

Chapter 16

Developing Social Capital in a Cross-Cultural E-Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

With fast development of internet technology and social media tools, e-learning is expanding drastically. E-learning builds a unique global learning community that brings in students from all over the world, which creates an optimum opportunity for students to learn from each other, work collaboratively, establish shared norms and values, and build mutual trust and respectful relationships. The four major components of social capital as delineated by Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) are trust, norms, obligations, and identification, and its core value is about building trustworthy and respectful relationships among people. From this perspective, e-learning has raised the mission of education to a higher level – promoting the development of social capital. This chapter focuses on two sub topics: 1) building a global e-learning community to develop social capital and 2) creating purposeful and meaningful teaching and learning activities to build trustful and collaborative relationships among students.

INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Socio-Cultural Systems*, Elwell (2013) begins his first chapter by describing the map-making process, from the initial inadequate and inaccurate reflection of world geography to the modern advanced technology-positioned map with high accuracy. Today's e-learning is reversing this process also through advanced technology philosophically; the world is more open and boundaries are disappearing. This reversing

process is our thought shifting from “analytical thinking, the science of dealing with independent sets of variables, to systems thinking, the art, and science of handling interdependent set of variables” (Gharajedaghi, 2012, p.1). “E-learning is emerging from the convergence of media, the Web and growth in understanding the true nature of learning on all levels” (Luskin, 2002, preface). E-learning is not only a process of disseminating education through Internet (a technical dependent process) – it is a very multifarious process involv-

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ing the art and sciences to address the complex relationships among human beings. Bonk asserts (2009) that the learning clientele is becoming more and more diverse each day due to increased access to learning, lifelong learning pursuits, recertification needs, immigration, longer life spans, better course marketing, etc. The advanced technology connects the diverse learners together from all over the world.

Education is not a privilege for the wealthy; it is an equal human right. Everyone is entitled to receive education. The importance of education is no longer just treasured by those who can afford it, but also by the great populace because it directly affects the quality of their life. With the dramatically increasing demand for education, e-learning has become one of the most affordable and effective solutions to meet this need. E-learning has qualitative changes since its initiation in early 60's, from a simple convenient delivery channel addressing growing educational challenges and student dynamic needs to an outreaching pathway to promote free open education to the great populace; from a sole for-profit business for academic degrees to a powerful means to improve the quality of people's life. It empowers and frees the mind of thousands who could not even dream of the education that is available to them today!

The importance of e-learning goes way beyond the knowledge distribution. It creates a global e-learning community that brings in people from different parts of the world. It immensely increases our virtual neighborhood to the entire world, which expands the scope for developing social capital. In this unique community, students are acculturating new values that promote effective communication, mutual understanding, respectful relationships, successful cooperation, and the development of social capital through appropriate use of modern technologies. This new learning community is enriched by cultural diversities, and at the same time a new shared value system is taking shape among community members. Students are able to learn new knowledge and

skills from each other that are lacking in their own culture; and work collaboratively together to achieve the common goal to benefit society. "Knowledge not only exists within the individual minds of a community's members, but also in the communication that unfolds between community members" (Gunawardena et al., 2006, p.221). E-learning also has a far-reaching and extended influence on the millions of local communities. Students will bring back what they have learned in this e-learning community and share with their own people to further develop social capital. This impact will be enormous.

Luskin predicted as early as 2002 that "Media centric and e-learning, including web-based or online learning is likely to be the fastest-growing method for creating access to education and training in the next quarter century" (preface). A half of a quarter century later today, the expansion of e-learning is astonishing. Traditional institutions have incorporated e-learning as part of curriculum delivery. More than a decade ago in 2002, MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) announced its OpenCourseWare (OCW) and spearheaded the open education movement. Many higher educational institutions followed MIT's footsteps and published free online courses to public. Today, open education courses break the record on daily basis, new well-organized and easily accessible e-learning education websites appear one after another. This open-source education plays a fundamental role in promoting free global e-learning. "The Internet provides the digital yarn that knits them all together" and "The communication, storage, community-building, interactive, synchronous, and asynchronous aspects of the Internet make it the most flexible and scalable tool available to assist learning" (Luskin, 2002, p. 17).

E in e-learning has been defined very broadly by Luskin (2010) "exciting, empirical, empathetic, extra, emerging, energetic, exceptional, early, eloquent, everywhere, ephemeral, extended, effortless, epic, evangelistic, eclectic, engaging,

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