

Online Collaborative Learning and Learning Styles

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INTRODUCTION

The need for the development of an online learning community for professional development and support for new and experienced educators is growing due to the significant turnover of teachers within the first five years (National Center for Teaching and America's Future, 2003). This trend is also present in other countries: England has a turnover rate of teachers at 18% in the first three years (Hayes, 2004), and Australia, especially in the New South Wales area, has a rate of between 20% and 50% within the first three to five years (Manuel, 2003). This challenge would be best met through the online collaborative learning model allowing for the development of outside resources without the excessive cost of the educator's most valuable commodity: time. This process is especially valuable for the utilization of comparative education issues between cooperating countries as it will lend itself to the collegiality of educators across countries and cultures.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The problem that exists for the development and management of the online collaborative learning community is the ability to address the varied needs of its members and their individual learning styles. The development of collaborative learning comes initially from the basic idea that "two or more [learners] working together may learn more than individual [learners] working alone" (Bruffee, 1995, paragraph 1). Bruffee found that the concept of collaborative learning was originally developed in order to educate diverse populations. Those involved tend to have differing ideas about the relationship of knowledge to those who are learning and those who are presenting. The first challenge that occurs, however, is that wherever two or three are gathered

together, there will be differences of opinion. What they hope to accomplish and how they are planning to complete the goal are varied according to what each individual brings to the table. Bruffee found in his research that if we are to collaborate as teams, then each of us must be willing to give up the things that have made us individual learners to start with. We have to rethink how we get what we want, how we do what we want with what we have, and be willing to share the experience with others in hope that the process will be an enriching one. This does not imply, however, that the individual cannot learn in their own preferred learning style.

Development of learning communities or teams as they are often now called is a result of the concept of collaborative learning. These teams enable the participants to reexamine their beliefs and values in light of increased understanding of the world around them. Bruffee (1995) explains that the construction and maintenance of knowledge comes not through one's individual view of the world, but rather through their interactions with others in their associated learning communities in both formal and informal settings. The development of the knowledge itself requires that we utilize language and in turn build our base of knowledge out of the language with which we are enculturated. That knowledge, oftentimes naively believed to be universally understood and accepted, is in fact a part of local culture and beliefs, and is ever changing as a result of exposure to outside influences. Cross (1998) states that the construction of knowledge and the repeated process of reconstructing it is how we develop our level of understanding. It is how we create these structures within our minds that help us to interpret our surroundings.

The development of knowledge by collaborative learning communities is known as social construction. This theory derives its focus from the idea that knowledge is not something that is traditionally passed

from instructor to learner, but rather something that is constructed collaboratively by all participants involved in the learning process. Cross (1981) says that these collaborative experiences create in the learner the belief that the instructor and fellow students are working with them in achieving the overall goals of the learning process or course work. Cross also found that allowing ample time for the learner to master relevant tasks makes the possible barrier of prior unsuccessful experiences in learning less threatening. Just the idea that one will have to sit through another long day or several weeks of classroom study in order to achieve their desired objectives can put a damper on the perceptions of those who are potential participants in this process. It is especially important in the collaborative process to develop the learning team into the type of group that benefits from each other's expertise and has an expanded common sense of purpose.

Cross (1981) cites that it is vitally important that program design for adult learners who have prior unsuccessful experiences in learning be nonaggressive and soothing. The learning tasks themselves should be distinct, and when feedback is given, it should be adequately reinforced so that the learner may make successful improvements on the tasks expected. The demonstration of success by those individuals who have experienced failures in past educational pursuits helps to establish positive personality traits for future endeavors.

One study promoted by Thiele (2002) found that the majority of its participants felt that the involvement in online learning had resulted in their becoming more self-sufficient and conscientious about their own learning processes. Participation in online learning helps the participant to reduce their own limitations and to emulate the strengths of other online community members in raising their level of experience in dealing with problems.

Three factors affect the ability of the individual to learn effectively: learning style, learning preference, and learning environment. Learning style is the individual's mode of interpreting through their senses the information that is to be acquired. Learning preference is then dictated by the means by which those sensory applications are involved. The learning environment invokes the setting in which both learning style and preference can be most effectively met. Online learning is an ever increasing

mode of instruction that meets a variety of needs for the learner. Cohen (2001) found that learners are better able to retain the information presented when their preference for learning style is accentuated by the instructor.

In order to be an effective instructor, one must try to understand the learner's motivations and respond to them accordingly. Robert Lewellyn (2002) highlights four career concepts, which he calls linear, expert, spiral, and roamer. In 1990, Don Lowery (1990) established an adaptation of David Keirsey's work on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which he called *True Colors*, which relates learning styles to dramatically based colors: blue, gold, green, and orange.

To make learning effective, an understanding of how these motivations factor in is most important. Sometimes, however, these motivations are not even consciously known to the individual themselves. The first of the career concepts is the linear, and this person is motivated by the desire to climb the corporate ladder. This individual's interest is in learning those things that can make him or her more prepared to take on ever rising position of authority and power. He or she is especially interested in any and all leadership training opportunities and will be more motivated to participate in online collaborative learning if their perception is that it will benefit them as a potential administrator. This individual relates to the gold and green types of true colors in that they are structure oriented with analytical influences.

The expert is motivated by the concept that he or she is the best among their peers. They have been influenced by the work ethic since childhood that stated, "grow up to be good at something" (Lewellyn, 2002, paragraph 5). Experts seek expertise and security, and relate to gold in this approach. This individual is looking for training that deepens their expertise or broadens their perspectives. They must be assisted in understanding that the market may not always value their expertise in such events, and they may need to find new areas of expertise to develop, in which case they will value the collaborative setting for the variety of skills presented. Experts are extremely structure oriented and value continuity over innovation.

The next career concept is known as the spiral because people in this category find success in moving from one position to a related but often

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