Exploring the Influence of Instructor Actions on Community Development in Online Settings

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Abstract

This chapter presents an exploration of the community experience in online settings where the development of a learning community was a key instructional aim. The inquiry used the learning community development model (Brook & Oliver, 2003) to guide the study and measured the individuals’ community experience using the Sense of Community Index (Chavis, Hogge, McMillan, & Wandersman, 1986) supported by observations and open-ended questions. The chapter reports the findings of a multi-case study that explored instructor actions in the process of community development in online settings.
Introduction

Many scholars assert that the social phenomenon of community might be put to good use on the support of online learning (Bonk & Wisher, 2000; Hiltz, 1998; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). This assertion is well supported by theories of learning that highlight the importance of social interactions in the construction of knowledge (Bruner, 2001; Dewey, 1929; Vygotsky, 1978). Further support is found in the works of scholars who explore the community construct. These scholars posit that community is characterized by a willingness of members to seek new members, involve all participants, and share knowledge and the results of their endeavors (Moore & Brooks, 2001). Benefits associated with community membership include an increase in intellectual capital (Stewart, 1997), an increase in social capital including the norms of reciprocity (Putnam, 2000), and the satisfaction obtained through membership (Lott & Lott, 1965). It has also been suggested that sense of community is characterized by a phenomenon of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts (Hawley, 1950). These characteristics afford members clear advantage over non-members, but it remains unclear in what ways these characteristics might be purposefully developed in online settings (Bonk & Wisher, 2000). It is clear, however, that the decision to join some communities and not others rests with the will of the individual (Tönnies, 1955). Factors that influence this decision remain unclear, although it is generally accepted that individuals seek community membership because it is beneficial for them to do so (McMillan, 1996).

While a definitive definition of community remains elusive (Puddifoot, 1996), a number of generally accepted characteristics have been suggested. Community is distinct from family and society (Tönnies, 1955), and it exists in a geographic and relational sense (Gusfield, 1975) including online settings (Surratt, 1998) in the form of virtual communities. It has been suggested that community is a sense rather than a tangible entity (Wiesenfeld, 1996). Sense of community exists in many forms including those associated with neighborhoods, fraternities, sport, and religion, and an individual is likely to belong to more than one community at a time (Sarason, 1974). Sense of community has been represented as a four-dimensional framework comprising the elements of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), although these elements might be present at varying levels in different community settings (McMillan, 1996). Individual community member’s experience of these elements can be measured using the Sense of Community Index (SCI) (Chavis et al., 1986), a measurement tool that has been shown to have validity across contexts (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999) and data gathering techniques sensitive to the realities of members (Sonn, Bishop, & Drew, 1999). However, it is not clear in what ways the individual’s experience of each of these discrete elements might be promoted in online settings.
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