Chapter 42
Building Collaborative Virtual Communities in a University Department of Early Childhood Education for Wikipedia Article Authoring

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ABSTRACT

Collaborative and student-centered learning are endorsed by modern educational approaches and (to a certain degree) are applied to educational environments. Early childhood education puts emphasis on such issues. Wiki environments provide the infrastructure for supporting collaborative learning and student-centered learning tasks. Consequently, wiki activities are gradually becoming part of teacher education curriculum. This chapter discusses issues regarding the incorporation of wikis in teacher education curriculum. The most recent corresponding approaches are categorized according to different views, and the most important findings are discussed. An approach aiming to create collaborative virtual communities for Wikipedia article authoring is also presented. The approach has been applied to a university department of early childhood education. To support communication among participants, face-to-face, e-mail communication, and tools encompassed in an open source Learning Management System were employed. Preliminary results are presented showing a positive response of the pre-service early childhood teachers. Lastly, conclusions and future research directions are outlined.

INTRODUCTION

Learners in all levels of education quite often learn by collaborating with each other and with their tutors (Johnson and Johnson, 1998; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, Mcdermott and Snyder, 2002; Vygotsky, 1978; Rekalidou and Penderi, 2010). In education, collaboration is considered vital in several tasks such as

problem solving and product creation. Learning activities based on Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) frequently involve collaboration in small or large groups of learners and tutors.

The creation of virtual collaborative communities in higher education could play an important role in the enhancement of learning activities and communication. This is especially the case in University Departments of Early Childhood Education. Early childhood education involves both teacher-centered and student-centered activities giving emphasis to collaboration, constructivism and interdisciplinary tasks (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 2012; Casper and Theilheimer, 2009). Pre-service teachers are acquainted with collaborative activities throughout their studies. Different types of ICT resources may also be employed for this purpose. On the one hand, pre-service teachers may work in groups to create educational software and other IT products concerning education. Tools are available to specifically facilitate collaborative creation. On the other hand, pre-service teachers (as all or most higher education students) become members of a blended learning community by employing corresponding ICT tools enabling asynchronous and synchronous anytime and anyplace learning activities. Web-based environments are frequently used to support blended learning and collaboration in higher education settings.

As knowledge in all fields of study constantly evolves (e.g., teaching methods and educational technology), it is very likely that university students after graduation will become members of lifelong learning communities by exploiting Web-based resources. However, in contrast to other university students, pre-service teachers also need to be prepared in using collaboration tools as in-service teachers. In-service early childhood teachers may use customized Web-based environments to provide a learning and collaboration environment to their students and parents. Furthermore, they could exploit Web-based tools to collaborate with colleagues, university instructors and student parents through communication, opinion exchange, commenting, file sharing and content creation.

Collaborative content creation activities are gradually becoming popular in education. Wiki environments constitute typical representatives of collaborative content creation functionalities. A wiki is a web site that may be edited by anyone who has been given access. Wiki activities have become part of teacher education curriculum the last years as they encompass a number of characteristics desired in higher education settings. Pre-service and in-service teachers learn to asynchronously collaborate and publish their work online. Based on the wiki environment used, the created content becomes available to peers or even to a worldwide audience. Besides collaboration, content understanding, information filtering and critical thinking are also promoted. Knowledge acquisition is also enhanced. The students' course examination results may be improved by preparing content closely relevant to course curriculum. In-service teachers enrich their knowledge to the benefit of their students. In addition, modern society is based on knowledge sharing and open resources. The role of teachers is to provide knowledge to their students and to other members of the society.

Various wiki environments are available but it seems that Wikipedia is the most well-known of them. Wikipedia articles constitute examples of Web-based content that may be edited by communities of contributors. Wikipedia articles cover a broad scope of subjects in several languages. The number of available articles is constantly increasing due to the community-based content creation making Wikipedia the largest encyclopedia in the world. Wikipedia is globally among the five most popular Web sites since its articles provide useful information to anyone interested. The collaborative tasks of Wikipedia article authoring and editing may play an important role in higher education as they provide a forum to pre-service and in-service teachers in order to promote knowledge sharing and education.

This chapter presents an initial approach aiming to create collaborative virtual communities in a University Department of Early Childhood Education. The main purpose of these virtual communities

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