Chapter 18
Virtual Learning Communities in Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will examine the virtual classroom as a social constructivist educational space and identify whether and how a virtual ‘learning community’ emerges in different telecollaborative environments. A qualitative analysis of e-mails, field notes of in-class discussions, as well as a subsequent survey with open-ended questions have shown that virtual learning communities do materialize when certain preconditions are met, such as embedding virtual elements into face-to-face learning environments, sufficient monitoring by staff and the design of suitable learning environments that bring about multiple perspectives with the help of stimulating prompts and adequate tasks. For intercultural virtual learning communities, an important feature of foreign language instruction at higher education level, several success factors were identified, including a genuine interest in and commitment to the task and collaborators at hand, the willingness to engage in a discourse structure that resembles a real conversation and encourages the exchange of views, and most importantly, the full integration of mediated communication in local classrooms.

INTRODUCTION: VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES UNDER INVESTIGATION

At the beginning of the 21st century, virtual learning or e-learning was hailed as a revolution in learning, also for the higher education sector. Online education was greeted as a new and innovative area of education that would provide an answer to the challenges and demands of different educational sectors, e.g. further education or higher education. Seufert et al. (2001) identified that at a time of increasing globalization and mobility there was a need for a simultaneous improvement of flexibility in learning arrangements, due to the challenges brought about by the pace at which knowledge is created and...
becomes outdated and the pressure to minimize costs on an administrative level. In the heyday of e-learning it was even assumed that the quality of learning systems was mainly dependent on technical aspects such as appropriate and reliable software (Schenkel et al., 2001). Dudeney (2000), in a handbook for language teachers willing to use internet applications for foreign language teaching, the author enthuses:

_These days (...) things have changed for the better, and the Net is now a thriving community with many millions of people exchanging information, ideas and opinions. The development of easier connections, more user-friendly software (the programs which computers use, such as word processors, Internet web browsers, etc.) and cheaper access has opened up the 'information superhighway' to everyone, from young children – at home or at school – to professionals in all fields and all walks of life. For language teachers, involved in the communication process on a very basic level, it is the perfect medium. (Dudeney, 2001: p. 1)_

Townshend (1997) does indeed use the word “revolution” when it comes to integrating online communications in foreign language learning environments: “At this exciting time teachers and their pupils need to be ready to claim their share of the communication revolution which can enhance foreign language learning and teaching.” (Townshend, 1997: p. 2)

Meanwhile, enthusiasts have had to sober up and acknowledge the fact that a particular medium does not represent an absolute value but must be seen in the context of the purpose one wants to achieve. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that the “brave new world” of e-learning with fully functional and low-cost virtual learning communities has failed to materialize. However, the now readily available digital infrastructure on university campuses has brought some advantages which can be exploited in order to provide rich learning environments. These learning environ-

ments have a greater potential for flexibility, as they operate independently of time and place, by integrating, for example, asynchronous media such as discussion boards or e-mail applications. The quality of independence of place means that learners can join a virtual learning community without having to be present on campus or even in the country. For foreign language learning and teaching environments, this feature (along with the potential to bridge time differences such as those that exist between different continents) is particularly interesting, because it allows the bringing together of learners from different target cultures, thus forging intercultural virtual learning communities. This, of course, does not happen automatically. The critical success factors of virtual learning communities from a pedagogical and a cultural perspective are considered in the following case study of foreign language learning in a higher education context.

**BACKGROUND: VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Digital media and a well-functioning internet infrastructure with a host of potential applications represent an everyday feature of higher education and other educational institutions. Outside of class or the lecture theatre, young people are very much used to digital media having shaped new forms of communication (e.g. Boyd & Ellison 2007). New forms of media applications for social networking purposes have been embraced by younger generations in particular (Rosen 2007), leading to what Castells (1996: 21) terms the “network society”. As mentioned in the introduction, the potential of this development for learning environments (initially in higher and further education and later on in schools) was recognized early on. (Kuh et al., 1991; Honebein, 1996; Kemmis, 2001). However, online communication and thus the creation of virtual learning communities in the