Abstract

This chapter addresses the use of communities as a context-creating approach for the management of learning in virtual settings. It stresses the lack of consensus around the concept of community, its recent deployment in the educational domain, and the extent to which the educational use of virtual settings has neglected the construction of appropriate learning contexts. On the other hand, it points to the existence of a large body of knowledge from areas such as organizational learning, actor-network theory, sociology, constructivism, and learning communities that may help overcome the limitations of Web-based learning as it is currently put into practice. The theory covered will offer a better understanding of the
relationships between different concepts and trends and of learning communities as entirely new tools for contextual approaches to the management of learning in virtual settings.

Introduction

On a recent trip to New Zealand, while wandering through the bookshelves of one of the bookshops at Heathrow airport, I bumped into a book titled *The 13½ Lives of Captain Bluebear* (Moers, 1999), a novel that made the remaining 27 hours of flight not only bearable but, indeed, very amusing! In spite of its good share of craziness and delightful entertainment, it is quite an enlightening and pedagogical book. It speaks of life, fear, hope, dreams, nightmares, frustration, friendship, loneliness, learning, collaboration, and community, apart from the crazy adventures of the sweet Bluebear. Its 703 pages go through the lives and adventures of the Bluebear in the fantastic lands of old Zamonia. There is a lesson to be learned from each life, but I would like to tell you about the life of the Bluebear in the Demarara Desert.

While falling into a black hole from his past adventure, the Bluebear literally lands on a sugar-made desert named the Demarara Desert. When he wakes up, he realizes he has been found by the Muggs, a nomadic tribe roaming in the desert in search of a place called “Anagrom Ataf.” The Muggs invite him to follow them, and since the Bluebear has nowhere else to go, he agrees; this is how his adventure on the Demarara Desert begins.

The Muggs were put together by chance. They pursue their own ideals of freedom, leisure, and independence, and they easily accept newcomers regardless of status, wealth, or gender, as long as rules are respected. The admission of newcomers is quite informal and unbureaucratic—just dressing a dark blue robe, calling out “Anagrom Ataf,” and trotting along with the caravan through the desert. The community of the Muggs was, thus, one of outcasts and dropouts that came together chasing the vision of Anagrom Ataf. They almost never quarreled and, like every other community, they had rules to be respected. But these were not common rules: they were found in a drifting bottle, made sense to no one else but the Muggs, and became their code of conduct.

The Muggs had a mission in life to which they were committed: finding, trapping, and occupying the city named Anagrom Ataf. The sole dream of finding this city was the vision that kept the Muggs roaming the desert.

When the Muggs and the Bluebear finally found Anagrom Ataf, they had to capture and occupy it. And though the facts said it was an impossible thing to do, with lateral thinking, collaborative work, joint effort, involvement and commitment, they managed to capture the city by fusing it with the desert floor through molten sugar. Occupation was the next step and it was an easy one. However, some problems started to show up. Trapped within the walls of a city, even if it was a mirage