

The Pedagogy of Social Development in Online Learning

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INTRODUCTION

Optimal learning outcomes, whether in face-to-face or online settings, are inextricably intertwined with the establishment of social networks among participants engaged in a collaborative enterprise. Students who feel socially connected to other students and faculty are more likely to persist in coursework and report higher levels of learning than those who report being less connected (McDonald, 2002; Rovai, 2002; Tinto, 1987; Wegerif, 1998).

But in the online setting, creating and maintaining a learning community is somewhat more challenging than in the face-to-face setting. For despite advances in audio and video streaming technologies, online learning remains primarily a largely textual and asynchronous environment. The challenge in this setting might be stated as follows: “How do we adapt a series of threaded texts to make them build a socially interactive, diverse network of learners who experience a positive sense of community?”

There are numerous pedagogical strategies that may be used to build highly interactive and socially rich educational environments. In this article, the researchers propose a model of “communal scaffolding,” which serves as a framework for a variety of online and off-line activities that can positively enhance the social dynamics on online courses toward the goal of increased cognitive and affective learning.

THE COMMUNAL SCAFFOLD

The scaffolding concept was first used in education to explain how knowledge is transferred from cognitive to practical applications (Greenfield, 1984; Harley, 1993). Within many educational frameworks,

scaffolding is used by an instructor to provide a contextual ladder for learners to progress from their current state of knowledge to the desired outcomes of the course. In our case, *communal* scaffolding refers to a contextual ladder of another kind—one that allows learners to bridge the gap between the task and interpersonal requirements of learning in an effort to maximize cognitive and affective outcomes.

The idea of the communal scaffold as it applies to online learning is built upon several key assumptions. The first assumption is that the “distance” in distance education is pedagogical and social, not geographical. This is a foundational postulate of the transactional distance theory that was developed for distance education (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The second assumption is that the process of communication is at the center of any learning experience, whether face-to-face or online. Finally, communal scaffolding recognizes that successful online learning must structure safety, collaboration, and connection with the larger physical and social contexts of interactions among participants in the learning enterprise if it is to be successful. In other words, even in the online environment, a successful learning experience includes both online and off-line interactions.

Kearsley and Schneiderman’s (1998) engagement theory embraces these three presuppositions in an attempt to integrate online and external/contextual (off-line) interactions into a single pedagogical construct. Engagement theory embraces the presupposition that learning at a distance, whether video, audio, or Web based, is at once both an online and off-line social and cognitive enterprise. The theory suggests that to be effective, online learning, given the nature of the medium, must actively engage learners in meaningful tasks at multiple (micro and macro) levels. According to Kearsley and Schneiderman, three main characteristics should

guide online learning: collaboration, problem-based learning, and authenticity. *Collaboration* emphasizes student, teacher, and computer immediacy, and occurs through any number of online and off-line asynchronous or synchronous means among students, teachers, and subject matter experts. *Problem solving* pushes students away from standardized testing to more active assignments or projects. *Authenticity*, which is specifically relevant to social dynamics, speaks to an environment or setting in which learners feel free to express themselves and share with one another. Authenticity must be present before collaboration and problem solving can occur. Each of these characteristics are accounted for in the communal scaffold.

Figure 1 graphically depicts how the communal scaffold facilitates the use of online and off-line community-building activities (CBAs) toward a high degree of interactivity and interconnectedness among online learners (with one another and with their instructors), which in turn provides a relationally

supportive environment to promote effective online education. The diagram demonstrates that connect- edness is the epicenter, or cohering point, for a successful online instructional endeavor. Scaffolding provides support for the learning endeavor, which adds an element of safety to the project and provides a place for the “workers” to stand. When students, in turn, feel the sense of intimacy, belonging, and safety that the scaffolding provides, there are more opportunities for collaboration and other activities where knowledge may be constructed. Possible sources of immediacy in this setting include interaction between instructors and learners, as well as among the learners themselves. In each instance, learning may be motivated through social incentives, such as expressions of interest in the student or approval for good behavior. As such, social networking within the scaffold encourages and reinforces cognitive development (knowledge construction) in the context of social connection and facilitation, much in the way that LaRose and Whitten’s

Figure 1. The web of communal scaffolding



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