Chapter 37
Virtual Learning Communities in Organizations and Institutions of Higher Learning:
Implications for Technology, Learning Practice, and Organizational Culture

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ABSTRACT

Organizational learning theory, adult learning theory, and basic human performance work in community psychology and anthropology inform this chapter which examines Virtual Learning Communities (VLC) in different types of organizations. Specifically, examples of VLC use in a corporate setting and an institute of higher learning are examined. The chapter reviews key components necessary for success when using VLC, as well as VLC effectiveness versus their limitations. Learnings obtained from experience with and research on VLCs are also discussed. The chapter ends by exploring the major implications for practitioners in adult learning, human resource development, and related disciplines.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual Learning Communities (VLC) has begun to appear online under the sponsorship of both organizations and institutions of higher education. Although psychological communities that have emphasized learning have been described for over three decades, recent research has reported that similar communities have developed on the Internet. In this chapter, the basic uses of VLC are discussed and the limitations on learning effectiveness within VLC are identified. An original research study of graduate students in a master's degree program is presented and examines emotional attachments in VLC. The major implications of VLC for practitioners in adult learning, human

resource development and related disciplines are then presented. This chapter will strive to illustrate the importance of emotional attachment to successful experiences in VLC.

This chapter focuses on the history, attributes, evolution and current utilization of VLC (Blanchard, 2008; Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Brown, 2000 & 2001; Hill, 2002; Jones, 1997; Koh & Kim, 2004; Lin, 2008; Rheingold, 1993; Sangwan, 2005; Stevens, 2012). This work is informed by organizational learning theory, adult learning theory, and basic human performance work in community psychology and anthropology.

BACKGROUND

Different types of learning communities exist in numerous socio-cultural organizations (Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004; Langer, 2011). This chapter examines examples of these learning communities, including those first developed in the classroom as a reconceptualization of educational practice (Bielaczyc & Collins, 1999).

Principles for the design of effective learning communities include those derived from discrete classroom learning cases. Some of these principles appear to be generalizable from the classroom to the virtual learning experience. One such example includes fourteen principles developed by Bielaczy and Collins (1999). Most recently, interest has grown in the development of learning in virtual communities. As we excavate questions of parallels and distinctions between face to face settings and virtual encounters, we are led to the learning content appearing everywhere in the second decade of the twenty first century.

Some theoretical contributions to the VLC developments stem from the efforts of McMillan and Chavis (McMillan, 1976; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996).

Their work on a definition and theory of a sense of community was based on four elements. They define sense of community as a feeling that members of a group have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith the members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. There are four elements that are a part of sense of community. First, people experience feelings of membership or belonging to their community. Second, influence or a sense of mattering implies that people feel they can make a difference in their community. Third, needs fulfillment suggests that members of a community believe that the resources available in their community will meet their needs. Finally, emotional connection is the belief that community members have and will share history, time, places and experience. The latter was based on the foundational belief that members had shared experiences, such as a homeland.

McMillan and associates (1986) also discussed psychological measures of a sense of community. Such scales as the 40-item Sense of Community Scale (Doolittle & MacDonald, 1978) and Glynn's (1981) measure of the sense of community have provided a set of metrics for the sense of community.

Two of the authors have practical application experience in creating such virtual communities in a university setting and another has application experience in the corporate settings. We plan to contrast these two settings utilizing the existing (although limited) research literature and examples taken from application in the authors' respective practices. Similarly, the limited availability of theories and models (e.g., McMillan, 1976, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986) will permit a discussion of these issues as they apply to VLC. We also plan to discuss the affective and cognitive issues in the formation of the learning communities. This chapter will focus on the effects of the virtual learning community rather than the classroom learning community (CLC). Discussion of classroom learning communities will be included only for the purpose of distinguishing and contrasting the two learning environments.

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