

Chapter XI

Bridging the Instructional Designers and Lecturers in Technology Education: A Framework for Cultivating a Community of Practice

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Abstract

This chapter examines an initiative to create educational technology (ET) Champions and leaders within a higher education institution in Singapore. It examines how the concept of communities of practice was applied to an initiative for transforming teaching and learning through educational technology. Instructional designers coached ET Champions in the principles of creating learning objects who later returned to their respective colleges to work with other lecturers. ET Champions progressed through five stages, which included peripheral, legitimate, core, strategic and transformational membership. Each stage required support and guidance within the community.

Introduction

How people learn and the conditions under which they learn has inspired research that has generated different theories. For instance, cognitive theories emphasize learning as an individual endeavor (Gagne & Medsker, 1996). In recent years learning has been seen as a social phenomenon that is situated in a social context. The social nature of cognition and situated perspective can be traced back to the work of Vygotsky (1978) who conceived that cognition begins at the social level and transcends to the individual level. This view is supported and further enhanced by the account of Lave and Wenger (1991) who stated that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice. Participation is at first legitimately peripheral and increases gradually in engagement and complexity until the person is a full member of the community.

Traditionally, instructional design has been described as a system of procedures for development in education and training programs in a consistent and reliable fashion. It is a complex process that is creative, active, and iterative. Instructional designers believe that the use of systematic design procedures can assist in making instruction more effective, efficient, and relevant. Instructional design also requires a team that may consist of a subject matter expert, instructional designer and other production personnel (Gustafson & Branch, 2002; Litchfield & Keller, 2002). Instructional designers may also combine their role with managing the project, which is often beneficial, but at other times confusing to other team members. Communication between the subject matter expert and instructional designers can sometimes be challenging due to a misunderstanding of roles. Ideally each team member should contribute his or her expertise to the design process to enhance the project quality.

The emphasis on communities of practice with collaboration and shared responsibilities has influenced the creation of learning organizations. The role of instructional designers has also been influenced by this trend and they are often involved in fostering a community of practice in a training organization or institution. Instructional designers may lead and manage large-scale instructional development which involves regular communication, mentoring and professional development of team members. Communities of practice may also be ideal vehicles for leveraging tacit knowledge because they enable person-to-person interaction and engage a whole group in advancing their field of practice. As a result, this interaction process may assist in dispersing insights about collaborative thinking across the entire organization (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

Community of Practice

The notion of community is not a new concept, as a natural part of human behavior consists of socializing and interacting with other people in a variety of environments and circumstances. The concept of communities of practice leverages on the sharing of the diverse experiences between people of similar interest. In addition, the advancement in information and communication technologies makes it possible for individuals to form their community and share their experiences and learn from each other (Saint-Onge & Wallace, 2003).

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