Community in Virtual Learning Environments

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INTRODUCTION

The development of dynamic learning communities is generally believed to be critical to providing engaging and 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). Both wide-scale anecdotal feedback and more formal research indicate that this aspect of a virtual classroom is particularly essential to student satisfaction, motivation, and retention in Web-based environments (Boettcher, 2004; Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Kearsley, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001; Rovai, 2002). For example, Fredericksen, Pelz, Pickett, Shea, and Swan (2001) surveyed 1,406 on-line students about their experiences in, satisfaction with, and perceptions of the Web-based classroom. Among the largest studies completed to date, it substantiated the correlation between, and importance of, student-to-student and instructor-to-student interaction to perceived learning effectiveness in virtual learning environments.

The ongoing communication, relationship building, and mentoring generated through participation in learning communities provide a foundation for continued cognitive development and knowledge construction (Rovai, 2002; Wegerif, 2002). Such environments facilitate both ongoing discovery and a personal relationship to learning; enable interpersonal connections; value the application of previous experience to current learning goals; and, promote democratic teaching-learning partnerships, allowing participants to develop both collective and individualized perspectives and approaches (Brookfield, 1987, 1999; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Taylor, 1995). Communities that develop in on-line instructional environments can be transformational 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.

DEFINITIONS

Preece (Garber, 2004) broadly explained "An on-line community consists of: people who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles; a shared purpose that provides a reason for the community; policies that guide people's interactions; and computer systems to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness" (section 1). Allan, Ure, and Evans (2003) extended this definition to focus on aspects of interdependence fostered by community structures, the purposes of which include to "… share knowledge and expertise, and function as an interdependent network over an extended period of time, using various technological means to communicate with one another, with the shared goal of furthering their 'practice' or doing their work better" (p. 7). Kaplan (2003) viewed reliance on technology as essential to the definition of virtual communities, in that "....All interactions begin and occur over the Internet, through conference calls, via videoconferencing, and so forth. These communities promote virtual collaboration that's focused on addressing a specific topic, and they are supported by one or more on-line learning and media tools" (section 2). Rovai (2002) identified learning community development and continuance as largely dependant upon the extent to which interpersonal conditions such as the following are met: "…mutual interdependence among members, [a] sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members" (section 4). Sergiovanni (Rovai & Jordan, 2004) believed such conditions to include relational aspects of community, noting members have a "...need for 'authentic community,' ...a tie binding learners and teachers through shared values, ideals, and goals" (section 3).

Intentionally developed virtual communities provide learning environments in which knowledge construction and theoretical application co-exist when facilitated by collaborative teaching methods. Roch-

elle (Palincsar & Herrenkohl, 2002) stressed "...the essence of collaboration is the construction of shared meanings for conversations, concepts, and experiences (p. 26). Gilbert and Driscoll (2002) discussed a constructivist approach to learning in community as "...a change in focus from individual knowledge constructed singly to public knowledge jointly constructed by students" (p. 59). Communities "...enable students to contribute to each others' learning through social construction of communal knowledge" (p. 59). Educators (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999), such as Usher, Bryant and Johnston; Brockett and Hiemstra; and Garrison expanded on constructivist models by acknowledging the importance of context to overall learning achievement. These authors suggested that learning did not happen in isolation, but, rather, was an evolving process impacted by socio-political history, relationships to people and systems, cognitive and affective development, and, opportunity/privilege, all of which are experienced differently on individual and collective levels.

Wenger and Snyder (Stein, 2002) referred to "... the idea of learning in community as a community 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). Stein (2002) observed "...'communities of practice,' or knowledge [learning] communities, have an important role in empowering participants to develop meaning systems, define learning, and, in a sense, claim a unique body of knowledge, noting "... 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). Wenger (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003) summarized, "Learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning" (p. 170).

CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Learning communities provide a natural instructional context through which to facilitate discovery and knowing by capitalizing on their characteristic strengths, that is, promoting collaboration, self-directedness and autonomous learning, and experiential and theoretical application.

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF COLLABORATION

Current literature indicated that students studying in Web-based learning environments were most successfully engaged through active involvement in opportunities for ongoing collaboration (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999; Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Fredrickson, Pelz, Shea, & Swan, 2001; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995; Kearsley, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001, 2003). Palincsar and Herrenkohl (2002) observed that the "...process of learning to engage in collaborative learning is, in many respects, a process of creating a shared social world" (p. 27). Authors Palloff and Pratt (2001) identified the importance of collaboration to learning achievement in Web-based classrooms, stating, "[Collaboration] is a process that helps students achieve deeper levels of knowledge generation through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning-making" They particularly noted the relevance of applying collaborative instructional methods in a virtual learning environment, writing "... using collaborative means...empowers students to explore their own potential as they more fully develop multiple pathways to learning" (p. 37). They emphasized a connection between collaborative pedagogy and student persistence, noting "On-line education continues, for the most part, to be text-based, which can focus on the rational. Consequently, we need to pay attention to ways [that] facilitate the other dimensions of learning or we risk losing our students" (p. 35).

SELF DIRECTEDNESS IN COMMUNITY

Acknowledging the important connection between the process of learning and the content of knowledge, Brookfield (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999) observed, ".... the most complete form of self directed learning occurs when process and reflection are