

ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES: ADOPTING A LEARNER-CENTRED PERSPECTIVE TO FRAME LIFELONG LEARNING FUTURES

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ABSTRACT

The association between perceptions of learning context and approaches to learning is repeatedly emphasised within research literature. Here, the concept of virtual learning communities is analysed from the learner's perspective. Learners identify pressures and recognise personal and professional applications for knowledge collaboratively constructed within the context of an online course.

KEYWORDS

Online learning communities - learner perspectives - lifelong learning

INTRODUCTION

Researchers and educators are becoming increasingly aware of the potential of learning communities for maximising learning and there is a perception that collaborative engagement within community contexts will facilitate successful achievement of learning objectives (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). The association between perceptions of learning context and approaches to learning has been repeatedly identified and emphasised as significant within research literature (Meyer & Muller, 1990). However, despite the effort expended to develop and implement computer mediated learning environments and online courses, they often fail to create effective settings for learning and knowledge construction (Oliver & Herrington, 2003). Within this paper, discussion of the pressures and possibilities of online learning communities related to lifelong learning are explored from the learner's perspective. Vygotsky's theory of development (Vygotsky, 1978) serves as a conceptual framework for the study and discussion of the findings are structured around four dimensions of community identified by Rovai (2002) as spirit, trust, interaction and goals and expectations.

Literature Review

The concept of "learning communities" is to the fore of educational and organisational literature and discussion (Kilpatrick, Barrett, & Jones, 2003) and, while there is a belief that the development of learning communities should be considered a primary goal, there is little empirical evidence to guide instructors in the development process (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Part of the problem may lie in the fact that there is a lack of consensus about what constitutes a learning community. Consequently, definitions continue to evolve in response to the diverse needs of learners and the communities in which

they learn (Kilpatrick *et al.*, 2003). Current definitional themes (Rovai, 2002), suggest that a learning community may be described as a group of individuals who share a common purpose or goal, collaborate to address learning needs and draw from individual and shared experiences in order to construct knowledge and enhance the individual and collective potential of community members. From this perspective an online course could be conceived as a 'virtual' learning community.

The community construct is widely accepted as a sense rather than a tangible entity (Wiesenfeld, 1996) and, although it has been argued that physical separation reduces the sense of community and gives rise to feelings of disconnection, in today's society the concept is perceived to be more relational than geographical (Brook & Oliver, 2003). Hill (1996) maintains that, based on this perspective, if we are to come to an understanding of sense of community we need to study it in a variety of contexts. Although there is theoretical debate about the role that communities play in the learning process, there is little doubt as to their value to learning (Hung, Tan, & Koh, 2006) as strong feelings of community are thought to increase persistence in courses, the flow of information among learners, the availability of support and commitment to group goals (Wellman, 1999). Kilpatrick *et al.* (2003) suggest that the core business of learning communities is to share knowledge through collaboration, a view supported by Palloff and Pratt (2005), who consider the two to be interdependent (while collaborative activity can assist the development of a sense of community, a sense of community is needed in order for collaboration to occur).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Much of the focus on learning communities springs from socio-cultural research (Wertsch, 1995). Within this paper Vygotsky's theory of development is used as a conceptual lens to view learning in online learning communities. From a social constructivist perspective learning is a social and situated process. The paradigm is

based on the principle that individuals and communities construct knowledge based on their experience and are constantly refining knowledge of the world by interacting in social and cultural contexts (Kanuka & Anderson, 1999). Participants actively construct meaning through language; thus learners learn by engaging in dialogue and the thinking of individuals is influenced by the group they are working in. Vygotsky's theory is appropriate to the themes of learning communities and lifelong learning as it is based on three interrelated precepts: that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems and can be best understood when investigated over their historical development. Palloff and Pratt (2005) are of the view that a strong sense of community can assist groups to move more effectively through the various phases of their development. The underlying assumption within current literature and the premise of the theoretical framework is that learning is a dynamic, interdependent, intrapersonal and interpersonal process. Learning can be viewed as a continuum, based on previous experience and shared knowledge and each interaction and learning event has the potential to contribute to and potentially to extend the learner's knowledge and understanding. Thus learning is a continuous lifelong activity.

METHOD

This paper reports the findings of one aspect of a larger research study, designed to understand how learners interact and construct knowledge in online environments, specifically, from large group, small group and individual perspectives. Here the focus of inquiry is upon how individual learners conceptualise interaction and knowledge construction within the context of an online course.

Research participants

The virtual community comprised students engaged in an online course offered to undergraduates within a regional university in Australia. The course was core within the Bachelor of Health Promotion and an elective for several different programs offered by the university. Ethical clearance was granted by the university's human ethics committee to investigate learner interaction and knowledge construction in online learning environments. 21 students completed the course and were invited to participate; one learner chose not to participate. Each participant is identified by a pseudonym.

Procedure

Electronic transcripts of responses submitted by learners to the class discussion board, during week three and week eight of the course, were purposefully selected. The relevance of responses during these weeks relates to the nature of the discussions which revolved around the development of online relationships and student perceptions of online learning groups. The content of transcripts were inductively categorized and thematically coded, data were managed with the assistance of qualitative software (QSR NVivo, 2006).

RESULTS

From a Vygotskyian perspective, the online course represents a semiotic mechanism for learning, as student interaction and learning take place in a text based, computer mediated environment. The mediated nature of the interactions presents the students with a series of challenges and opportunities in respect of how they interact and how they construct knowledge within the course. Based on learner perceptions, the results and discussion of this study are structured around four dimensions of community identified by Rovai (2002) as spirit, trust, interaction and goals and expectations; the concept of mediation, from the conceptual framework, is also incorporated.

Pressures

Emily: *"I have found working in a group in an online environment very challenging. I love the social aspect of having a group with common goals, but find communication online to be a little frustrating and sometimes hard to understand. Miscommunication happens so easily, whether due to spelling mistakes, the inability to place emphasis on specific words to enhance understanding, or the inability to use nonverbal behavior to communicate meaning such as a joking comment. The task of making a simple decision such as organizing a time to chat can become a long drawn-out process, which can be frustrating as I like to do things quickly. Groups take time to deliberate about alternative courses of action. It takes a substantial time for each person to describe ideas, clarify misunderstandings and respond to questions or criticisms".*

Jane: *"Miscommunications occur frequently but that is all part of the learning process. Trying to work out ways to communicate effectively, online, is a task on*

its own[,] let alone the work we actually have to do for this course”.

Fiona: “...this online course *FORCES* students to contribute, participate and voice their opinions and for that reason I think it's very good”.

Jenny: “When my husband is online with work or his course he doesn't hear me and when I speak to the kids they also are completely detached from reality. It is more of a detachment than if they were just reading. Now I have started my course my family are complaining about me being the same way. We have actually limited our children to half an hour a day on computer even for online study as we feel the computer is interfering with our family connectedness”.

Possibilities

Morgan: “I find that no matter what sort of learning you participate in, you will only get out of it, what you put in. The more effort you exert the more beneficial the outcomes and learning experience should be”.

Community spirit: trust, unity and support

Nari: “I think the fact that we are all on common ground with studying similar courses and having similar career goals may enhance our ability to trust those in our class, and effectively self-disclose information”.

Belinda: “I am enjoying the OLG [online learning group] more-so with each passing week, due to the support of my fellow group members and the sense of unity that's evolving over time.”

Rena: “I also feel connected with others and assured that help is available as everyone is so quick to respond in answering queries or problems on the discussion board”.

Sense of place: safe but surreal!

Fiona: “I think it's better to make a few mistakes and stumble a bit in this forgiving forum than wait until we're out in the professional world where stumbling and mistakes might not be so readily tolerated”.

Jenny: “I have also found myself sitting around in pj's [pyjamas] when there is a lot of work to get done. The other day my husband rang from work and I was really absorbed in an assignment on the computer. He mentioned the time which was midday[.] I thought it was only 10.30 as the stopped study clock indicated. It was cool

and overcast and not noticing the stopped clock and being on the computer I felt like I was in a time warp”.

Mediated interaction: power, voice and understanding

Simon: “With this setup each person can say what they feel and think without being interrupted whi[le] some face to face groups operate with a centralized pattern of power that privileges only one or two members of the group/class”.

Nari: “I find that meeting online allows me to express my feelings more openly. I don't feel threatened by others opinions of me, as they cannot see my lack of confidence in my kinesics (as they would in face to face meetings) and I cannot see their non-verbal feedback to my comments, whether they agree or disagree or think [I] sound stupid. When I associate with people face to face, I often feel that my comments make me sound unintelligent, and I often find people talking over the top of me, which really disconfirms and angers me”.

Kirin: “When communicating online I can assert myself more, and I have time to think about my response and not sound like a goof, if I say something stupid because I haven't thought about it”.

Alaine: “Although at first I was skeptical about how well an online group would work, I was pleasantly surprised to find that overall our small group communicated well and have accomplished set tasks effectively. We have all learned from each other because through interacting we have had the opportunity to expand the concepts within the theory. We have done this by offering examples that we think relate these theories back to communication we have experienced. Our group then uses our collaboration sessions to discuss this further[,] giving even more clarity and helping each other to grasp the concepts”.

Sustainable outcomes

Emily: “Constructive group communication requires that members use effective verbal and nonverbal communication, check perceptions with each other, listen mindfully, build good climates and adapt communication to each other and various group goals and situations (Wood 2004). While some of these are impossible via the online forum (such as the nonverbal behavior), and others need to be adapted (such as reading mindfully rather than listening mindfully), these are all important

communication skills that, if used, can enhance not only group work, but [also] every relationship in a person[']s life.”.

Morgan: “...online communication plays a large part in my life, both professionally and socially, and I do believe it has many benefits, in bringing people closer together, especially when distance may separate them. This course is an example of many people, from around Australia[,] communicating even though a great distance separates us physically. How truly fantastic is that[?] We don't even have to leave our homes to study and advance in the world of education...”

Fiona: “The fact that this course is based on group work is entirely understandable given that in the workforce operating in groups (and teams) is commonplace; and the major requirement is good communication skills, not only in groups but [also] in one-on-one relationships. The more practice we have and the more prepared we are for it, the more successful we'll be. Of course the spill over and application of these skills into our personal lives can only benefit us”.

DISCUSSION

Community spirit and sense of place

There is continuing concern that computer mediated interaction may not be a sufficiently rich mode of communication to sustain a sense of community and engender trust relations (Haythornthwaite & Aviv, 2005). While collaborative learning does not require long term interaction to be useful and effective, building trust in an online community that promotes collaboration does (Haythornthwaite & Aviv, 2005). How much time is required to build trust and develop a sense of community? Within this course participants developed trusting relationships and perceived a sense of community within a relatively short period of time, as between weeks three and eight of the twelve week course learners identified ‘unity’ within groups and a sense of belonging and safety in their learning environment, despite the fact that the environment did at times feel surreal. Thus it was possible for learners to develop a sense of community during an online course within an academic term.

Mediated interaction: trust, voice and understanding

According to Sonn, Bishop and Drew (1999), the experience within a community is context specific. Within this course, learners raised concerns associated with the development of

trust, owing primarily to the absence of visual, non-verbal cues and the fact that their interaction was mediated by text. Despite initial misgivings learners did overcome this barrier and adapted by posting photos and using electronic text, textual emphasis and emoticons. Of particular interest to the structure and design of future learning contexts is the fact that students perceived this online environment as a safe and supportive forum for participation and self expression.

Goals and expectations

In today's society computer-mediated communication is commonplace and an understanding of how to work in virtual teams is becoming a fundamental competence in many organisations (Palloff & Pratt, 2005). Although learners identified pressures associated with course workload and the time required for interaction and collaboration, this pressure was offset as learners acknowledged that their time was being well spent. Overall learners perceived the process as worthwhile, foreseeing wider personal and professional applications for their knowledge, skill and confidence.

CONCLUSION

Online interaction and collaboration emulate future workforce practices. Thus the knowledge and skills developed by learners, while collaborating as members of an online learning community, have the potential to prepare participants for work. The findings of this study suggest that despite pressures associated with computer mediated communication, online interaction can engender a sense of community, within a twelve week academic term. Within this learning community the online environment was perceived as both safe and supportive, promoting participation and confidence to communicate. Learners also acknowledged future personal and professional applications for the knowledge and skills they had developed during the course. With lifelong learning as the core focus it would appear that sustainable, learning outcomes are achievable from ‘virtual’ learning communities.

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