Chapter 6.10
Virtual Organizing Professional Learning Communities through a Servant–Leader Model of Appreciative Coaching

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ABSTRACT

This case investigates a set of empowerment concerns in the context of transforming classes of student and teacher learners (considered as department-wide learning units in higher education) into professional learning communities (PLCs). In particular, we are interested in enhancing student learning through designing a collaborative learning environment in support of problem-based learning, based on the concept of virtual organizing the various PLCs distributed throughout a higher educational institute. Of specific interest in our exploration is the generative potential of a servant-leader model of student-centered education in support of the PLCs nurtured by the development practice of appreciative coaching adapted from the established positive change paradigm of appreciative inquiry.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The department of computer and information science (CIS), as a constituent unit of education under the Faculty of Science and Technology at the author's affiliated university, is installed to offer degree programs in both the undergraduate and graduate levels in software engineering. The department has a current population of about 150 undergraduates and 30 graduate students (mostly part-time). It has to coordinate per academic year, the enactment of about 20 graduate and 40 undergraduate courses. There are currently five laboratories installed for the information technology (IT) education of our students: software engineering laboratory, e-commerce technology laboratory, distributed systems laboratory, computer graphics and multimedia laboratory, and the motion capture laboratory. Besides, there are over two hundred PC's distributed on campus, to

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offer 24-hour computer service to our students, including Internet access. To help manage course delivery, the university also provides course management systems, such as WebCT (since 1998) and MOODLE (since 2008) to teaching staff for their course enactment. Currently, the means of education delivery in our department has largely been didactic; yet, we are quite willing to blend the best of our old values of good teaching through the instructivist approach with the modern-day constructivist way of thinking such as problem-based learning (PBL) (Amador, Miles, & Peters, 2006).We are also interested in the continuing efforts to extend our curriculum and instructional practice over the Internet, through some continually renewed electronic (mostly Web-based) course support, both for the teaching staff and for the students.

SETTING THE STAGE

The following case description recounts the action research experience of some bottom-up course-support initiative sustained by individual staff members from the Department of CIS over the years in reshaping our undergraduate learning landscape through the integration of some ICT-enabled (information and communication technologies) environments to enhance student learning. In particular, this report is based on the experience acquired through the experimentation of a Web-enabled course support environment called REAL (Rich Environment for Active Learning) initiated in 1999, and reactivated in 2008 with a renewed title as REALSpace (Vat, 2009b) to nurture an emergent interest of professional learning community (PLC) (Dufour & Eaker, 1998) to be properly described as follows. It is our lessons learned that if student learning is to improve, staff should be well informed of the PLC potential and develop the capacity to function as PLC. If students are to benefit from the PLC, they must develop a collaborative culture. If students are to develop a collaborative culture, we must overcome the tradition of teacher-centered education (teacher as sage on the stage). If schools are to overcome their tradition of teacher-centered education, teachers must learn to work in collaborative teams (as coaches by the side). If schools are to support effective teamwork to enhance student learning, there must be some technology-enhanced environment to enable learning among teachers and students. And the concept of virtual organizing fits right in to provide the mechanism of a learner-centered appreciative knowledge environment (AKE) to stimulate and facilitate a learning-centered culture of knowledge sharing to enhance student achievements. The impact of a servant-leader model of education (Greenleaf, 1977) should serve as a transformative path to enable the learning cycle of appreciative coaching (AC) (Orem, Binkert, & Clancy, 2007) on the part of teachers to enable students to tap into or rediscover their own sense of wonder about their present and future possibilities.

The Context of PLC

The premise in our discussion of PLC (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008) lies in the assumptions of the meaning behind the three words: professional, learning, and community. It is believed that a *professional* is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base. The term *learning* suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity. It is expected that if students are to learn, those who educate them must engage in the ongoing study and constant practice of their field. The term *community* suggests a group linked by common interests that provide members with a sense of identity, belonging, and involvement that result in a Web of meaningful relationships with moral overtones (Sergiovanni, 2005, p55). Communities (or communities of practice) form around com-

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