Chapter 20
Online Graduate Programs and Intellectual Isolation:
Fostering Technology–Mediated Interprofessional Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

With more flexibility in higher education, the authors argue that online graduate programs have a significant but unrecognized potential for interprofessional learning. Interprofessional learning is an emerging trend that is considered necessary to address the "wicked problems" in our society that defy simple solutions, disciplinary silos, and cause/effect thinking. This chapter examines the challenges of: fostering good adult education pedagogy in an online context, encouraging peer collaboration and an intellectual culture in an online, self-directed graduate program, and creating the conditions for interprofessional learning.

INTRODUCTION

With the intensification of the knowledge economy, the concomitant pressure on workers, and the emergence of significant technological innovations for educational provision over the past 25 years, online graduate programs have proliferated to meet life-long professional development demands and aspirations. The changes that technology has brought to higher education include a range of flexibilities in access, timing, place, space, cost, and content; which have largely been promoted as an uncritiqued virtue (Burge, 2007). While there are issues embedded in the provision of these flexible delivery mechanisms, we will argue that online graduate programs have unrecognized potential for interprofessional learning. As Westley, Zimmerman and Patton (2007) have identified, the specialized knowledge silos in higher education, and in society generally, are unable to respond to the complexity of the social and environmental issues facing humankind. Simple formulas, disciplinary silos and cause/effect thinking cannot address the contemporary complex systems we are embedded in, which have a logic and life force of their own. Weber and Khademian (2008) call these 'wicked problems' that require the work of networks across public, private and nongovernmental sectors. New ways of relating and collaborating that cross professional and disciplinary boundaries are required to address interconnected, trenchant issues, and to create social change. These times call for learning together to creatively think, collaborate, and solve problems (Kevany, 2012). This includes an orientation and commitment to multisectoral and interprofessional framing and space that can approach challenges in respectful ways and design solutions across a multitude of issues. Yet, Cranton (1994) emphasizes that learning new ways of relating and collaborating can be as painful as they are transformative.

As the vigorous debates around online pedagogy reveal, the promises of e-learning, including increased learner control, flexible delivery, interactivity, and group-orientation, does not necessarily hold. The task of this chapter, then, is to critique the issues in adhering to adult education orthodoxies in an online environment, issues in online professional communities, and describe the findings of an empirical study that examined the potential for inter-professional learning in one on-line graduate program aimed at professional development. Hara, Shachaf, and Stoerger (2009) have suggested the need for more examination and an extension of insights regarding open online communities of practice (CoP), based on empirical data. This chapter responds to this call by enabling discussion of our empirical findings that support peer-to-peer (P2P) learning across professional and disciplinary lines using a variety of technological mediations. Online, workplace, and regional communities of practice possess great potential for innovative and effective approaches to address wicked problems.

BACKGROUND ON ADULT EDUCATION ORTHODOXIES

It is a well-established orthodoxy in the field of adult education that learners are more motivated to learn if they have a role in establishing the goal and direction of the learning, in evaluating the learning, and if the learning relates to a role or task they must perform (Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1981). Nevertheless, it has also been established that a capacity-building process is required to support, motivate and enable learners, habituated to passive schooling, toward self-directionality (Pratt, 1993; Merriam, 2001; Heimstra & Brockett, 1994). In particular, participatory and active learning experiences have been identified as having potential to build self-direction by providing a space where adults can discuss, process, and apply their learning both individually and collaboratively (Silberman, 1996). Participatory learning focuses on the autonomy of the participant

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