Chapter 8

Developing Professional Competencies through International Peer Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter utilizes a peer learning community as an example to explore whether and how information exchange, learning, and knowledge creation occur when students undertake professional internships. Observation and analysis of the learners' views on their interaction are conducted by studying peer-generated blogs to determine if learners working in companies worldwide, but connected via an informal virtual community, can communicate effectively and produce a useful pool of information, thus creating meaningful knowledge and expertise to assist in future career development. The objective is to utilize the lessons learned to incorporate effective elements of the peer learning experience into formal programs of study and so increase the employability focus of business education.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the findings of investigative research conducted on a group of learners with the intention of exploring how effective use of online social networking tools can assist participants within an informal international professional peer community to learn from each other. A number of research areas including communication across cultures, professional development, and com-

munities of learning were used as a background to the study. The prime data was derived from the informal, learner initiated online reflective blogs, where postgraduate, culturally diverse students utilize their peers' knowledge and expertise when undertaking work placements abroad and completing their internship reports. Whilst adopting a social constructivist approach, the intention was to find out whether learners can effectively learn from each other by exchanging internship experiences and exploring how knowledge is

generated within an informal peer initiated learning community, thus enhancing the professional development and employment opportunities of the participants.

BACKGROUND

There is sufficient evidence to indicate that knowledge can be shared in a community of learning given that reflective communication enables the enculturation of professional activities (e.g. Steinbring, 2005). A primary focus of learning within the community is *social participation* i.e. an individual as an active participant in the interactions of the community and in the construction of the knowledge base through the community. Many have suggested that knowledge is socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1966); often tacit (Polanyi, 1966; Hedlund, 1994); a function of the play of meanings, material, as well as mental and social (Latour, 1987); acquired through participation within communities of practice (Wenger, et al., 2002). In contrast to the objectivist epistemology view, Polanyi (1966) argued that there is an inescapable and essential personal element that is a structural component of all knowledge which he called "personal," saying that when we know anything at all, we "dwell in" its particulars in order to understand the "comprehensive entity" which is the meaning of these particulars, which includes them as their sense. Davenport and Prusak (1998) claimed, "knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight... it originates and is applied in the minds of knowers" (p. 5). Nonaka (in von Krogh, et al., 2000) concluded that in any way knowledge is context-specific, as it depends on a particular time and space. While the sender of the knowledge is giving it meaning in according with its home context, the receiver is decoding it in accordance with the host framework in order to apply it. Overall this chapter argues that knowledge is constructed on the bases of social

circumstances, the characteristics and personal history of individual learners (Billet, 1996), the level of trust generated among the members (Bekmeier-Feuerhahn & Eichenlaub, 2010) and specific work-based settings.

It is essential to understand the fundamentals of the communication process in order to fully comprehend the many and varied enablers and barriers that are an integral part of knowledge sharing which occurs in the process of learning. While "communication is *already* a complex process of information exchange, that involves the perception and judgment of all involved" (Nance quoted in Buckley, et al., 1999, p. 79), effective communication incorporates how that information is conveyed and received. Some explanations of human communication behavior derive directly from an examination of how individuals acquire and modify ideas through communication with others. The learning, diffusion, and change processes, all involve the communication route. Schramm (1965) found that the transfer of ideas occurs most receptively between those who are alike and similar in certain attributes, such as beliefs, values, and education. When the parties involved share common understandings, have a mutual language, and are alike in personal characteristics, the communication of ideas is likely to have a greater effect in terms of knowledge gained, attitude formation, and change. As a whole, the interactions are more rewarding to both the sender and receiver of the information the more they have in common. When encoding information to communicate to others, the degree of common ground varies with the particular relationship, complicating the process of information perception. Schramm (1965, p. 17) suggested that it is the area formed by the overlapping field of experience of communicators—a desirable area of "common interest/ground"—that enhances the possibility of knowledge creation as a result of the communication process. This has been further developed by social constructivists, who believed knowledge to be socially and culturally

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