Chapter 9
Design of an Online Community of Practice to Support an Emerging Doctoral Culture

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the initial accreditation process for California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB)’s new doctorate in educational leadership, the accrediting body, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), presented the institution with a serious concern. Reviewers of CSUSB’s proposal to offer their first doctorate indicated that the institution did not have a history of a doctoral culture. The challenge was how to acculturate students into a doctoral culture in the absence of an established doctoral culture? The university proposed to leverage their track record creating and nurturing departmental online communities of practice by creating and nurturing a similar community of practice for scholars in the doctoral program. This online community of practice was intended to provide scaffolding which was similar to that which occurs in full-time doctoral programs where faculty and students regularly interact in both formal and informal settings. In designing the online community of practice, the Office of Distributed Learning built upon the expertise developed in the successful implementation of similar communities of practice for numerous departments across the campus.

BACKGROUND

During the initial accreditation process for California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB)’s new doctorate in educational leadership, our accrediting body, the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), presented our institution with a serious concern. Reviewers of our proposal to offer our first doctorate indicated that the institution did not have a history of a doctoral culture. We were dismayed by this concern, as it was clear that the university did indeed have a doctoral culture among the graduate professors. However, WASC clarified that they were not concerned about the doctoral culture among the graduate professors, but rather, the absence of a doctoral culture among the pro-
spective students. Thus, our institution was faced with a challenge. The challenge was how do we acculturate students into a doctoral culture in the absence of an established doctoral culture?

The Office of Distributed Learning at Cal State, San Bernardino, charged with support of online teaching and learning at the University, presented an idea for a solution to the problem. We proposed to leverage our track record creating and nurturing departmental online communities of practice by creating and nurturing a similar community of practice for scholars in the doctoral program. Initially, we needed a way to enculturate new students into the doctoral culture. Our colleagues at the central California State University Chancellor’s office were excited about the prospect of an online community. This proposal was well received by our accrediting body as well.

Therefore, working in collaboration with the CSU Chancellor’s office, we created an online community of practice to provide a social structure to support the emerging doctoral culture. This online community of practice was intended to provide scaffolding which was similar to that which occurs in full-time doctoral programs where faculty and students regularly interact in both formal and informal settings. In designing the online community of practice, the Office of Distributed Learning built upon the expertise developed in the successful implementation of similar communities of practice for numerous departments across the campus. We have constructed over twenty such environments for academic departments including online communities in the departments of sociology, world languages, teacher credentialing, elementary teaching, secondary teaching, and special education. We employed social constructivist perspective in the design of the communities. Some of the communities have been executed in the Moodle learning management system; others have been executed in the Blackboard learning management system. In this chapter, I discuss the design and deployment of the Blackboard-based doctoral online community of practice.

### Literature Review

Many have shown how difficult it is to complete the doctorate. Among hypotheses for how to increase the completion rate, the establishment of cohorts of students has been shown to be efficacious in assisting timely completion (Stock & Siegfried, 2006). It is hypothesized that this is due to the camaraderie and support that is offered by students who are encountering the same challenges in close proximal order. Many have suggested that electronic communities of practice may serve the same acculturating function as physical communities of practice (see, for instance, Peterson, Herrington, Konza, Tzvetkova-Arsova, & Stefanov. 2008).

In designing our electronic community of practice for doctoral students, we considered work on the design of physical communities and social constructivism. Building upon the work of Vygotsky (1930), we designed a structure in which students could learn the “tools of the trade” through participation in a community led by professors. In our design of the virtual community of practice, the Vygotskian “zone of proximal development” for individual students would be the space between their professional lives at entry and the level of professional scholarship expected before being awarded the doctorate. We also drew heavily upon the groundbreaking work of Lave & Wenger (1990), in which “legitimate peripheral participation” is emphasized as an effective means of acculturation into a professional community. In our design of the online community we sought to create an environment that was conducive to Brown, Collins and Duguid’s “cognitive apprenticeship” (Brown, Collins, & Duguid. (1989).

Also very influential was the work of Slotta (2002a, 2002b, 2004) and Slotta & Linn (2000) who developed the Web-based Integrated Science Environment (WISE). The WISE project established social networks of middle-school science students working toward common goals such as how to eradicate malaria. In the WISE project,
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