Chapter 2.3

Electronic Classroom, Electronic Community:
Designing eLearning Environments to Foster Virtual Social Networks and Student Learning

Lisa Harris
RMIT University, Australia

ABSTRACT

The capacity for online learning environments to provide good quality learning experiences for students has been the focus of speculation and debate in the higher education sector from the late 1990s to the present day. In this area, "quality" has become synonymous with engaging students in a learning community. This chapter reports on a qualitative research project designed to explore the significance of community for students studying online. Using three fundamentally different types of online learning environments as case studies, this research explored the relationship between the constructed online learning environment and the development of learning communities or what the author has termed social learning support networks (SLSN). Exploring the common themes to emerge from these three case studies, this research provides new evidence of the benefit of community for students studying online and argues that future online learning environments should be shaped by five key principles designed to foster a sense of social connection between students.

'I pay the schoolmaster, but 'tis the schoolboys that educate my son'.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)*

INTRODUCTION

Many Australian universities grapple with both interpreting and responding to student engagement data (Coates 2006) and working through the effective use of online learning environments. Creating learning communities or a sense of belonging for students has emerged in the Australian higher education literature as a key goal for those interested in improving the student experience (Coates 2005; McInnis et al 2000). At the same time, many universities are coming to terms with the failure of their investments in eLearning to generate the new revenue streams forecast in the late 1990s, (Zemsky and Massy 2004; Reynoldson and Vibert 2005). This has required them to focus on developing sustainable eLearning policies that try to reconcile the demands of professional development for staff with increasing student demands for courses that are flexibly delivered (Minshull 2004). This chapter reports on research into the significance of community for students studying online and what role the constructed online environment can play in the development of community for students. This is particularly relevant for social work and human service students studying online because much of their education is predicated on the development of good interpersonal communication skills. The use of poorly designed online learning environments for the delivery of social work and human services study programs may well hinder the development of these interpersonal communication skills.

This research is significant because it provides a new way of thinking about "community" for students by showing the importance of community and how it works in both on-campus and online learning environments. But more importantly, it provides a new way of thinking about community that shifts our understanding away from a nebulous, ill-defined idea - to a practical, student-centred idea of community defined as Social Learning Support Networks (SLSN). The research findings indicate that the constructed online environment can facilitate the development of SLSN's for courses delivered fully online if it provides students with what Burbules (2000) calls, a *place* to inhabit. While the evidence for this second finding came from students who were effectively distance learners, it is likely that the elements of the online environment that supported their development of SLSN's are also relevant for the online environment we provide for on-campus students. In this chapter I draw together the common themes from three case studies and detail the significance of this research for future developments of eLearning in higher education by providing five significant challenges to the current design of Course Management Systems (CMS).

THE THREE CASE STUDIES

This research used a multiple-case study approach to explore three different online environments. The first case used a rudimentary web page with email communication and discussion boards. The second, a purpose built Virtual Social Space operating within a Course Management System (WebCT). The third, a text based virtual campus operating in a MOO environment (Multi user dimensions-Object-Oriented).

The first case study took a group of undergraduate social science students who were studying a single course online as part of a three-year on-campus program offered by the School of Social Science and Planning, RMIT University Melbourne, Australia. The online environment in which these students were studying was primitive using only a web page and email, and provided little or no opportunity for the participating students to develop a sense of connection with each other. Students' interactions were teacher driven and focused on course content and assessment activities. The students interviewed in this case were asked to explore their experiences of developing connections with other students both on

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