

Learning Community and Networked Learning Community

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INTRODUCTION

A community is socially organized around relationships as a result of seeking a common ground that builds upon “community by kinship, of mind, of place, and of memory” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xvi). Participating in the activities of others and contributing to cooperative doings may reveal identity construction in the social process of forging a community. Such a community-building process is further reinforced by its members’ increased belonging and shared identity, values, norms, communication, and supporting behavior.

However, along with the rapid postmodern technological developments, the notion of community has changed as current community involves “virtual as well as actual, global as well as local” (Palloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 25). As a result, a relationship-focused rather than place-based community has expanded the parameters of community concept, as is the case with networked-learning community. Seen in this light, this article examines the notions of community, of learning community, and of networked-learning community that is related to technological developments. A discussion of trends, issues, and strategies that can be used to foresee, solve, and maximize learning outcomes in the networked online learning environments will also be addressed.

COMMUNITY

The notion of community conveys multiple meanings, including those of locality, social activity, social structure, and sentiment (Clark, 1973). According to Clark, (1) locality suggests space, place, or the geographical location of the community; (2) social activity implies agency and relationship with a purpose of engaging in a

shared social movement or response; (3) social structure indicates social cohesion, social participation, social control, or mutual support; and (4) sentiment conveys a sense of solidarity and a sense of significance, or signifies identity, understanding, friendship, and togetherness. Of all these meanings, the essential role of the individual within the group in the community-building process cannot be ignored because the community is often seen as “a social enterprise in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute and to which all feel a responsibility” (Dewey, 1959, p. 61).

In view of that, community may turn into a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people become involved in common practices, grow to be mutually dependent, make shared decisions, feel for synergy, and make an enduring commitment to the well-being of their own, one another, and the entire group (Shaffer & Anundsen, 1993). Evolving toward wholeness, the community engages in the sharing of goals, values, expectations, and mutual needs, and involves the nurturing of group identity, belonging, connectedness, support, trust, mutual interactions, and shared engagement. In such an evolving process, “an organic body of personal relations and responses, a living and evolving community of creativity and compassion” (Palmer, 1993, p. 14) is forged.

Applying the notion of community into school settings, the fundamental educational beliefs, structures, practices, and behaviors may require rethinking, thus reorganizing them into actions that are both pedagogical and educative. Highlighting the need for a recovery of community, Palmer (1993) claimed that the community as “a foundation stone of the educational enterprise” (p. xviii) is vital to the understanding of “the nature of reality (ontology), how we know reality (epistemology), how we teach and learn (pedagogy), and how education forms or deforms our lives in the world

(ethics)” (ibid., p. xiii). These four issues, in his view, are fundamental to the life of the mind because the chance to revise education as a communal enterprise may give rise to a deeply ethical education that would help students develop the capacity for connection with ethical life.

LEARNING COMMUNITY

Origin and Concept

From a historical perspective, traces of learning community are evident in the works of John Dewey (1915) and Alexander Meiklejohn (1932). To minimize the effect of enormous specialization, isolation, or fragmentation of the curriculum structure across disciplines on America’s colleges and universities during the 1920s and 1930s, Dewey advocated learning as an active, student-centered, and shared inquiry that focused more upon the teaching and learning processes and anticipated to “make each one of our schools an embryonic community life, active with types of occupations that reflect the life of the larger society and permeated throughout with the spirit of art, history, and science” (1915, p. 27). Such an idealized pursuit was concretized in the pioneering Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin—Madison in 1927 with intent to form “a closely-knit intellectual community” (Meiklejohn, 1932, p. 215) between advisers and students. Hence, “education becomes what it ought to be—not a set of imposed, demanded, external tasks, but a form of human living and association, the natural and inevitable growth of a healthy organization in a congenial environment” (Meiklejohn, 1932, pp. 227-228). As a result, the learning community or “a generic term for a variety of curricular interventions” (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 1), came into being to “counteract the isolating tendencies of education and the curricular dis-integration that results when knowledge is compartmentalized into competing disciplines and isolated courses” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 90).

A review of literature finds that learning communities have been formed with diverse foci such as student/faculty learning communities (Cox, 2004), e-learning communities, blended learning communities (Kaplan, 2002), and online collaborative learning communities (Alavi, 1994). Although different terms are used to indicate the concepts of learning community, one thing is definite in that the learning community may “form

the hearts and minds of learners, shaping their sense of self and their relation to the world” (Palmer, 1993, p. 20) and “stand on the common ground of learning as development, the value of building connections, and the power of shared inquiry” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, p. 17).

In reality, the shaping of such an empowering learning community takes time. The participatory, collaborative, active, and interdisciplinary nature of learning community can be seen as an approach to curriculum design that requires instructors and students to make joint efforts to coordinate proper courses into different programs of instruction, to implement the coordinated courses, and to evaluate the designed course content and learning objectives. Stated in a specific way, learning community is the purposeful restructuring of the curriculum that links together courses or course work in a way that learners may find greater coherence in their learning process as well as increased intellectual interaction with instructors and peers (Gabelnick et al., 1990). Moreover, in an effort to “reverse the alienating effect of traditional authoritarian education” (Fox, 2002, p. 80), the learning community may also “enable faculty to find different ways of thinking about what promotes effective educational reform, excellence in teaching and learning, and collegiality” (Gabelnick et al., 1990, pp. 85-86). Taken as a whole, learning community is an educational philosophy and/or practice that “requires a sharing of responsibility for learning methods, the curriculum followed, and assessment procedures adopted” (Fox, 2002, p. 80).

Learning Community Curricular Models

Significant variations exist in different institutional settings. Gabelnick et al. (1990) summarized five major types of learning community curricular models to “represent attempts to reorganize and redirect students’ academic experience for greater intellectual and social coherence and involvement” (1990, p. 19). These models include:

1. **Linked Courses Model:** Students register for two courses which are linked together. The instructors of the two courses coordinate syllabi but teach individually.
2. **Learning Clusters Model:** This model links three or four courses in a given quarter, semester, or year. The courses are scheduled and listed so

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