Chapter 26

Participatory and Appreciative Adult Learning and Reflection in Virtual Environments:
Towards the Development of an Appreciative Stewardship

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ABSTRACT

Information Communication Technology, largely thanks to the development of web 2.0 resources, has encouraged the development of participatory learning processes beyond the logic of the individual learning/learners. Moreover, it has allowed the transition from a learning approach based on the development of individual capacity of critical reflection on experiences to an appreciative approach of learning, based on value creation, creativity, innovation, and based on the valorization of the positive aspects of individual and collective experiences. These aspects will be approached with regard to the contribution offered by PAAR's (participatory and appreciative action and reflection) theoretical and methodological perspectives and to the most recent contributions coming from learning in virtual environments. Eventually, we will suggest a facilitating model of learning partnership development in online environments.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout a day's time, an average adult person logins and logouts of websites a number of times which undoubtedly varies according to age, genre, geographical area where he/she lives, revenues. When we talk about learning in virtual environ-ments we are referring to a specific segment of the population: on average, people who are young, wealthy and living in most developed areas in the world. Given that this relativates the follow-ing topics into a specific population area, while still keeping an overall interest, we must ponder upon the customary action of getting into and out of virtual environments: does anything happen

in between these actions and is it by any chance related to participation and learning? What pushes professionals to take part in virtual environments? Which features do virtual environments have for producing relevant learning experiences?

There are four features linking either individuals and communities to virtual environments which are: fun, need, sharing, learning. These simple features give way to a complex system of interactions where different actors play fundamental roles such as: individuals, communities, technologies, expectation systems. The fact that the system involves adult people, participating to and interacting with other complex systems at the same time, makes things get much more complicated.

When we refer to learning in virtual environments, as we are doing in this chapter, we are suggesting a very strong thesis: learning together without being together physically (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009). Learning online means learning along with other people that sometimes we know and sometimes we don't. It could be through synchronous or asynchronous course formats but it also means using technology as a means for learning. In this case, technology and virtual environments become key actors in the learning process.

There are some aspects to consider in the learning process in virtual environments:

- *Learning in virtual environments*. How do users learn browsing among different virtual environments?
- *Learning to participate*. What does participation in virtual environments mean? What are the relationships between participation and learning in virtual environments?
- *Learning together through the use of technologies*. What kind of relationship is there between technology and participants? How does technology enable individuals and communities and vice-versa?

In this chapter we will address these questions and make reference to *participatory and appreciative learning* principles (Ghaye, 2008). To accomplish this goal we will consider three metaphors: the journey metaphor, the participation metaphor and the metaphor of community. We will also identify features of learning together and participating to virtual environments. Finally we will consider a participatory and appreciative approach to facilitating learning, action and reflection in virtual environments.

BACKGROUND

Learning in Virtual Environments: Nomadism and parkour

The Journey Metaphor

The first element to consider is linked to the social body pulverization and to what Maffesoli (1994) refers to as values transmutation: nowadays there are new subjects of a polimorphical societality where reason ideals have been replaced by feelings and emotions, while logics of identity has been replaced by logics of affection. It is time of networks, of small groups, of tribes: in this way online virtual communities can be defined as emotional communities, born and existing on sharing images, styles, personal forms (Maffesoli, 2000). Also time is experienced in a different way, socially and individually. The main value is in sharing the experience. The same relational logics has already started to gain the market, known and used as characterizing itself by viral marketing, that aims to generate and strengthen the feeling of being a community among users-consumers by means of products and strategies studied in order to cluster a community and support its own development, self-recognition, self-alimentation (Cova, Giordano, & Pallera, 2008).

Michel de Certeau (2001) describes the city as a concept generated by strategic interactions

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