Chapter 14

Blended Learning Communities: Relational and Identity Networks

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ABSTRACT

Blended learning communities are defined by specific learning and psychosocial processes based on the multilayered sense of belonging of the group’s members, related to the merging of both virtual and real interactive contexts. This chapter focuses on the psychosocial dynamics of blended communities, in order to identify some specific participation strategies and identity dynamics, which both vary with the double interactive context. We used a qualitative variant of Social Network Analysis to analyse the interactions of two blended student communities, identifying various participation trajectories and identity positionings of the group members. The results revealed that the blending of two communication contexts generates different psychosocial dynamics from those activated by the same community in a wholly on- or offline context. The combination of interactive environments results in participation strategies in which members can choose distinctive trajectories, shaping their original identity positionings.

INTRODUCTION

The integration of computer mediated and face to face communication has been recently implemented in numerous educational and professional contexts to create blended learning communities (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Ligorio, Cacciamani & Cesareni, 2006; Ligorio & Sansone, 2009) that improve learning processes through participation, sustaining a sense of belonging and the subsequent identity construction process (Lave, 1991; Zucchermaglio, 2002).

This chapter focuses on these psychosocial dynamics, particularly on the idea that learning as a social process (Annese, 2005) accentuates the interweaving between psychosocial and psycho-educational conceptual frameworks.

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is an intersubjective process among individuals who co-participate in a meaningful, goal-directed interaction.
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(Lave, 1993; Matusov, 2001; Wells, 1993). From this perspective, the identity construction process bridges social and individual aspects of learning, as it emerges from the development of a sense of belonging to the learning community (Wenger, 1998). Moreover, in blended learning activities, students’ self-perception is affected differently by the online and offline contexts (Spadaro & Ligorio, 2007).

A psychosocial approach to group dynamics helps in understanding the social norms, communicative networks, language structure and setting characteristics that make blended communities suitable for implementing effective learning processes.

BACKGROUND

Cultural Perspective: Learning as Participation

The reformulation of learning as participation, from a psychosocial perspective, and as acculturation, from a cultural perspective (Bruner, 1966, Wenger, 1998), establishes the relevance of the social context in which people negotiate their meanings. The sociocultural approach is based on the assumption that during social activities individuals interact through cultural representations, so modifying their psychological processes (Cole, 2004).

In group research, cultural psychology provides a conceptual framework able to rethink psychological processes such as learning, participation, sense of belonging and identity through the construction of Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998). Learning is a central concept in CoP theory, with sense of belonging and identity being two of the possible objectives of learning in both formal and informal contexts.

According to Reckwitz (2002), a practice is a routinised behaviour consisting of bodily and mental activities, artefacts and their use, shared knowledge, emotions and motivations. According to Wenger (1998) these processes involve individuals in interaction, and collective learning is accomplished through common practices. Thus conceptualised, practices can both achieve a current goal that is meaningful for practitioners and embody the historical memory of community. Through practices, meanings are negotiated and reified in material or cultural products.

Communities of Practice (CoP) are based on three dimensions: a) shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998) is the collection of reified objects socially negotiated and belonging to the community’s history, aimed at allowing new members to learn the community’s practices; b) mutual engagement implies that each participant is responsible for the expected goals of the practice and accepts his/her own and others’ individuality during involvement in common practices; c) joint enterprise requires that the community members perceive the same meaning in participating in the same activity; in other words, each practice should be continuously negotiated among participants.

CoP are an arena where even identity is negotiated; in fact they enable a multi-step identity project (Wenger, 1998). Firstly, each member can define “who he/she is” through his/her experience of ways of participating in practices and his/her relationships with others. Secondly, members identify themselves by distinguishing between what is familiar and what is unfamiliar in their world. Thirdly, they delineate their identity in a trajectory starting from one position and moving towards another; the variety of positions of different memberships are coherently integrated in a unique identity. Finally, they differentiate themselves by negotiating a local sense of belonging in a larger constellation of communities.

Lave and Wenger (1991) explain the identity trajectory through “Legitimate Peripheral Participation”: newcomers can participate in practices with different degrees of engagement depending on the level of the appropriation of community’s culture. Usually they move in a participation