

Chapter 9

The DEHub Virtual Learning Space: A Niche Social Network Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

Our concept of ‘virtual learning spaces’ is changing, as are the practices that are adopted within these spaces. To understand these changes, this chapter will provide an exploration of the conceptualisation and creation of an interactive, online, social network community of practice. The case that will be used is based around the Distance Education Hub (DEHub) which is both virtual and physical. DEHub is in the simultaneous process of constructing and facilitating a virtual space to support and encourage both knowledge dissemination and knowledge creation. The DEHub space focuses on learning as a co-operative, constructive, and dynamic process involving engaged communities of scholars, learners and practitioners. It will tackle the question of why this virtual learning space is defined as a niche social network and how this impacts on the conceptualisation and consequent development of virtual spaces — in this instance, co-development by the community. Finally, it will demonstrate through this analysis how changing concepts of ‘virtual learning spaces’ are put into practice through ‘virtual space’ design and development for creating and supporting niche social networks.

INTRODUCTION

Annette Lorensten (in Bernath et al., 2009) briefly noted, “the two most promising new learning contexts to replace the traditional classroom setting seem to be virtual learning spaces and

situated learning in learning communities where learning and work are combined and intertwined” (p.60). This chapter focuses specifically upon our understanding of ‘virtual learning spaces’ and the practices adopted within these spaces through an exploration of the conceptualisation and creation

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of an interactive, social network, research community of practice. The case that will be used is based around the Distance Education Hub (DEHub) which is both virtual and physical. Through an exploration of the structure and purpose of the DEHub space (DEHub, 2010), this chapter will uncover issues surrounding 'engagement' and the 'relevance' of virtual spaces situated against the theoretical knowledge base around communities of practice and the co-generation of knowledge. Through an analysis of the DEHub space this chapter will uncover contemporary practices surrounding the design and development of online spaces. It will reveal considerations that take place in facilitating the creation and ongoing support of a sense of 'value' amongst participating community members and provide insight into the decisions that are made to ensure practical application of such spaces. The work presented here does not aim, nor is there space, to address in detail criticisms of virtual spaces in the contexts of the use of personal learning tools such as blogs, wikis or repositories and no doubt others in this book have done so. Nor is a full exploration of the substantive literature around repositories presented. Rather the case presented here uses that work as the starting point and attempts to locate the development of the DEHub 'virtual' social niche network from the view of relevance and purpose.

Background

One of DEHub's primary starting goals was to establish a central agency for the provision of best practices in distance education for the Australian higher education sector. There was a need to bring practitioners together to reduce overlap and duplication, identify common goals/objectives, work together cooperatively and collaboratively to aggregate research and address these issues, and then disseminate their findings to a national and international audience who may be able to draw lessons and implement practical changes relevant to their environment. The delivery of

these findings, originally conceived along the lines of a 'clearinghouse' model, was later developed to a vision whereby visitors would personally contribute their experiences, theories, and arguments and thus contribute to the development of knowledge through a virtual community. The term 'virtual learning space' is hereafter used to distinguish the broad, multi-faceted design of the DEHub space apart from 'virtual learning environments', or VLEs. VLEs are often fixed systems with finite boundaries and structures, whereas the DEHub space incorporates a range of different environments within a borderless, highly dynamic and undefined 'space', as explained in more detail further below.

The innovative design of the DEHub space sought to address some of the primary concerns surrounding pedagogical practice in distance education environments, in particular, skill development surrounding technological innovation, workloads in e-learning spaces, and the construction of online communities ('of practice' and 'of learning'). Today's rapidly changing educational environments, and the knowledge and skills needed to maintain these environments, have been well documented by the pedagogical literature. Teghe and Knight (2004, p. 152) argued that institutions must remain up to date with technological advances if they are to remain competitive. In addition, there is also pressure to provide students, whatever their course of study, with the additional skills needed for employment (Leitch, 2006, pp. 3-4). More recently Tynan, Lee and Barnes (2008) suggested that, on an individual level, instructors must maintain an advanced level of knowledge and be "on the new wave" if they are to meet the new challenges (p. 3560). There are ample examples in the literature which describe professional development approaches but as Collom, Dallas, Jong and Obexer (2002) observed in their analysis of existing practice, most development was reactive, non-flexible, piecemeal and poorly targeted academic development programmes which were constrained by the client base with competing

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