

Chapter 4.11

Developing a Community of Practice in an Online Research Lab

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to present instructor and student perspectives on the development of a Community of Practice within an online research laboratory for graduate students in psychology. A computer-facilitated learning environment was set up to meet two goals: (1) to encourage individuals to work as a team on a live research project, and (2) to give students research skills needed to further their development as scholar-practitioners. The objective of this chapter is to identify, from the perspectives of the students and the instructor, how social factors influenced learning outcomes and how the group formed into a research team. This chapter begins with a brief overview of the Community of Practice literature

and the context of the Online Research Lab in the School of Psychology at Walden University. The second section addresses strategies the instructor used to facilitate the sense of community in the Online Research Lab. The chapter concludes with a summary of challenges in developing a Community of Practice, as well as strategies instructors can use to overcome these obstacles.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Community of Practice

The Online Research Lab discussed in this chapter is conceptualized as a kind of Community of Practice (CoP). A Community of Practice is made up of a group of individuals working together toward a common goal. Essential to the development of a

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CoP are the practices, activities, and rituals that set the group apart from other groups or organizations (Wenger, 1998). There are four important processes in addition to learning itself that must be in place for a successful CoP: (1) a practice to be learned, (2) a community within which to learn it, (3) meaning developed as part of learning the practice with a group of individuals, and (4) an identity formed as part of membership in that community (Wenger, 1998). As group membership shifts over time, the CoP must also balance the practices of the established community with the learning curve of new members.

Most individuals will belong to a number of different Communities of Practice throughout their lifetimes (Merriam, Courtenay, & Baumgartner, 2003; Stacey, Smith, & Barty, 2004; Wenger, 1998). For example, individuals may participate in a cohort of professional peers, play on a recreational sports team, or perform in a musical production. Membership in one community may influence the development of membership and identity in another CoP (Stacey et al., 2004). For example, by pursuing a higher degree, membership in an academic CoP may provide a person with resources that increases her contributions to a work-based CoP. However, although individuals may overlap in their CoP membership, the activities and contribution of group members must be coherent to constitute a separately functioning CoP.

In Wenger's (1998) CoP model, a meaningful life stems from the practice of a purposeful activity. In this view, learning happens best when it is relevant to the individual's goals and interests (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989). In the present discussion, both formal learning activities and "extracurricular" social interaction are assumed to foster the development of a sense of community in the classroom (Browne, 2003; Johnson, 2001; Johnson & Aragon, 2003). Within a CoP, the community members draw from each other, collaborating to develop and validate shared understanding (Browne, 2003; Collins

et al., 1989; Johnson, 2001; Johnson & Aragon, 2003; Richardson, 2003). The interactions of most CoP involve members with varying amounts of expertise (Wenger, 1998), but can also include novice-novice relationships (Hertzog, 2000). When applied to a formal education setting, both the instructor and the students contribute to the activity of the classroom. In the Online Research Lab discussed in this chapter, the focus is both on the relationships between students and on the relationship between the instructor and the students as a research team.

Cognitive Apprenticeship

Cognitive apprenticeship was the motivating theoretical framework for the Online Research Lab design and pedagogy (Collins, Brown, & Holum, 1991). Apprenticeships, in the traditional sense, are an opportunity for the novice to acquire a skill by working alongside an expert in his or her work environment. The expert models a skill within his or her own workplace, office, or laboratory. What each apprenticeship has in common is the "real world" context, or situated learning, in which the skill is developed (Brown, Collins, & Danguid, 1989). *Cognitive apprenticeship* is an effort to combine the best of the classroom experience with the applied learning opportunities of apprenticeship (Collins et al.). In traditional graduate education, this model is most closely manifest in the way faculty mentor graduate students by including them as members of a research team. Some online graduate programs in psychology provide research experiences as an independent study or research practicum, where a student works individually with a faculty member (Jones & Wilson, personal communication, 2006). To our knowledge, the Online Research Lab discussed in this chapter is the first example of a research cognitive apprenticeship course in an online, Web-based graduate program in psychology.

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