

Chapter 20

The Use of Technology to Promote Engagement: Five Case Studies in Distance Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores five case studies to examine technology's impact on teaching, learning, and service. Each case study examined an online or hybrid course that primarily focused on community engagement through non-traditional methods, and in which students were responsible for creating knowledge in a way that would inform a community. Through this examination the chapter shows how what is known about civic engagement and citizenship is changing due to the fact that society is evolving and technology is being used in many ways to connect communities. By using Web 2.0 tools the learning environment encouraged individualized learning while still increasing the impact of learning beyond traditional boundaries of a brick and mortar institution. Finally, this chapter shows that by incorporating student-created projects using Web 2.0 tools it provided an overwhelming benefit to students in the form of self-empowerment. Students were able to develop personalized projects that positively impacted their communities.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores five case studies to examine technology's impact on teaching, learning, and service. Each case study examined an online or hybrid course that primarily focused on community engagement through non-traditional methods, and in which students were responsible for creating knowledge in a way that would inform a community.

Each course provided knowledge and information to a chosen community on a variety of topics by using collaborative web-based tools, webpage development and analytics, interactive communication techniques, and/or Internet based assessment methods. The case studies highlighted the ability to move community engagement, combined with learning outcomes, into a technological age in which distance education and web-based learning is increasing. Through the examination of the six courses, this chapter expands on exist-

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ing community engagement pedagogy and how it was molded to fit within distance learning and global communities.

Community Engagement

For the purpose of these case studies, community engagement pedagogy encompasses many forms of civic education, from service learning to community-based partnerships. As the case studies will show, much of what is known about civic engagement and citizenship is changing due to the fact that society is evolving and technology is being used in many ways to connect communities. Technology has allowed vast distances to become irrelevant with the ability to connect with faculty and peers in the pursuit of higher education. Today, technology can provide a venue for social engagement and civic responsibility through service learning. According to Bennet and Greene (2001) “service learning (and ultimately community engagement) can be easily incorporated into online learning” (p. 22). The Guthrie and McCracken article, *Making a difference online: Facilitating service-learning through distance education* (2010), discussed how combining online learning and engagement pedagogy strengthens the course and the teaching methods. This engagement via an online format gives institutions the opportunity to reach communities far away, thus providing a positive impact in the communities of individual students (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010a). Additionally, it is speculated that students will seek out community engagement courses because it will help them build lasting relationships for future employment (Strait & Sauer, 2004).

Learning through Distance Education

Furthermore, through examination of the courses in the case studies, it was shown that by using Web 2.0 tools as a supplement tool the environment encouraged individualized learning. This use of

technology in the courses increased the impact of learning beyond the traditional boundaries of a brick and mortar institution. It is also important to note that even though technology is the main focus of this chapter when describing community engagement activities, the use of technology was not the sole focus of the professors teaching the courses. And yet, each professor used technology to enhance an already enriched environment, to better guide students to participate with the community, and to push students to develop understanding and new knowledge of the course content. These courses revealed how students were able to use technology rich coursework to not only learn information but also to create information. As Wesch (2009) states “it becomes... more important for [students] to be able to find, sort, analyze, share, discuss, critique, and create information. They need to move from being simply knowledgeable to being knowledge-able” (p. 5).

Finally, the review of these courses showed an overwhelming benefit to students in the form of self-empowerment. Students were able to develop personalized projects that invited them to be part of the “pedagogical process” (Major, 2014) and that positively impacted their communities. Furthermore, these student-created projects provide a unique opportunity to the classroom because of the technology incorporated within the course. As the students developed their projects under the guidelines of the course in which they were enrolled, they began expanding and generating new learning experiences as a result of the technology. This in turn allowed their environment to expand and reach new situations and information relevant to their project.

BACKGROUND

The five case studies were developed out of a dissertation research study that focused on what civic engagement meant in the online environment. Each study was uncovered as the research

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