Chapter 5

How E-Learning Experience Enhances the Social Presence in Community of Practice: An Empirical Analysis

Constanta-Nicoleta Bodea
Academy of Economic Studies, Romania

Radu Ioan Mogos
Academy of Economic Studies, Romania

Maria-Iuliana Dascalu
Academy of Economic Studies, Romania

ABSTRACT

The chapter presents a study made in order to find out how the e-learning experience enhances the social presence in the community of practice. The study was carried out for the online master degree programme in project management, delivered by the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. The main research method was a survey and the research instrument was a questionnaire. Statistics and data mining were applied. Statistics was applied to check hypothesis and quantify the correlation significance. Due to the large number of the variables and the indirect relationships, the analysis paths become very complex and it would be extremely difficult to manage the analysis workflow. So, the data mining approach was chosen. As a theoretical framework and analytical perspective for this research, Wenger’s theories of learning in Community of practice (CoP), and the social presence model of Garrison et al., are applied. The study revealed that the characteristics of the online social presence in learning environments enhanced the students’ interest for CoPs. Another finding of this study is that for project management area there is not a significant correlation between the learning domain and that of the CoPs chosen to get involved. The reason is that most of the project personnel hold a first degree in an area other than project management.

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INTRODUCTION

Wenger defines a community of practice as a “group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger, 2006). Members of a community of practice (CoP) are engaged in common activities and discussions, sharing knowledge. They are united by confidence, trust and common identity (Kimble, Hildreth, & Wright, 2001). Learning and interaction are the necessary characteristics, in order to call a group as CoP. The interactions act as learning enablers. These two elements are very much related. The CoP members build relationships, interact and thus, learn together. They share experiences, stories, solutions to real problems, in other words, they share practices. Practice is, according to Wenger, about meaning as an experience of everyday life (Wenger, 1998). The primary interest of a CoP’s members is apprenticeship, as Wenger noticed (Kimble, Hildreth, & Wright, 2001). Apprenticeship means learning from the other more experimented members of CoP: “novices learn how to become professionals by being mentored by and appreciated to more experiences mentors” (Hara & Kling, 2002), they come into contact the expert ways of knowing, thinking and reasoning (Zimitat, 2007). New learners are learning through interactions with experienced members of the CoP, but the interesting aspect is that these more experienced members also learn by teaching.

Online learning communities and CoPs are close concepts. Every CoPs is a learning community, not necessarily online, but not every learning community is a CoPs. Online (or distance) education community is a learning community (Fredskild, 2008). When the learning approach is a combination of experience and theories and techniques exploration, conducted by a problem-based learning curriculum (PBL), then the community could act as a CoP (Zimitat, 2007). The characteristics of a learning community (Ragan & Tello, 2005) are: safety and trust, openness, respect – members feel valued and respected, responsiveness – moderated by facilitator, collaboration in both creation and consultation, relevance – relationship to participants academic life, challenge – high expectations for quality of outcomes, enjoyment - activities must include social opportunities, capacity of sharing individual and community outcomes with colleagues, empowerment - a sense that activity is focused around a crucial element and a desired outcome. The members of a learning community are engaged in joint activities and discussions, as CoPs’ members are, too. The common features of learning communities and CoPs are the stress put on domain experience, shared knowledge, shared knowing, the way in which time is managed, the way in which users’ needs are addressed and in which these needs emerge. The main difference between learning communities and CoPs are the formalization degree (Ragan & Tello, 2005): learning communities are formal, institutionally created, and CoPs are informal, self-generated. There are authors who mix the both concepts, of learning communities and communities of practice, when talking about a community in which certain professionals are trained. Baran and Çağıltay (2006) describe the relationship between teachers’ professional development and online communities of practice. They classify the communities of practice in task based learning communities (“produce a product or outcome and their members know each other. These are generally temporary groups whose members try to accomplish well-specified tasks”), knowledge based learning communities (“compose knowledge based on a specific area. Members of it may or may not know each other personally. There is a long-term commitment to construct knowledge base”) and practice based learning communities (these communities “differ from task based community mainly by voluntary participation. There is a shared activity among members of the community to produce knowledge. Tacit knowledge...
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