

Learning Communities

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Abstract

This chapter evaluates the vital role of learning communities, generating both challenges and opportunities for student support in distance education. The concept of student support will be examined relative to educational processes, with emphasis on experiential contexts and social interaction, toward transformative and constructive learning. Variable, interactive learning communities will be discussed, including higher education, the role of knowledge base sharing, and communities of practice that incorporate experiential applications of theories. Examples of social networking, utilizing distance education resources, toward 'constructed' learning community enrichment for distance education students, will be highlighted as an emergent, distributed form, integrating learning and support aspects.

Introduction: The Impact of the Information Age on Student Support in Distance Education

The rapid development of communications technologies has transformed the industrial era to a global economy of interactive information exchange. Opportunity for interactive dialogue via the Internet has generated expansive interest in distance education, and facilitated the formation of learning communities in support of distance learners.

Universities have traditionally offered learning community environments devoted to inquiry and study that are segregated from vocational training or commercial practices. The original form of Socratic education, where teaching inherently integrated inquiry with support through personal dialogues within shared contexts, has been reconfigured over time by the mandate to improve access to education for more students (Sewart, 1993; Sinclair, 1999). The result is larger classes, with detached professors serving as "lecturers", and mass produced learning materials. Distance education institutions in particular have designed packaged educational materials, utilizing various types of media, to minimize reliance of students on physical classrooms, campuses, or libraries.

To help equalize opportunities for academic success, traditional colleges have typically offered face-to-face student services. Campus-based support services have included libraries, computer labs with technical support, writing labs, career counselors, academic advisors, student clubs, study groups, office hours with faculty or tutors, and quiet study spaces set apart – all combining to create a learning community culture and environment. For distance students, who are inherently removed from campuses, this form of services is often impractical.

As networked computer technologies increasingly provide distributed opportunities for learning, students may study and/or communicate anywhere, anytime. To some extent, the same computer tools used for web-based courses may be utilized to deliver "campus" information, advising, interactive dialogue, and library resources. Relative to the educational process overall, from admissions through graduation, institutions increasingly capitalize on the notion of "autonomous" or "self-directed" students to achieve cost effective

distance education systems (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The majority of students choosing to pursue degree programs via online distance education programs are adults, often combining study challenges with jobs and family responsibilities, adding complexity and increased distraction from the required focus on higher education activities (Evans, 1994; Sinclair, 1999). Technical components assumed for access present new financial challenges and/or prerequisite skill requirements for students, often resulting in obstacles to participation or frustrations that lead to increased drop-out rates (Bates, 1995; Hara & Kling, 1999).

Sewart (1993) warns that support must be integral to overall course delivery, and must be recognized as the most direct interface between the student and institution throughout the educational process. However, management strategies often segregate the student support function, increasingly styled as service industry 'call centers', which minimize personal interaction with the student, and often result in frustration rather than true support. Tait (2003) emphasizes the imperative of building stronger relationships with students to foster engagement, "deep learning" and improved academic success. Kegan (1994) prescribes a fundamental principle to meet the complexity of contemporary learning: "...people grow best where they continuously experience an ingenious blend of support and challenge, ... [which] leads to vital engagement" (p. 42). This blend of challenge and support may be cultivated within learning communities, wherein students may exchange ideas and experiences, with both professors and peers. Genuine relationships may be developed through dialogue, utilizing variable communications media. Ultimately, distance education students may find it valuable to merge benefits of membership in more than one type of community, and essentially construct the combination of challenge and support they need. For example, a student may take a class online, while applying theory to practice in a local community project, or within a professional community.

Discussion

1. Learning Communities Defined

In an effort to describe an emergent virtual community, Unsworth (1996) maintains that "community is generally a function of shared location, shared interests and sometimes shared government and shared property; in order to deserve the name, a community needs more than one, though not necessarily all, of those attributes" (p. 138). Unsworth notes that communications networks offer an "environment in which, independent of need, one can pursue creative activities with tangible, communal, and perhaps even economic results" (p. 148).

Over the past few years, "learning community" has become a common term. Palloff and Pratt (1999) point out that while "community is no longer a place-based concept" (p. 21) it may nonetheless be considered a "conscious community" through the sharing of goals, communications styles, and behavioral norms (p. 23). The central focus of an educational community is on "learning about learning" (p. 23).

For purposes of distance education, Palloff and Pratt (1999) consider "geographically disconnected people becoming 'connected' in a community with several purposes but with a shared interest" (p. 23) which takes on a more egalitarian form than traditional classrooms, wherein exploration of a subject area occurs with all participants contributing, toward improved understanding of both the topic and of each other's perspectives. To

achieve this goal, early clarification of purpose, codes of conduct, conflict resolution, roles and responsibilities are important. Harasim (1996) emphasizes the benefits of improved social equality in the online environment, wherein gender, handicaps, appearance and even shyness become less of a barrier to participation. Overall, respect in a learning community is gained “by exhibiting expertise and command of the subject matter” (p. 211).

Specific types of learning communities include:

Virtual learning communities are those learning communities that only “exist” in the conceptual space of computer-mediated communications (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Today, the method of communications is the Internet, specifically the World Wide Web. In Harasim’s view, the Internet is really a “place” where communities are formed rather than a network of routes to information (Harasim as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Thus, community members create a virtual environment that permits interpersonal exchanges to occur. The first virtual community to gain recognition was the WELL, as described by Rheingold (1993). Using the computer-mediated communication tools introduced through the early Usenet bulleting boards, the WELL community developed quickly into a social network where topics of interest are shared online for diverse public exchange. Thus were born a multitude of discussions about gardening, books, grassroots political campaigns, career advices, or even finding friendships.

Knowledge building communities generally focus on the development, accumulation, and maintenance of a significant knowledge base that serves a specific learning community group or profession (community of practice). Such information-based communities rely extensively on the information technology and database management tools now available on the Web, and may support distributed members of the profession, or the general public who may draw on data resources (Turner, Liu & Wagner, n. d.). An example of this would be Baltic University Programme’s shared database and knowledge resources, known as TRENDS, which gathers input from various participating researchers, and is then utilized in distance learning courses for various universities in the region (<http://www.balticuniv.uu.se/esd/resources/resources.htm>).

Communities of practice have been extensively discussed by Wenger (1998). Under his concept, learning for individuals focuses on their engagement and contributions to the common practices of the communities of which they are part. Learning involves refining best practices so new generations of members will join and sustain the community, within a specific experiential and social context (Wenger, 1998). Shared common practices and a focus on tasks faced by real-world members of the community are characteristics of communities of practice (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Bannan Haag, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). The business management community is especially geared to draw on knowledge gained from observing best practices in competing organizations, and/or by building partnerships. Cooperative education, which strategically merges theoretical coursework with practical internships or projects in the students’ local context, is used by the University of Maryland University College for undergraduate students to support their development of skills in professional practice (<http://www.umuc.edu/careercenter/cccec.html>).

2. Distance Education Pedagogy: The Role of Interaction in Learning and Student Support

Adult learning. Theories of adult learning emphasize the concept of ‘transformative learning’ wherein the learner moves through a process of fundamental change in worldview and self concept, translating to changed behaviors, applied in their local context (Cranton, 1994). Adult students are motivated by previous experiences and values that prompt their inquiry, together with personal objectives for learning and meaning-making that may be different from a particular institution’s set of objectives.

Herein the role of dialogue, integrating narratives of personal experience, is essential to associative and constructive learning processes, particularly for adult students (Daloz, 1999). Moore’s theory of “transactional distance” emphasizes dialogue as the bridge that minimizes the perceived distance between the ‘autonomous’ student and the ‘structure’ of the course and/or institution (Moore & Kearsley, 1996; Moore, 1997).

Conversely, institutional decisions for web-based course delivery and student support tend to segregate physical and affective considerations from ‘teaching’, intended to prioritize ‘cognitive’ activities alone (Sewart, 1993; McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000). This dualistic approach disregards foundational adult learning principles that emphasize relevant meaning-making for adult students, intertwined with problem-solving in their immediate context (Knowles, 1998). Daloz (1999) discusses the process of mentoring adults, who need particular support through personalized dialogues, incorporating narratives of experience, as the student’s identity and values move through various stages of adjustment in a transformative learning process.

Contemporary course design theories increasingly refer to principles of ‘socio-cognitive constructivism’, emphasizing the *interactive* aspects of situational context and social interactions with cognitive perception, toward constructive meaning-making (Garrison, 1993; Jonassen et al., 1995; Tam, 2000). Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule (1986), Burge (1998) and von Pruemmer in this volume) further suggest that designs for education that are technology dominant, emphasizing rationalism detached from affective experience, may be especially disenfranchising for women, who tend to learn through experientially ‘connected’ methods of knowledge construction. More generally, learners have variable learning styles and cultural orientations which cannot be equally accommodated through technology alone (Sanchez & Gunawardena, 1998; Soles & Moller, 2001; and Spronk in this volume). True learner-centered designs for distance education must consciously integrate physical, affective and cognitive aspects, to maximize meaningful and relevant learning. Again, cooperative education designs offer such opportunity, wherein students may learn theory with an academic mentor, while also deriving experiential learning from application to projects on the job, with additional support from a professional coach. SUNY’s Empire State Degree Program is well known for their use of learning contracts that facilitate this type of learning design (Daloz, 1999; Knowles, 1998; Peters, 1998). As mentioned, UMUC provides this type of opportunity for undergraduates through a cooperative education program, which similarly utilizes learning agreements. In both cases the student is actively involved in negotiating the goals, logistics, and resources for their own learning experience, together with supportive mentors and advisors.

Collaborative learning. Toward offsetting the limitations of independent learning, collaborative learning incorporates social interaction and environmental aspects toward creative problem solving (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1998; Thorpe, 2002). Amabile

and Tighe (1993) emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation combined with liberty for multidirectional exploration and “intra-individual” dialogues to achieve creative outcomes. Collaborative learning through small groups, both online or “on the ground” incorporate the components of creative process, and offer potential support for students through personalized exchanges, with potential for continuing relationships beyond the ‘class’ space. Thorpe (2002) emphasizes that these human elements of conversation and community must be carefully considered, so they are not lost in the “technicist approaches to system or learning management” (p. 107) and to properly utilize technology toward constructive learning outcomes. Cf. the chapters by Naidu and by Drago and Smith in this volume for a discussion and examples of designing collaborative learning into instruction.

Creative problem solving. Kanter (2001) discusses themes of creativity and learning in the context of workplace communities where theory must be practiced. She asserts that face-to-face relationship building, combined with the benefits of “email and chat rooms, with everyone looking at the same documents or drawings, can facilitate speed and seamlessness” (p. 156) in creative problem solving.

Community building. Kanter (2001) further emphasizes that “community has both a structure and a soul”, with social interaction being key to progressing

... from bureaucracy to democracy...community is the behavioral and emotional infrastructure that supports those other organizational processes and makes them effective. Community action and spirit permit speed and seamlessness, encourage creativity and collaboration, and release human energy and brainpower – the essence of e-culture. (p. 196)

Learning community. Jonassen et al. (1995) specifically emphasized the term “learning community” as the interactive environment that facilitates constructive learning, and further, the role that technology could play in creating communities of learners and practitioners. Knowledge construction is herein facilitated through collaboration, reflection, and conversation with other learners. Computer-supported collaborative work tools and technologies, including group decision support systems, project management tools, electronic conferencing systems, and shared editors, would permit groups in distributed environments to engage in negotiation of solutions, which are the “hallmarks of constructive learning” (p. 18). In the constructivist view, a consistent and meaningful learning community is “key in sustaining the type of interactive exchange that in turn promotes both retention and knowledge-building” (Conrad, 2002, ¶26). The key to the design of a constructivist environment is authenticity, or the “extent to which the environment faithfully reflects the ordinary practices of the culture” (Jonassen, et al., 1995, p. 21).

Rogers (2000) defines a learning community as one which embodies a “culture of learning in which everyone is involved in the collective effort of understanding” (p. 384). Responsibility for learning is shared among group members in an online learning community. Collaboration is essential, in that the process of working together on a task enriches learners’ repertoire of learning processes (Rogers, 2000). The result of collaboration is thus a richer, more dynamic product, which has been built by group members helping each other and participating actively in the creation of their own learning processes.

Mills (1996) and Sewart (1993) suggest an emergent reconfiguration of the original distributed support center model, wherein a ‘network’ of community-based study spaces

may be shared by students who may attend different schools 'online', while also coordinating their study with practical application within their own context. Integrated course designs may therefore be informed by distributed local groups, to facilitate relevant community problem solving, on the ground as well as online, toward more holistic learning experiences (Thorpe, 2002).

3. Learning Communities: Student Support Methods and Techniques

The characteristics of participation in a community are similar online and 'on-the-ground'. Individuals must explore and observe the environment to learn who else is participating, on the type of activity, and the rules that govern the 'space'. They must gather understanding of the standards for behavior and practice common language, with understanding of connotations, particularly as they are used in text formats and/or symbols. Meaningful communication must move beyond generic information, incorporating shared personal experiences, with 'affect' applied in ways that will enhance understanding. Methods of mutually respectful dialogue must be cultivated, with or without visual cues, depending on the mode or media.

Specific tools and techniques that may be used to implement a learning community on the Web include:

Dedicated, shared Website. Most learning communities supported by information technology rely on a central Web page to organize the various resources involved in learner support. This Website should permit access to online conferences, online knowledge databases and libraries, student advising and counseling services, e-mail communications, and organizational documents (such as syllabi) that define the content presented in and maintained by the community.

Online information resources, including information for prospective students, orientation documents, information about student advising, program services, and technology requirements are essential to establishment of the community and should be maintained at the shared Web site (Blackmun, 2003).

Online classroom where the various conferences, e-mail addresses, members of the group, and study groups are organized for members of the community toward specific learning objectives.

Online conferencing or discussion threads are generally constructed to support discussion of a particular topic, section of a structured course, or interpersonal communications. The challenges presented to learners in sharing personal experiences, reflecting on particular topics, sharing in meaning-making and creating new ideas are substantial. Many learners or new participants in the community may have no experience with publication of their ideas on the Web, or may have little experience expressing their ideas in writing. This form of learner involvement provides a unique opportunity to develop writing skills and the ability to express personal perspectives for comment by others.

E-mail communications provide members of the community with the ability to communicate one-on-one, to ask variable questions about the community and learning support mechanisms, and to communicate with other members of sub-groups in the community. E-mail also provides an excellent opportunity for peer-to-peer support and encouragement,

which can be essential, especially with learners who have not previously studied at a distance or extensively used the technology tools.

Study groups may be offered as a method for facilitating small group collaboration, which is essential to the meaning-making assumed in a distance education environment. This is usually a private space where members of the sub-group may communicate via private online conferences, develop shared documents, and share resources to be used in the creation of projects consistent with the goals of the community. Study groups may present a particular challenge to adult learners, who have little experience working with teams in the online environment, and may experience difficulties organizing roles and responsibilities to achieve a shared goal.

Facilitation by an instructor or experienced learner or other member of the community may be key to overcoming the reluctance of some learners to participate in study groups and online conferencing. Such a facilitator encourages the group toward a common goal and helps individual learners become comfortable with the tools and the concepts used to create group projects.

Knowledge bases online are often developed for a particular profession or practice and should be searchable and constantly evolving. Members of the community may utilize these documents much as they would library resources.

Library databases should be searchable and draw on various on-the-ground and online library resources.

Chat rooms may be used to provide opportunities for socializing, casual discussion, or, less frequently, structured discussions of a particular topic. For a particular profession or practice group, the chat room may be used for regular meetings of the group to achieve common goals, or to document their progress.

Mentoring is a form of student support where an experienced learner or practitioner lends their direct, one-on-one support to a new learner or other member of the community. Mentoring is used by several higher education institutions to integrate teaching and support mechanisms for online students (Athabasca University, <http://www.athabasca.ca>; Capella University, <http://www.capella.edu>).

Blended learning with facilitation permits students to coordinate workplace projects with theoretical learning online, with peers that may be both online and on-the-ground. Faculty online may facilitate the individual learning process and/or cooperative education agreements can combine the facilitation of faculty and workplace mentors for individuals or small groups.

Resource-based, open learning. Public libraries offer one of the best examples of interactive, resource-based learning, as they retain a mission of democratic, public access to tools and educational programs. Local librarians coordinate with resources and other librarians online, providing continuity of presence for research assistance. (Cf. the chapter by George and Frank in this volume for a discussion of the evolving role of the librarian in supporting learning.) There is potential for groups with shared interests to utilize resources together both online and 'on-the-ground' relevant for individual learning contexts. Similar to campus environments, there are typically nearby community coffee shops, many of which include public internet access, providing a space where peers can meet virtually and/or in person, resulting in a distributed socio-technical composite form of learning

community (Kling, 2000). For registered students, University System of Maryland offers students the opportunity to study online, while accessing library and campus facilities at any of the distributed college campuses throughout the state. There is a cohesive online reference system known as VICTOR web that allows students to locate the specific location for resources. Students may therefore access librarian support either online or at the library nearest their local community.

5. Learning Communities and Communities of Practice: Examples

Baltic University Programme (BUP) (2004) coordinated by Uppsala University, Sweden, includes a network of participants from 14 countries, and 160 universities, who collaborate in four fields, including environmental sustainable development and democracy. BUP offers cooperative education projects with municipalities, merging online studies and shared databases, with on the ground community interaction and application in various field stations.

Canadian community learning network (CLN) projects. Canadian visionaries are piloting new community learning network projects that are based on “public and private partnerships and inter-institutional collaboration” including schools, colleges and universities, as well as for profit education organizations (Skrzeszewski, 1999, p. 63-64). Such blended learning projects emphasize the fact that businesses, homes, government, education and community organizations increasingly utilize the same technology, which may also be shared with partners internationally.

Similarly, contemporary consortia, such as *Global University Alliance* (www.gua.com) are currently creating partnerships between universities, wherein students may utilize libraries or campus services from participating members (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). For these students a university library nearby may provide not only research materials, but digital access, printers, copy machines, quiet study space, and even the effect of a learning community environment while studying online (Association of College & Research Libraries, 2003).

Indira Gandhi Open University (IGNOU) coordinates distance courses for medical doctors in child health, with hands on practice occurring in 140 district hospitals, under the mentorship of hospital senior doctors (Goel, 2002).

Non-profit higher education membership associations such as the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO, <http://www.aacrao.org>) and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA, <http://www.nasfaa.org>) provide information for members, knowledge databases, white papers and analyses, and information about the associations.

University of Maryland University College. UMUC is one of the premiere US institutions offering online programs, including one of the only Master of Distance Education programs in this country or the world. While continuously enhancing its organization and services, the online community space for the MDE program characterizes many of the best student support online environments (Blackmun, 2003; Walti, 2002). UMUC's partnership with other institutions allows students to locate variable sub-community resources, including organized conferences, to help introduce students to the overall distance education professional community.

Summary and Conclusions

The contemporary tools and processes provided by information technology contribute substantially to the development of learning communities and communities of practice to support networked learning. Ultimately students live 'on the ground' while they may study online, and therefore participate in multiple 'communities', from which they may construct the combination of support elements needed. The careful design of holistic, constructive learning ensures balance between challenge and support. Learning communities coordinate educational content and experience that is relevant to the community and to the individual, and provide for resource sharing to support the institution's mission for distributed education. Ultimately an interactive blend of online and 'on-the-ground' resource exchanges, facilitating peer partnerships for mutual support, may help bridge student support gaps in distance learning.

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