Facilitating Connected Knowing Through Virtual Learning Communities

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INTRODUCTION

Generally believed critical to facilitating multi-dimensional instructional experiences for participants in a range of educational environments (for example, as accessed through academic institutions, corporate staff development, professional organizations, and so forth), the use of learning communities as an important instructional method is widely recognized across academic disciplines, teaching approaches, and delivery media. In fact, Lave and Wenger (in McPherson & Nunes, 2004) argued that learning is, by nature, an activity by which one engages knowledge in many forms, through which one becomes a “member of the community of knowledge” (p. 305). As such, communication, collaboration, and interaction become essential methods in facilitating instructional partnerships. Extending beyond a social context, the ongoing relationship building, advising, and mentoring generated through participation in learning communities provide a foundation for continued cognitive development and knowledge construction (Rovai, 2002; Wegerif, 1998). Such environments facilitate both ongoing discovery and a personal relationship to learning; enable interpersonal connections; emphasize the application of previous experiences to current learning goals; and, promote democratic teaching-learning partnerships, allowing participants to develop both collective and individualized perspectives and approaches (Brookfield, 1987, 1995; Daloz, in Taylor, Spring, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Taylor, 1995). Although Burbules (cited in Chamberlain, Charalambos, & Michalinos, 2004, pp. 136 – 137) stressed the importance of community development to learning as equally valuable regardless of the instructional medium, both wide-scale anecdotal feedback and more formal research indicated that this aspect of learning was particularly essential to student satisfaction, motivation, and retention in Web-based classrooms in which students may never physically come into contact with peers, instructors or campus/organizational services and programs (Boettcher, 2004; Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Kearsey, 2000; McCracken, 2005; Palloff and Pratt, 1999, 2001; Tinto cited in Rovai, 2002; Rovai, November, 2004; Shea, 2006). Communities that develop in online instructional environments can be similarly transformative in their significance to research generation, self-assessment, and critical thought development, as well as important to furthering advising/consulting relationships, social networks, and professional affiliations.

BACKGROUND: CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Many educators have attempted to capture the essence of community as it exists in virtual instructional environments; such definitions included a broad range of priorities, from the pragmatic to the philosophical. For example, Kaplan (August, 2002, section 2), Precece (cited in Garber, 2004) and Allan, Ure, and Evans (October, 2003, p. 7) noted that reliance on technology was essential to the very definition of virtual communities to the extent that communications and interactions were dependent upon media-based tools. However, beyond this general conclusion, there were many variables identified as impacting learning as facilitated using learning communities. Precece (cited in Garber, 2004) broadly explained that clear role differentiation and shared purpose promoted strong online community development (section 1). Allan, et al., (October, 2003) extended this definition to consider aspects of interdependence fostered by community structures, the purposes of which included furthering common goals and practices (p. 7). Rovai (August, 2002) also emphasized interdependence among members as contributing to learning community development and continuity, finding it largely dependant upon the extent to which interpersonal conditions such as the following were met: “...a sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit,
trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values
and goals, and overlapping histories among members”
(section 4). Sergiovanni (cited in Rovai and Jordan,
November, 2004) considered the relational aspects
of community, identifying that participants appeared
to have the “...need for ‘authentic community,’ ...a tie
binding students and teachers through shared values,
ideals, and goals” (section 3). Shea’s (February, 2006)
research elaborated on both Rovai and Sergiovanni’s
findings, reflecting that distant students reported a strong
sense of learning through community in those on-line
classes in which instructors created open environ-
ments for the discussion, mediation, and resolution of
difficult dialogues that ultimately reinforced complex
understanding (section 5).

Instructional approaches that included attention to
variables such as those previously described enabled a
comparatively natural environment in which to pro-
 mote the development of knowledge; many of these
approaches were constructivist in nature. Gilbert and
Driscoll (2002) discussed a constructivist approach to
learning in community as including a “... change in
focus from individual knowledge constructed singly
to public knowledge jointly constructed by students,”
noting that the creation of communities “...enable[d]
students to contribute to each others’ learning through
social construction of communal knowledge” (p. 59).
Educators (in Merriam and Caffarella, 1999), such as
Usher, Bryant and Johnston (as related to experiential
learning) (pp. 227 – 229); Brockett and Hiemstra (with
reference to personal responsibility) (p. 298); and, Gar-
rison (who favored “collaborative constructivism”) (p.
300), expanded on constructivist models by acknowled-
ging the importance of context and experience to
overall learning achievement. These authors suggested
that learning did not happen in isolation, but, rather,
was an evolving process impacted by relationships to
people and systems, cognitive and affective develop-
ment, socio-political history, and, opportunity/privilege,
all of which were experienced differently on individual
and collective levels.

Wenger and Snyder (in Stein, Fall 2002) refined the
function of learning in community as forming the foun-
dation for the development of communities of practice
(p. 27). These authors defined community of practice as “... a group of people ‘informally’ bound together
by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise....
sharing their experiences and knowledge in free-flow-
ing creative ways that foster new approaches to solving
problems.” (p. 27). Building on Wenger and Snyder’s
observations, Stein (Fall 2002) observed that communities of practice, as learning communities, performed an
important role in empowering participants to develop
meaning systems, define learning, and claim a unique
body of knowledge, stating“.....The meaning of learning
[in] community lies in the increasing confidence of a
group that its ability to learn and to act on that learn-
ing resides in the group itself, and that the learning
it creates can encompass the whole community” (p.
39). The research of Sorensen and Murchu (October,
2004, p. 198) as well as that of Rovai (cited in Ander-
son, June, 2004, p. 184) confirmed that the success of
virtual learning communities rested in their capacities
to further empowerment and autonomy enabling both
individual and collective constructs of knowledge (p.
198). Smith (1992, in Chamberlain, et al., 2004) ob-
erved that distant students were more likely to invest
in community-building activities when they identified
common experiences and goals, and obtained imme-
diate access to networks, materials, and skills that they
prioritized (p. 137). Lebow, Wager, Marks, & Gilbert
(in Gilbert & Driscoll, 2002) noted that a particular
advantage to utilizing knowledge communities in
virtual environments included the capacity to archive
artifacts, learning objects, and transcripts collectively
created by the membership (p. 61 - 62).

MAIN FOCUS: BENEFITS AND
CHALLENGES TO LEARNING IN
VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES

Like all instructional approaches, the integration of
learning communities in virtual classrooms included
both strengths and challenges. Mobilizing community as
an instructional approach succeeded only to the extent
that participants and instructors were present, engaged,
and invested in its use as a method that furthered both
learning and teaching. The following summary of com-
parative benefits and challenges illustrates the complex-
ity of incorporating both methods and technologies to
facilitate the development of learning communities as
an instructional method in online classrooms.