Chapter 10
E-Learning as a Socio-Cultural System

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ABSTRACT

The chapter analyses issues concerning the nature of virtual communities and learning in the following communities. Firstly, the discussion will focus on the question whether the very existence of technology and its ever increasing influence is an object of culture. Next, the relation between different elements of the culture (including technology) from the perspective of fostering interaction and learning will be discussed. Lastly, the specificity of the socio-cultural system of information and communication technologies (further - ICT) assisted learning together with recommendations for fostering further ICT assisted learning, e-learning and computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) will be analysed.

INTRODUCTION

Here we provide several excerpts from a series of interviews, carried out in Lithuania, in 2008. A number (12) of therapists were approached in order to clarify their objectives and motives to engage in virtual communities (both for learning/teaching purposes, and in order to organize their work better). A semi-structured format of interviews was chosen in order to have guidelines for conversation, and also to ensure a certain degree of freedom for interviewees. Conversations were recorded, after the transcriptions had been completed, a content analysis was applied in order to identify main ideas, shared by interviewees. The length of interviews varied from 30 minutes to an 1 hour and 45 minutes.

Interviewer: What was the reason for you to start the virtual community? (emergency therapists’ virtual community in Lithuania; the community was started by therapists in the beginning of the XXI c. in order to monitor, what Lithuanian hospital lacks an emergency-therapists and also to identify who could assume the responsibility for a day or night shift, in case of a colleague’s sudden or planned absence. The community is totally volunteer based, and its purpose is to provide each other with op-
opportunities regarding lifelong learning, and still to make sure that patients in any hospital in Lithuania are provided with the best medical service. Note by VZ and EB, authors of the chapter).

Interviewee (a man, 47 years old, 23 years of experience, MD. The respondent leads a team of er-therapists that applies Web 2.0 technologies, e.g.: Google Groups, Google calendar, shared documents, Skype, e-mail, etc.) What I think – I am still surprised how the thing is actually working... I think... well, this virtual community relies solely on the basis that... well, it provides an opportunity for people's responsibility to manifest itself....it is responsibility that runs it. Just recently I have read a book on organization by ... <...>. It is about the organization that is operated without any management. It is a kind of anarchy, but members of the organization find the ways for going on....they do not need a manager, a boss to say things, to set some guidelines. In any other hierarchical organization it would seem strange, but such practices do exist... I know it is not something extraordinary that we have created.... Other people do similar things... we risk, and it works.... We are far away from each other, geographically, and also, some of us have administrative responsibilities, financial too, we do not 'sit' in one place. Therefore we have chosen Google, as everyone has a g-mail account... we have chosen the easiest way...

The chapter begins with the quotation from the interview, one of the many, taken by authors of this chapter in order to highlight the following questions: What makes communities work? What makes virtual communities work? How does culture influence communities? Will we still have communities with such a rapid and overwhelming advancement of technologies that we are witnessing today?

These and the related questions will be further addressed in this chapter, and guidelines for possible directions of where the answers may (or may not) reside will be discussed.

First of all, the discussion will focus on the question, whether the very existence of technology and its ever increasing influence is an object of culture. Next, the relation between different elements of the culture (including technology) from the perspective of fostering interaction and learning is discussed. Lastly, the specificity of the socio-cultural system of ICT assisted learning together with recommendations for fostering further ICT assisted learning will be analysed.

Here we would like to emphasise that the concept, ICT assisted learning’ is used as a synonym to ‘e-learning’, even if authors are well aware of the fact that the level of immersion into face to face social interactions is much higher in, ICT assisted learning’, and sometimes almost non-existent in, e-learning’. The choice to use concepts as synonyms is based on the idea that in any case, it is necessary to overcome certain barriers in deciding to enrich learning experiences by introducing at first an element of ICT, and then to befit to its full, and use many opportunities offered by e-learning.

CONCEPTS OF CULTURE AND ITS RELATION TO LEARNING

The widest definition of culture is that it is something created by human beings, and therefore clearly not a part of nature (Christensen, 2003; Kavolis, 1995); ie culture is artificial.

Culture is a sociological concept with a number of different meanings but it usually refers to the totality of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and values of a social group (International Dictionary of Adult and Continuing Education, 1999, p. 65). Other authors note that culture is a set of the beliefs, attitudes and behaviours of people, which enables us to identify the similarities or differences that affect our ability to communicate effectively and to focus on our efforts in the process of development and learning (Ricard, 1993, p.6). Christensen (2003) summarizes definitions of culture and provides