

Chapter XLVII

Course Assessment in a Teacher's Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

How can we assess the effectiveness of a course that is implemented in the context of a technology based Learning Community (LC)? What are the features of successful courses? Under what circumstances is a LC created within courses? Such questions were explored during an educational program for in-service K-12 teachers concerning the use of ICT in their teaching practices. During the implementation of the program, a research study took place. Assessment issues were dealt with and one course was proven the most “successful”, according to specified criteria. In this chapter, features of this course are presented in detail. We studied the role of e-moderation and how different means of communication were used during the course implementation. During our analysis, we deduced that a key factor for the success of the course was the creation and evolution of a LC. Finally, conclusions, benefits and perspectives of issues presented are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

During the last few decades, a paradigm shift from teacher directed instruction to learner managed learning, from subject-centered design to learning-centered design, and from individualistic learning to learning within a social context has occurred in the research area of learning theories.

Most importantly, there is a shift from a vision of students as more or less passive learners to students as apprentice knowledge workers (Land & Hannafin, 2000). Learning theories with a social dimension, such as Vygotsky's ‘*Social Development Theory*’ (1962), are now influencing nearly all learning theories, modern as well as traditional ones. In fact, most modern learning theories have

a 'Socio-Constructivist' nature (Wertsch, 1979). Despite their 'Constructivist' core, they have been greatly influenced by the aforementioned social-oriented learning theories.

Recent theories derived from the socio-constructivism paradigm, such as 'Situated Learning' theory (Lave & Wenger, 1990), 'Activity Theory' (Leont'ev, 1974), and 'Distributed Cognition' theory (Hutchins, 1991) have provided a theoretical backbone for the creation of *Learning Communities* (LC) and have greatly influenced their requirements and implementation. According to Barab, Schatz and Scheckler (2004), an online community can be defined as 'a persistent, sustained social network of individuals who share and develop an overlapping knowledge base, set of beliefs, values, history and experiences focused on a common practice and/or mutual enterprise'. According to Rovai (2001), participation in a community generates a substantial increase in useful information access, by the use of the 'community's knowledge base' and mutual support, commitment and, mostly, cooperation among the participants. The process of creating a community is regarded as bearing mutual commitment, rules that determine the way participants interact, reliability, negotiation, understanding and knowledge acquisition through the creation of practices within the community (Wenger, 1998). Especially *Communities of Practice* (CoP) are considered (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), as potentially useful environments for both students and instructors. According to Johnson and Johnson (1987), a student's participation in a LC can develop students' abilities to learn on their own, beyond the limits of the educational environment.

According to these theories, e-learning can be accomplished through numerous online collaboration activities, given the appropriate educational resources and communication services. In e-learning, the course content can be dynamically and radically changed according to the students' needs and the progress of the activities assigned, thus facilitating the process of learning. So and

Kim (2005) believe that there seems to be a certain lack of instructional guidelines specifically developed for collaborative learning. In cases that are designed for formal technology supported courses, usually no rules or any special guidelines are followed. On the other hand, in cases where LCs are implemented, there may be positive learning results derived from the collaborative context and the interaction of the community members, yet learning is informal and usually without predefined goals.

Most educational programs implemented with the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) come from the academia (Salmon & Jones, 2004; Vlachopoulos & McAleese, 2004, etc.), a few are from the circles of primary and secondary education (Nurmela, Palonen, Lehtinen & Hakkarainen, 2003; Vonderwell, 2003, etc.), and even fewer concern further education for in-service teachers (Nilsen & Almas, 2003; Wu, Larsen & Andersson, 2003, etc.).

Some traditionally designed programs implement formal courses in a manner similar to educational programs conducted face to face (Nilsen & Almas, 2003). Other cases are designed so as to host or create learning communities via collaborative environments, usually called CoP, within which learning can be accomplished (such as Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Finally, only few cases have suggested formal course implementation within a framework of development and maintenance of an online community of learners (Vonderwell, 2003).

The aforementioned implementations and research do not give clear answers to a number of basic questions, such as:

How can we design course programs in the context of a K-12 teachers' learning community?

Is it possible to conceive a concrete and appropriate course model? And if so, how can we assess the effectiveness of a course that is implemented in such a complex learning situation?

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