Chapter 3.7

Facilitating Connected Knowing Through Virtual Learning Communities

Holly McCracken
The University of Illinois at Springfield, USA

INTRODUCTION

Generally believed critical to facilitating multi-dimensional instructional experiences for participants in a range of educational environments (for example, as accessed through academic institutions, corporate staff development, professional organizations, and so forth), the use of *learning communities* as an important instructional method is widely recognized across academic disciplines, teaching approaches, and delivery media. In fact, Lave and Wenger (in McPherson & Nunes, 2004) argued that learning is, by nature, an activity by which one engages knowledge in many forms, through which one becomes a "member of the community of knowledge" (p. 305). As such, *communication*, *collaboration,* and

interaction become essential methods in facilitating instructional partnerships. Extending beyond a social context, the ongoing relationship building, advising, and mentoring generated through participation in learning communities provide a foundation for continued cognitive development and *knowledge construction* (Rovai, 2002; Wegerif, 1998). Such environments facilitate both ongoing discovery and a personal relationship to learning; enable interpersonal connections; emphasize the application of previous experiences to current learning goals; and, promote democratic teaching-learning partnerships, allowing participants to develop both collective and individualized perspectives and approaches (Brookfield, 1987, 1995; Daloz, in Taylor, Spring, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Taylor, 1995). Although Burbules (cited in Chamberlain, Charalambos, & Michalinos, 2004, pp. 136 – 137) stressed

the importance of community development to learning as equally valuable regardless of the instructional medium, both wide-scale anecdotal feedback and more formal research indicated that this aspect of learning was particularly essential to student satisfaction, motivation, and *retention* in Web-based classrooms in which students may never physically come into contact with peers, instructors or campus/organizational services and programs (Boettcher, 2004; Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000; Kearsley, 2000; McCracken, 2005; Palloff and Pratt, 1999, 2001; Tinto cited in Rovai, 2002; Rovai, November, 2004; Shea, 2006). Communities that develop in *online* instructional environments can be similarly transformative in their significance to research generation, self-assessment, and critical thought development, as well as important to furthering advising/consulting relationships, social networks, and professional affiliations.

BACKGROUND: CHARACTERISTICS OF VIRTUAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Many educators have attempted to capture the essence of community as it exists in virtual instructional environments; such definitions included a broad range of priorities, from the pragmatic to the philosophical. For example, Kaplan (August, 2002, section 2), Preece (cited in Garber, 2004) and Allan, Ure, and Evans (October, 2003, p. 7) noted that reliance on technology was essential to the very definition of *virtual communities* to the extent that communications and interactions were dependent upon media-based tools. However, beyond this general conclusion, there were many variables identified as impacting learning as facilitated using *learning communities*. Preece (cited in Garber, 2004) broadly explained that clear role differentiation and shared purpose promoted strong online community development (section 1). Allan, et al., (October, 2003) extended this

definition to consider aspects of interdependence fostered by community structures, the purposes of which included furthering common goals and practices (p. 7). Rovai (August, 2002) also emphasized interdependence among members as contributing to learning community development and continuity, finding it largely dependant upon the extent to which interpersonal conditions such as the following were met: "…[a] sense of belonging, connectedness, spirit, trust, interactivity, common expectations, shared values and goals, and overlapping histories among members" (section 4). Sergiovanni (cited in Rovai and Jordan, November, 2004) considered the relational aspects of community, identifying that participants appeared to have the "...need for 'authentic community,' ...a tie binding students and teachers through shared values, ideals, and goals" (section 3). Shea's (February, 2006) research elaborated on both Rovai and Sergiovanni's findings, reflecting that distant students reported a strong sense of learning through community in those on-line classes in which instructors created open environments for the *discussion*, mediation, and resolution of difficult dialogues that ultimately reinforced complex understanding (section 5).

Instructional approaches that included attention to variables such as those previously described enabled a comparatively natural environment in which to promote the development of knowledge; many of these approaches were constructivist in nature. Gilbert and Driscoll (2002) discussed a constructivist approach to learning in community as including a "... change in focus from individual knowledge constructed singly to public knowledge jointly constructed by students," noting that the creation of communities "...enable[d] students to contribute to each others' learning through social construction of communal knowledge" (p. 59). Educators (in Merriam and Cafferella, 1999), such as Usher, Bryant and Johnston (as related to experiential learning) (pp. 227 – 229); Brockett and Hiemstra (with reference to personal responsibility) (p. 298); and, Garrison (who fa-

9 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/facilitating-connected-knowing-through-virtual/54505

Related Content

The Selection of a New Student Administration System at University of Southland
Nelly Todorovaand Julie Falls-Anderson (2007). *Journal of Cases on Information Technology (pp. 16-29).*
www.irma-international.org/article/selection-new-student-administration-system/3210

Face Recognition Based on Fractal Code and Deep Belief Networks
Mohamed Benouis (2021). *Journal of Information Technology Research (pp. 82-93).*
www.irma-international.org/article/face-recognition-based-on-fractal-code-and-deep-belief-networks/289859

A Network Data Science Approach to People Analytics
Nan Wangand Evangelos Katsamakas (2019). *Information Resources Management Journal (pp. 28-51).*
www.irma-international.org/article/a-network-data-science-approach-to-people-analytics/225016

A Diffusion-Based Investigation into the Use of Lotus Domino Discussion Databases
Virginia Ilie, Craig Van Slyke, Hao Louand John Day (2009). *Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology, Second Edition (pp. 1101-1107).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/diffusion-based-investigation-into-use/13713

Data-Driven Trend Forecasting in Stock Market Using Machine Learning Techniques
Puneet Misraand Siddharth Chaurasia (2020). *Journal of Information Technology Research (pp. 130-149).*
www.irma-international.org/article/data-driven-trend-forecasting-in-stock-market-using-machine-learning-techniques/240726