; emphasize the application of previous experiences to current learning goals; and, promote democratic teaching-learning partnerships, allowing participants to develop both collective and individualized perspectives and approaches (Brookfield, 1987, 1995; Daloz, in Taylor, Spring, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Taylor, 1995). Although Burbules (cited in Chamberlain, Charalambos, & Michalinos, 2004, pp. 136 – 137) stressed the importance of community development to learning as equally valuable regardless of the instructional medium, both wide-scale anecdotal feedback and more formal research indicated that this aspect of learning was particularly essential to student satisfaction, motivation, and *retention* in Web-based classrooms in which students may never physically come into contact with peers, instructors or campus/organizational services and programs (Boettcher, 2004; Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Kearsley, 2000; McCracken, 2005; Palloff and Pratt, 1999, 2001; Tinto cited in Rovai, 2002; Rovai, November, 2004; Shea, 2006). Communities that develop in *online* instructional environments can be similarly transformative in their significance to research generation, self-assessment, and critical thought development, as well as important to furthering advising/consulting relationships, social networks, and professional affiliations.

BACKGROUND: CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Many educators have attempted to capture the essence of community as it exists in virtual instructional environments; such definitions included a broad range of priorities, from the pragmatic to the philosophical. For example, Kaplan (August, 2002, section 2), Preece (cited in Garber, 2004) and Allan, Ure, and Evans (October, 2003, p. 7) noted that reliance on technology was essential to the very definition of *virtual communities* to the extent that communications and interactions were dependent upon media-based tools. However, beyond this general conclusion, there were many variables identified as impacting learning as facilitated using *learning communities*. Preece (cited in Garber, 2004) broadly explained that clear role differentiation and shared purpose promoted strong online community development (section 1). Allan, et al., (October, 2003) extended this definition to consider aspects of interdependence fostered by community structures, the purposes of which included furthering common goals and practices (p. 7). Rovai (August, 2002) also emphasized interdependence among members as contributing to learning community development and continuity, finding it largely dependant upon the extent to which interpersonal conditions such as the following were met: "…[a] sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members" (section 4). Sergiovanni (cited in Rovai and Jordan, November, 2004) considered the relational aspects of community, identifying that participants appeared to have the "...need for 'authentic community,' ...a tie binding students and teachers through shared values, ideals, and goals" (section 3). Shea's (February, 2006) research elaborated on both Rovai and Sergiovanni's findings, reflecting that distant students reported a strong sense of learning through community in those on-line classes in which instructors created open environments for the *discussion*, mediation, and resolution of difficult dialogues that ultimately reinforced complex understanding (section 5).

Instructional approaches that included attention to variables such as those previously described enabled a comparatively natural environment in which to promote the development of knowledge; many of these approaches were constructivist in nature. Gilbert and Driscoll (2002) discussed a constructivist approach to learning in community as including a "... change in focus from individual knowledge constructed singly to public knowledge jointly constructed by students," noting that the creation of communities "...enable[d] students to contribute to each others' learning through social construction of communal knowledge" (p. 59). Educators (in Merriam and Cafferella, 1999), such as Usher, Bryant and Johnston (as related to experiential learning) (pp. 227 – 229); Brockett and Hiemstra (with reference to personal responsibility) (p. 298); and, Garrison (who favored "collaborative constructivism") (p. 300), expanded on constructivist models by acknowledging the importance of context and experience to overall learning achievement. These authors suggested that learning did not happen in isolation, but, rather, was an evolving process impacted by relationships to people and systems, cognitive and affective development, socio-political history, and, opportunity/privilege, all of which were experienced differently on individual and collective levels.

Wenger and Snyder (in Stein, Fall 2002) refined the function of learning in community as forming the foundation for the development of *communities of practice* (p. 27). These authors defined community of practice as "... a group of people 'informally' bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise.... sharing their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing creative ways that foster new approaches to solving problems." (p. 27). Building on Wenger and Snyder's observations, Stein (Fall 2002) observed that *communities of practice*, as *learning communities*, performed an important role in empowering participants to develop meaning systems, define learning, and claim a unique body of knowledge, stating ".... The meaning of learning [in] community lies in the increasing confidence of a group that its ability to learn and to act on that learning resides in the group itself, and that the learning it creates can encompass the whole community" (p. 39). The research of Sorensen and Murchu (October, 2004, p. 198) as well as that of Rovai (cited in Anderson, June, 2004, p. 184) confirmed that the success of virtual learning communities rested in their capacities to further empowerment and autonomy enabling both individual and collective constructs of knowledge (p. 198). Smith (1992, in Chamberlain, et al., 2004) observed that distant students were more likely to invest in community-building activities when they identified common experiences and goals, and obtained immediate access to networks, materials, and skills that they prioritized (p. 137). Lebow, Wager, Marks, & Gilbert (in Gilbert & Driscoll, 2002) noted that a particular advantage to utilizing knowledge communities in virtual environments included the capacity to archive artifacts, learning objects, and transcripts collectively created by the membership (p. 61 - 62).

MAIN FOCUS: BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES TO LEARNING IN VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Like all instructional approaches, the integration of learning communities in virtual classrooms included both strengths and challenges. Mobilizing community as an instructional approach succeeded only to the extent that participants and instructors were present, engaged, and invested in its use as a method that furthered both learning and teaching. The following summary of comparative benefits and challenges illustrates the complexity of incorporating both methods and technologies to facilitate the development of *learning communities* as an instructional method in *online* classrooms.

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