

Chapter XXXI

Online Learning Communities: Enhancing Learning in the K–12 Setting

Chris Brook

Edith Cowan University, Australia

Ron Oliver

Edith Cowan University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This chapter reports a design framework intended to support and guide teachers in advancing K-12 literacy through principles of collaborative learning and the development of online learning communities. The study was guided by an investigation of contemporary literature focused on the community construct, online learning community development, the collaborative construction of knowledge, and the practices of experienced professionals working in the field. The intended outcome is a design framework that may be useful in guiding instructors in the advancement of K-12 literacy skills through the development of online learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

A report issued by Alberta Learning claimed that “Current technological advances are making it possible to offer online learning programs that are equal to or even superior to regular classroom instruction” (Alberta, 1999). Such programs may be seen to meet the needs of:

- Students preferring to work independently.
- Parents disagreeing with the social values taught in public schools.
- Students who need to study outside the regular school hours.
- Students who experience health challenges which restrict their access to regular schools.

- Schools unable to offer a full program of study. (p. 3)

While the potential benefits that online technologies afford K-12 education were highlighted, the report acknowledged that online technologies are not a panacea. It was suggested that care is needed in the design of learning activities to account for both the social and cognitive impact of technologies, if the full potential of online technologies to support learning is to be achieved (Alberta, 1999, p. 16).

Much has been learned in higher education settings since the time that Alberta Learning first published the report, reflecting both social and cognitive considerations in approaches to online learning that may be beneficial to the advancement of literacy in the K-12 setting.

Currently, there is growing support for the supposition that the social phenomenon of community may be put to good use in the support of online learning (Bonk & Wisner, 2000; Hiltz, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002). This suggestion is well supported by theories of learning that highlight the role of social interaction in the construction of knowledge (Bruner, 2001; Dewey, 1929; Kafai & Resnick, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) and those that propose that knowledge is constructed within the social milieu (Cunningham, 1996). Further support may be found in contemporary literature that reports the benefits of collaborative learning settings spanning the academic, social, and psychological domain (Panitz, 1997). It has been suggested that collaborative learning settings promote increased motivation (Slavin, 1990), learning achievement (Johnson, 1991; Maxwell, 1998), and perception of skill development including satisfaction (Benbunan-Fich, 1997). Additionally, social factors such as a sense of connectedness have been shown to influence student success and satisfaction in online learning (Barab, Thomas, & Merrill, 2001).

Some researchers believe the development of learning communities should be a primary goal of online instructors (Hiltz, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). However, there is little empirical evidence to guide instructors in the development process (Bonk & Wisner, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Paulsen, 1995). Currently, design principles tend to be process oriented (Brook & Oliver, 2003) and based on anecdotal evidence gleaned from the experience of professionals working in the field with a notable absence of empirical studies (Bonk & Wisner, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999).

This chapter describes an investigation of the development of online learning communities. It proposes to establish a common understanding of the term *community* and identify the chain of events that lead to community development and the collaborative construction of knowledge, proposing a model that describes this sequence. Guidance was taken from contemporary literature, the practices of experienced professionals working in the field, and the experiences of students.

Although much of the research referred to was conducted in higher education programs, it provides a strong foundation for the K-12 setting.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY

While the use of the term *community* is becoming increasingly common in education circles, it is important to acknowledge that a definitive definition of the term remains elusive (Puddifoot, 1996) with numerous definitions identified (Hillery, 1964). Due to the many disciplines that study the social phenomenon of community, presenting a range of understandings, the identification of a single definition is unlikely (Goth, 1992).

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