Chapter IV

Designing Community Learning in Web-Based Environments

Mercedes Fisher, Pepperdine University, USA
Bonita Coleman, Valley Christian Schools, USA
Paul Sparks, Pepperdine University, USA
Cheryl Plett, Cerro Coso Community College, USA

A community can represent many things and be directed toward a definite goal, but community itself is the focus of a spiritual science that inspires universality. Day-to-day living in a community fosters a very practical concept of existence. Community life represents the frontier between the macro and micro in terms of human organization, making it possible to experience all levels of human existence. The community is, therefore, a vast landscape for a material realization whenever each person enters into contract with the gifts, virtues, and shortcomings of its members. It is also the immense spiritual and psychic laboratory that enables our spirits to develop.

~ Alex Polari de Alverga in *Forest of Vision: Ayahuasca, Amazonian Spirituality and the Santa Daime Tradition*
Community Learning Theory

... Learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon. (Wenger, 1998)

Current learning theory suggests that collaboration is a key to effective learning. Perhaps it is no coincidence that collaborative online tools have appeared as social theories of learning have become more widely accepted. Programs that embody the more traditional and linear teaching methods are slowly yielding to collaborative tools that more appropriately support our new understanding of social learning. As our tools become more powerful and sophisticated, so too will our ability to think and learn with them.

The design of successful Web-based learning environments is best when based on sound learning principles. Social learning theory, in which cognitive factors, environmental influences, and behavior work together to determine learning, suggests that knowledge is shared and that learning occurs when people interact with each other in meaningful ways (Wenger, 1998). The following principles help to define meaningful learning environments (IRL, 1990):

- People learn best socially, through collaboration.
- Knowledge relies heavily on context provided by the community.
- Communities of interest provide an ideal learning environment.
- Learning is gaining identity and confidence in the community.
- Knowing is participation in the practice of the community.
- Knowledge increases when new information makes a connection with prior knowledge.

The application of these principles to Web-based environments requires creativity and some courage, but has already proven to be effective (Fisher, 2003). One key to successful online learning is to create learning environments that promote sociability and encourage collaboration. Traditional distance learning courses provided almost no collaboration and were known to have abysmal completion rates, often less than 20%. Current online courses offering electronic collaboration capabilities often boast completion rates that approach 100% (Pepperdine University, 2002).

The collaborative design element of Web-based education involves interactivity. Effective collaboration in online environments provides the student the means of being actively involved in the learning activity. It results in learner-centered instruction, improves student attitude towards learning, and gives the student the opportunity of having personal interaction with both the instructor and other learners (Bills, 1997). According to Matthews (1997), active learning has been shown to be most effective when the learner is engaged. Technology, when used well, can tailor the instruction and learning experience. Interacting with virtual classmates and instructors makes learners creative and thoughtful. As reported in Song (1998), students assert that taking part in
Identifying Student Types in a Gamified Learning Experience
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