Chapter 6
Models and Strategies to Support Students’ Initial Socialization in Web-Based Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Entering a learning system based on CSCL models may be a challenging experience. Beginner users are required to accomplish several tasks for the first time, such as learning to communicate by written discourse in an asynchronous manner, as well as becoming familiar with communication technologies and with the learning system. In order to support their initial steps several measures, which focus mainly on socialization with peers and instructors/tutors and familiarization with the learning system, may be adopted. The focus of this chapter is to present a model and some related strategies to support students’ initial socialization and familiarization in web-based learning environments. Such strategies have been developed and implemented by the authors over several years of experience as designers and instructors in graduate and post-graduate courses in Italy.

INTRODUCTION

In today’s experience, the growth and the gradual evolution of digital learning environments still presents many critical issues. In the context of online learning communities that are based on the principles of CSCL, for instance, one of the most crucial phases is when students enter the learning system. The reason why this phase is so critical is twofold. First, for most students it is their first online learning experience and they have to face several new problems, including learning to communicate by written discourse in an asynchronous manner, becoming familiar with communication technologies and with the learning system (Piskurich, 2003). Second, team learning and collaboration always involves a deepening
process of participation in a group, and it is closely connected to that of construction of group identity. Being part of a group or a community means, most of all, building a common and shared identity with the other members, as well as developing an active, self-sustaining participation (based also on criticism, conflict and means of conflict resolution) (Herring, 2004). Indeed, participation especially implies the reorganization of individual identities and the construction of a collective and shared identity within the group (Wenger, 1998).

Numerous studies, from the student side (e.g. Booker & Rebman, 2005; Trekles Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008) and from the hiring decision-makers’ perspective (Adams, 2008), have analyzed the factors implied in the acceptability of e-learning. Drop-out risk has been one of the most important issues tackled by distance learning literature. Among the various factors the following are undoubtedly the most recurrent: individual background, intrinsic and/or extrinsic motivation, academic integration, social integration, and technological environment (Jun, 2005). Other reasons have been explored (Araque, Roldan, & Salguero, 2009) and different methods to measure drop-out have been adopted (Lykourentzou, Giannoukos, Nikolopoulou, Mpardis, & Loumos, 2009). What emerges is that participants should be intrinsically motivated to complete their online studies with success and satisfaction (Bishop, 2007).

One of the most successful measures to complete an online program successfully seems a robust sense of community (Conrad, 2005; Dawson, 2006) and a good level of social presence (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Caspi & Blau, 2008). In these terms, one points out the importance of an orientation process that is able to facilitate not only access to the educational system, but above all entry into the peer group (i.e. in the community of learners), integration in the learning environment and socialization with all the subjects involved (teaching staff, support staff, peer group, etc.). Therefore, these activities set themselves the objective of reducing the initial difficulties for what concerns the initial knowledge and the skills required and aims at reducing any possible gaps with regard to the technical and interactive aspects (e.g. use of the platform, online interaction, use of tools).

The aim of this study is to present a model and some associated strategies able to facilitate the introduction of students in an online learning environment as part of their educational program. The ideas that will be presented have emerged as a result of the experience of the authors as designers and instructors in their long term involvement in graduate and post-graduate courses in Italy. The main purposes of the chapter are to present the three-step model named “Orienting, Preparing, and Supporting” (hence OP&S) and some solutions suitable to help learners taking their first steps in a CSCL environment based on the massive use of CMC. Two examples based on the implementation of the model will be provided to make the theoretical principals of the model explicit.

THE ROLE OF SOCIALIZATION IN LEARNING PROCESSES

The social, relational, and affective dynamics of learning are receiving more and more attention in the study of learning processes. Researchers and practitioners have acknowledged that a well-established social dimension is the prerequisite for collaborative learning and group-based work, especially within those approaches that are more sensitive to socio-constructivist provisions (e.g. Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

Social presence has been defined as “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999, p. 94). The literature has shown how social presence seems to support cognitive objectives as it encourages and supports meaningful critical thinking processes.