

ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES - AN INITIATIVE FOR MODERN EDUCATION

SANGEETA CHAUHAN

Associate Professor and Faculty Incharge, Guru Gobind Singh Indraprastha University, Dwarka, New Delhi, India

ABSTRACT

Today we live in a bigger, faster, more knowledgeable world, where people have to collaborate with others in order to reach their best potential. Teachers are no exception. Today's teacher has to collaborate with others in order to provide the best education to his or her students. The best ways to do this is with access to web-based Learning Communities or Professional Learning community. Professional Learning Community (PLC) means a community of stakeholders that are all working together focused on the best interest of the students, where results are measured by an increase in student achievement. These stakeholders are anyone with an interest in that particular school from within the school community—school leaders or administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and community members. Collaboration is a key factor in a PLC. Imagine everyone working together for the best interest of the students and focused on a culture of assessment-driven continuous improvement, and you have a PLC. The more extensively involved teachers were in professional activities, such as collaboration with others and involvement in online learning communities, the more likely they were to use computers in varying ways. That said, with access to current technology, teachers that are more active in their school environment are in a position to help other teachers become more accomplished in the area of using computer technology in their teaching (Becker, 2000). The opportunities are endless and the doors to 24/7 learning are opened, suiting both the learner and in time. This paper focuses on the need and relevance of on-line learning communities in today's world and how this online learning would be a step towards revolutionizing the demands of modern education. If schools/ colleges realize the potential of just one or two of these aspects and fully embrace this change, it will be a revolutionary moment.

KEYWORDS: Online Teaching, Online Courses

INTRODUCTION

Bruner (1960) argued that children are ready to learn when teachers are ready to teach. (<http://www.simplypsychology.org/bruner.html>) The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996) reported, "What teachers know and do is the most important influence on what students learn." <http://www.namodemello.com.br/pdf/tendencias/whatmattersmost.pdf>

Today's technological tools make it possible to teach in new ways -- to do things differently or even to do entirely different things. Elsewhere we build a case for the multiple forces at play today for educational reform and how these reform goals have led to a greater emphasis on collaboration and the creation of learning communities as appropriate and effective vehicles for new learning for students.

Technology enables educators to meet remotely to experience growth as teachers. In the 21st century, working environments are evolving into collaborative places where knowledge is disseminated by autonomous individuals

organized into more lateral and less hierarchical structures.

Today's technologies have helped create fluid linkages where there used to be harsh divides. "These technologies form rich socio-technical networks that have come to constitute life in this digital age, and participation in these networks is becoming commonplace. They exist in various stages, forms, and venues".

According to Wilson and Ryder (1996), "groups become communities when they interact with each other and stay together long enough to form a set of habits and conventions and when they come to depend upon each other for the accomplishment of certain ends"

Recent years have yielded research into the importance of community and online teaching in online courses. This has expanded into the idea of a social presence where one is able to be seen as a real person in a virtual environment. Study findings have supported the idea that the cause of success in an online environment is the establishment of an effective learning community.

Web 2.0 tools have critically elevated the social networking activity and skills of individuals. Not only are young people highly active in social networks, but older individuals are also showing a huge increase in their use of these tools. The attraction of older age groups is, of course, social connection and community building among professional and casual peers and friends. The following graph of a Pew Internet study shows the various age groups and the increase of use. Much has been written recently about the impact of social networking tools in teaching and learning and how educators can build on the skills of their students in using these tools. The discussion here does not negate that good work but introduces the idea that social networking is only the beginning of a longer and more complex process of socially constructed learning and ultimately collaboration and knowledge building. That is, if educators only integrate the ability of students to connect and socialize, deeper points of learning will be missed. While good teaching and learning rests on effective relationships (Cummins, 2000), in an active learning community, those relationships should evolve into actual idea exchange and knowledge construction.

What Social Networking Offers to Learning The most effective pedagogical approach using new technology is social constructivism, as it builds on social interaction and engagement, which is at the heart of Web 2.0 technology. As I have already mentioned, the rise in social networking is not only with younger generations, but it is the younger generations who are actually changing how instruction is delivered and evaluated based on their high level of social engagement using technology in various aspects of their lives. In general, social networking provides new ways to connect and share information and create networks of interest. So, while in more traditional learning environments much of this must be orchestrated.

It is often considered quite "cool" by students when teachers also have Face book links and provide a shared group for the class online. A note of caution here: Sometimes, if the instructor's presence is only social in nature, it can seem "creepy" to students and an intrusion on their social space. Owing to this, specific instructional use is more effective and acceptable for students to understand why the teacher has created the space.

What Social Networking Does Not Offer to Learning While this level of connection and shared information is a great first step in community building, it does not necessarily lead to learning communities or the sharing of ideas. This must happen intentionally and is where the instructor is very much a necessary support to the process. A recent 2009

case study explored the instructional benefits of social networking tools in building learning communities 2009: Using Social Networking Tools to Build Learning Communities: A Case Study of the Punahou Technology Lab School Ning, posted by April Hayman, April, 2009), retrieved from(<http://aprilhayman.wordpress.com/2009/04/15/tcc-2009-using-social-networking-tools-to-build-learning-communities-a-case-study-of-the-punahou-technology-lab-school-ning/>)

The study worked with school children in grades 4 through 10 at a school in Honolulu, HI. What was discovered was that while there were the usual challenges with new technology tools, such as orientation and lack of student confidence in their use, there was an increased challenge to actually "present" ideas publicly. While the technology proved incredibly useful in terms of hosting a variety of media resources and storing large amounts of information, the challenge was with the students becoming "learning community participants." That is, seeing their own ideas as valuable to the wider community and sharing those openly. This is not new to instruction as it is a continuing challenge to all teachers to encourage confidence and learner autonomy and to develop collaborative learning skills that will benefit the students throughout their entire lives. What social Networking tools provide is a forum for this work to take place but only with relevant and expert intervention by the instructor.

Today's technological tools make it possible to teach in new ways -- to do things differently or even to do entirely different things. Elsewhere we build a case for the multiple forces at play today for educational reform and how these reform goals have led to a greater emphasis on collaboration and the creation of learning communities as appropriate and effective vehicles for new learning for students. Collaborative Online Continuing Education: Professional Development through Learning Communities What is a Learning Community?

From Vygotsky's social constructivist perspective, the socio cultural context influences the thinking and creation of meaning. Meaning making is a process of negotiation among the participants through dialogues or conversations. The opportunity to interact with other learners in sharing, constructing and negotiating meaning leads to knowledge construction.

Within a constructivist model, learning is based on constructing meaning from experience, and interpreting the world largely through the social processes (Jonassen, 2000)

Knowledge construction in our society is rarely done in isolation. People in a field work together building on the ideas and practices of the group. Learning increasingly takes place in communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) or learning communities

(Ruopp, Gal, Drayton, and Pfister, 1993; Pea and Gomez, 1992). (<http://bbaplc.wikispaces.com/Learning+Communities>)

A learning community is a group of people who share a common interest in a topic or area, a particular form of discourse about their phenomena, tools and sense making approaches for building collaborative knowledge, and valued activities These communities may be large, the task general, and the form of communication distant, as in a group of mathematicians around the world developed.

How does "Community" Relate to Learning? According to Webster's Dictionary, a community is "any group living in the same area or having interests, work, etc. in common." While communities have existed since the beginning of humankind, the growing interest around the concept today is largely a result of the breakdown of the

geographic assumption underlying this simple definition. Most communities - whether online or off - share a number of qualities and characteristics: they are held together by distinct operating norms; members are distinguished by their formal and informal roles; trust must be built to ensure quality interactions; and a shared sense of purpose serves as the glue that bonds the community together. Communities focused on learning, in our opinion, are only "communities" if they possess these characteristics and engage people in a learning process over time. Arguably, the term "community" has become an ambiguous buzzword. In many instances, the concept has become synonymous with online discussion boards and chat rooms. When put into a learning context, however, community can be a vehicle for connecting people to other people's stories, experiences, and mentoring, which results in accelerated learning and the sharing of "tacit" knowledge**within an organization. Alternatively, they can be small, the task specific, and the communication close, as when a team of teachers and students plan the charter of their school.

The question arises: Why we should consider building community into our overall learning strategy?

Students, teachers and all other stake holders find a place where they can chat, discuss and distribute and accept or discard others point of view. They can voice their opinions, experiences problems and issues to solve and get solved by others.

Physical in accessibility can easily be overcome. Better academic achievements could be achieved as efforts are more directional and focussed on academic activities. Communities extend learning by creating a structure whereby people can learn from "informal" interactions. Approximately 70% of what an employee needs to know for success is learned outside of formal training (e.g., on the job, through mentoring, etc.).

Communities are a way to elicit and share practical know-how that would otherwise remain untapped. Tacit knowledge - the informal knowledge about "how things really get done around here" and ultimately, how to be successful in one's job - is extremely difficult to capture, codify and deliver through discrete learning objects and traditional training programs.

Communities become a boundary less container for knowledge and relationships that can be used to increase individual effectiveness and a company's overall competitive advantage. Creating and structuring opportunities for people to network, communicate, mentor, and learn from each other can help capture, formalize, and disseminate tacit knowledge, and thus accelerate learning and organizational effectiveness. For most learning professionals today, the question isn't if building communities will deliver value to the organization, but rather what kind of community is needed and what are the steps involved in building it.

ONLINE

A defining feature of a networked school is that much of the activity will take place in the online environment. This will include both synchronous and asynchronous activity, using a wide range of technologies – including video conferencing, webinars, learning management systems and Web 2.0 tools. Online access should embrace both the use of specific access end points in a school and provision for ubiquitous access by students from anywhere, at any time using any device.

Benefits: There are a range of reasons why schools may choose to be a part of an LCO, including:

- providing greater access to curriculum choices for students
- providing access to subject matter experts to enhance school-based learning
- participation in virtual field trips
- engaging students in collaborative projects
- supporting gifted and talented students by enabling them to connect with others with similar skills and interests
- sharing (both accessing and contributing) a wide range of rich and current resources to support learning
- providing professional learning opportunities for teachers, including virtual staff meetings etc.
- Whatever the reason, there are considerable benefits that can be realised from making this sort of commitment, including:
 - retention of students who may otherwise choose to go elsewhere for their education
 - retention of specialist staff who are now able to teach in their specialist area, rather than taking ‘filler’ classes to make up a teaching load
 - access to experts in subject areas not available locally
 - sharing of resources, resulting in lower costs and increased relevance and use
 - provision of high interest, relevant and authentic learning experiences for students.

We live in an age of ‘collaboration’, where the traditional view of schools as being in competition with one another must be balanced against the considerable benefits of collaboration and supporting each others’ work.

Commitment is one way of achieving this. Creating Collaborative Learning Communities. When creating collaborative learning communities, community builders should consider much more than just technology. Ideally the conversation begins by clarifying how objectives translate into group-level and individual competency requirements. From there, learning objectives may be defined that support competency gaps.

Group processes to achieve the learning objectives then become clear, along with the appropriate technology to support these processes.

While differences between online and in-person facilitation definitely exist, many seasoned trainers and facilitators discount their skills when it comes to online community building. Just as any trainer might facilitate introductions, set expectations, and ensure equal participation; these same activities (and other common group processes) can and should be applied in the online world. A number of approaches can help engage learners in collaborative online learning environments. We have categorized these under the broad headings of people, group processes, and supporting technology.

While not all of the following design principles may apply to a given community, our framework is intended to serve as a basic starting point when creating eLearning or blended learning collaborative environments.

PEOPLE

- Clearly Define Roles - Describe the relationship between the different roles in the community (including the instructor, subgroups, group leaders/facilitators, and individual learners) and outline their responsibilities and interdependencies.
- Create Sub-Groups - Create sub-groupings of learners that have their own online space for small group learning activities and group project collaboration.
- Support Individuality - Provide a way for learners to create personal profiles that contain their photos and salient information to the topic at hand (e.g., for a course on marketing, for example, a profile item might include something fun such as "favorite innovative television commercial").

GROUP PROCESSES

- Establish Operating Norms - Provide guidelines for online (and offline) etiquette and obtain agreement on the behavior that will lead to successful group and individual learning outcomes (e.g., everyone logs in three times a week, everyone posts one question and one response on the discussion board, etc.).
- Foster an Environment of Trust - Establishing and aligning learners' expectations around shared objectives, including how individuals' contributions contribute to the broader success of the group, helps create an environment characterized by sharing and openness. Explicitly and collaboratively defining the common values and behavior that will contribute to achieving the shared goals of the group also builds trust.
- Create a Buddy System - Keeping learners engaged and participating in an online environment can be challenging. By creating a "buddy system" whereby pairs or groups of learners are responsible for joint participation and contribution (co-development of a case study, alternating postings in the discussion area, etc.), a support structure can be created to keep people engaged. Technology Provide an Integrated and Easy-to-Use Collaborative Learning Environment Online learning environments come in many shapes and sizes. Some typical features of these web-based environments include:

Synchronous Tools

- Audio Conferencing
- Web Conferencing
- Video Conferencing
- Chat
- Instant Messaging
- White Boarding

Asynchronous Tools

- Discussion Boards

- Calendar
- Website Links
- Group Announcements
- Messaging / E-mail
- Surveys & Polls
- Decision Support Tools Content Integration
- Interactive CBTs
- Streaming Audio & Video
- Narrated Slideshows
- Web books

Document Management

- Resource Library
- Document Collaboration
- Version Tracking & Control
- Permission Based Access

In addition to features, simplicity and ease-of-use are the most important attributes to consider when creating or selecting an environment. The goal of technology should be to serve the community through its transparency - learners' time should be spent learning about the topic at hand, not about how to use a given technology. Ideally technology should be transparent to the instructor as well - no technical knowledge should be required to customize or manage the environment.

CONCLUSIONS

As we begin to focus more on the learning process, it becomes evident that various skills are developed as a result of using specific tools or applying ideas to a specific context.

For example, the skills of discussion and dialog can be enhanced through in-class or online discussion groups, and collaboration can be developed through ideas sharing and concept building.

It is important to recognize, however, that with Web 2.0 tools a host of skills can be developed, sometimes sequentially and sometimes simultaneously. Blogger, Marcia Connor, posted the following Sunday Oct. 19, 2008: "These new literacy's almost all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking. These skills build on the foundation of traditional literacy, research and technical skills, and critical analysis hopefully addressed in each classroom and every home. Our goals should be to encourage children and youth to develop the skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence needed to be full participants in contemporary society." Among those listed by Connor (quoting from MIT and other sources) are skills in:

- Simulation: the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes;
- Collective intelligence: the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal; and
- Negotiation: the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives and grasping and following alternative norms.

While these are clearly social in essence, we must realize that they can be developed in a variety of ways and as a result of a variety of technology uses. It is interesting that these skills and those also listed in the blog are not isolated, but each one is interrelated in some way. In other words, rather than an activity being task-based with only one method of completion, if students are provided with a problem to solve or information to research and discuss using a variety of tools, many related skills will be developed. Therefore the actual process of learning becomes rich and diverse and much more likely to meet more learning needs of students.

So social interaction and relationships can be an integral part of learning more than ever and can certainly enrich the learning experience for our students. What is vital to realize however, is that the motivation created by these kinds of networks must be maximized by the instructor to benefit the students in their growth and development as learning community participants. It is important to move students beyond social interaction to the kind of learning communities that are dynamic, rich, and very much reflective of the students who are participating.

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