

Chapter IV

Building Virtual Learning Communities

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the concept of virtual learning communities and discusses and further enhances the theory and definitions presented in related literature. A model comprising four criteria essential to virtual learning communities is presented and discussed in detail. Theory and case studies relating to the impact of virtual learning communities on distance education and students from diverse cultural groups are also examined. In addition, this chapter investigates the enabling technologies and facilitation that is required to build virtual learning communities. Other case studies are used to illustrate the process of building virtual learning communities. Emerging technologies such as wikis and video lectures are also analysed to determine the effects they have on building and sustaining effective virtual learning communities.

Introduction

Virtual communities are created when people form groups online to share a common interest and create a social bond that is nourished with continued interaction over time (Powazek, 2002). Social virtual communities, also known as discourse communities, have existed on the Internet for many years. Communities supported by Internet discussion boards and the like are dedicated to interests as diverse as pop stars and football. All involve the sharing of knowledge, support, and common interests through ongoing social interaction online (Jonassen, Howland, Moore, & Marra, 2003; Rheingold, 1994; Wood & Smith, 2001).

Computer-supported collaborative work has been the subject of research since the 1970s when communications technology evolved to support virtual communities in the workplace (Lewis, 2002). Work-related virtual communities are also known as communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). These communities allowed their workers to share business knowledge and learn from and support one another (Jonassen et al., 2003). Employees at different offices and those working from home can also share a mutual sense of presence provided by such communities (Dourish & Bly, 1992; Schraefel, Ho, Chignell, & Milton, 2000).

The advent of the Internet has had a huge impact on teaching and learning around the world. The Internet and its associated communication media have the potential to revolutionise learning (Lewis, 2002). It is not only a powerful tool for content provision, but it also lends itself to the creation of groups of learners who can support each other in the learning process (Bruckman, 2002).

Traditionally, universities have used classroom-situated tutorials as a means of facilitating discourse among learners so they can construct a solid understanding of course materials through social interaction with their peers and instructors. Virtual learning communities can now provide a classroom online, in which students may interact with each other and their instructors. The virtual nature of the classroom means that students can join in regardless of their location. Consequently, participation in a learning community can be particularly beneficial to those who study entirely online, such as distance learners. It can help learners to overcome their feelings of isolation and enhance their learning experience through interaction with their peers (Blunt, 2001; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000; Lanham & Zhou, 2002).

The work of Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) describes a virtual learning community that used multiple technologies to connect distance learners. The distance program included some classroom-situated seminars. However, the bulk of the learning experience was conducted online. E-mail and Internet discussion boards were the prime means for communication among students and staff. Internet Relay Chat (IRC), a text-based synchronous discussion program, allowed students to partake in informal social communication known as “whispering” during real-time virtual lectures. IRC was also used by students to ask the instructor questions during the live lectures. The lectures were delivered online using PowerPoint slides accompanied by narration. Interviews conducted throughout the duration of the course showed that students who communicated actively identified themselves as members of a learning community and felt less isolated and less stressed than those who did not participate.

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