

AUTONOMY & AUTHORITY: CREATING A LEARNING COMMUNITY ONLINE

Cathy Sherratt, Edge Hill University

Abstract

This paper explores how we might create or develop a learning community online, and the implications of this for the role of the online tutor. Opinion is divided regarding the ideal conditions to support the emergence of learning communities, although there seems good agreement regarding the usefulness of the online medium to support a social constructivist approach.

A typology of expressed needs for tutor support is presented and discussed as a possible means to assist tutors in nurturing online learning community. Issues of 'authority' and peer support are also explored.

Introduction

This paper will explore how we might create or develop a learning community online, and the implications of this for the role of the online tutor. In the postgraduate programme in Clinical Education at Edge Hill University, a multi-disciplinary professional development course for clinical educators, delivered by means of 'blended learning', the Course Team have embraced what can be termed a 'social constructivist' approach. Thus, the course has been designed and taught using discussion as a major element of the learning experience (see Brookfield & Preskill, 1999, 2005), and we therefore place great emphasis on encouraging interactivity within the programme.

We use an asynchronous online discussion forum within our Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) – simple and familiar technology, and in distinct contrast to Hung and Chen (2001), we find that it works in supporting the development of dialogue. When it works well, we can see a real learning community emerge, which could, perhaps, also be thought of as a 'Community of Practice', as proposed by Wenger (1998). This learning community allows us to realise our social constructivist ideals, with students supporting, interacting with, and learning from each other.

Henderson and colleagues (2007) however, remind us that Communities of Practice cannot be designed, but must be allowed to emerge - although they admit that we can assist their emergence by careful architecture, a point supported by Wilson and colleagues (2004), when they identify that there is a subtle difference between a spontaneously-arising Community of Practice and the more formally constituted 'Bounded Learning Community' that as tutors we try to create within an educational setting.

However, it is interesting to note that several years earlier, Johnson (2001) had proposed that a Community of Practice can emerge **within** what he described as a 'designed community', and so it would appear that our course context should not be seen as a barrier to community formation.

Meanwhile, more recently, Hara and Hew (2007) have questioned whether the same success factors hold good for a community that is deliberately created

rather than one which spontaneously emerges – an interesting consideration when we are seeking to develop a learning community within the artificial confines of an educational programme.

Online Interaction

So what can the online tutor do to promote the formation of learning communities? And what is our role? Woo and Reeves (2007:15) remind us that "One of the key components of good pedagogy, regardless of whether technology is involved, is Interaction", and this, therefore, appears to be a good starting point in considering how we might encourage the formation of a learning community.

In earlier work (Sherratt & Sackville, 2006) we explored discourse within the online discussion board in our postgraduate programme, identifying the achievement of true dialogue online, rather than the unconnected statements, or 'serial monologue' which a number of authors have commented on (see, for example, Henri, 1991; Pawan et al, 2003; and Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Goodfellow and Hewling (2005) have complained that "Participation as a pedagogical synonym for learning has long been a key feature in the discourse of computer-mediated communication in education". Meanwhile, Woo and Reeves (2007:18) have also reminded us that "social constructivists do not maintain that all conversation and discussion occurring anywhere anytime are meaningful for learning"!

However, whilst it is true that consideration of the content and context as well as frequency of postings is necessary in order to gain a full picture of the overall online learning experience, nevertheless, it is also clear that active engagement within the online discussion board can contribute significantly to the learning both of individual participants and the group as a whole. Furthermore, Rovai (2002) has suggested that interaction is a major factor in creating a learning community. Thus, despite the comments of Goodfellow and Hewling (2005), noted above, nevertheless, interaction and the achievement of dialogue within the online discussion board can only be considered to be advantageous.

Peer Facilitators and Social Interaction

In the Edge Hill Clinical Education programme, participants are divided up so that they work in groups, or 'Learning Sets', of no more than 15 members. Students do not choose their group, but rather, they are allocated to their Learning Set, so that wherever possible, each Learning Set is 'balanced' to contain an equal ratio of males and females, and a similar spread of different professions (e.g. doctors, dentists, nurses, paramedics).

In previous work, we have noted that the presence of what we have termed "peer facilitators" has a huge impact on the development of dialogue (Sherratt & Sackville, 2006), and if we accept Rovai's (2002) proposition, noted above, regarding the importance of interaction, then this therefore impacts significantly on the formation of a learning community. Indeed, facilitating actions from peers can clearly be seen to have a different impact than interventions from tutors, and the dynamic created within the group is therefore also different. Following on from this, we have also found that groups which are 'tutor-focused' do not develop dialogue or indeed group identity in the same way as more peer-

focused groups, a point also supported by Garrison (2006), leading us to speculate further on the significant advantages of achieving peer-to-peer dialogue.

Our speculations are supported by Thompson and MacDonald (2005: 244), who point out that "conversation is pivotal to interaction"; while Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) suggest the importance of 'social presence' for the development of online discourse. Dixon and colleagues (2006) also note that it is important that students should feel comfortable to make social postings. Meanwhile, Daniel et al (2003) go further and propose Social Capital as a vital component of the learning community – although one might equally argue that the social engagement of the group is an artefact **of** the existence of a sense of community rather than in any way causal in nature.

Salmon (2000) asserts that social interaction is caused, in part, by e-moderators' interventions. It has also been argued that tutors can influence the engagement and interaction of students in the online discussion forum simply by the frequency with which they intervene in discussion (Mazzolini & Maddison 2003); whereas the content of tutors' postings does not particularly influence student engagement (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007) – a proposition which is by no means supported by the findings of Celentin (2007:55), who suggests that "in order to build real knowledge during the discussion the tutor should post different kinds of messages".

Where a rich dialogue is achieved, online discussion has clear transformative potential, as Garrison & Kanuka (2004) have suggested. For example, in a recent module (CPD461), the students commented that "It was a superb demonstration of Wenger's communities of practice", and further identified "a 'Eureka' moment" in their understanding of e-learning. (Networked Learning Community CPD461, 2008.)

But the question remains, as indeed we have also asked elsewhere (Sackville & Sherratt, 2008) – are all of these students actually ready to be transformed? Meyer and Land (2005) remind us that transformation can involve a very uncomfortable journey, and also that many students tend to remain instead in 'pre-liminal space'. This, then, begs the question as to whether all students are also ready to become self-directed learners.

And so, despite our explicitly articulated social constructivist pedagogy, and the opportunity for students to work together (and with tutors as peers), it appears that not everyone agrees that the peer is a role that tutors should adopt. Indeed, one of the CPD461 students complained of a "paucity of active input from tutors" (Networked Learning Community CPD461, 2008), based on the fact that substantially more 'triggers' were posed by students than by tutors – despite the obvious benefit that the students had become more self-directed in their learning, rather than remaining reliant on tutors to push forward their understanding.

The Role of the Tutor

This, then brings into question the tutor's role as a 'guide on the side', suggesting that some participants and commentators, at least, expect a more active and directed input. Furthermore, Swan (2002: p32) proposed that

"instructors' activity is an important factor in the success of online learning". More recently, Garrison and Cleveland-Innes have also commented (2005: p137) "we find the leadership role of the instructor to be powerful in triggering discussion and facilitating high levels of thinking and knowledge construction"; and Celentin (2007) has advised that guidance from tutors will enhance the achievement of meaningful learning. So contrary to our earlier-expressed ideal of peer-facilitated learning, this implies that much more control should rest in the hands of the tutor, leading to the position of the tutor as an authority figure.

On the other hand, Rovai (2002) reminds us that self-directed learners will not respond well to an authoritarian approach on the part of the tutor; and Garrison (2006:30) further suggests that "students need to assume some control or ownership of the discussion". Meanwhile, Carusi (2006:5) has proposed that "the social relations become de-hierarchised: the teacher is no longer the central – and 'higher' – authority, and learners collaborate with each other, each learning through doing and each cooperating rather than competing with others in pursuit of a shared goal".

So should tutors aim to assume the role of co-learners, or is there something of an expectation that we will undertake and maintain more of an authoritative role? And how does this activity on the part of the tutor encourage the growth of an active and supportive online learning community?

Students' Expressed Need for Tutor Intervention

As noted above, members of my course team have been actively exploring issues around online discussion for a number of years. In my own current, ongoing study, I have explored the expectations and expressed needs of our students for intervention and support from tutors, particularly in the online discussion forum.

From this, a simple typology has emerged (Sherratt, 2008), shown in Figure 1, below, which identifies whether students expect to work collaboratively, possibly without "interference" from tutors, or perhaps welcoming them as peers (see Quadrant A of Figure 1); or whether students are more tutor-focused, looking to the tutor as an authority figure who will provide the 'right' answer, as shown in Quadrant D of Figure 1.

Interestingly, we can see what we have termed 'peer facilitators' clearly located in Quadrants A and B of Figure 1 (below), and it might be suggested, therefore, that these two quadrants are where we will find conditions to support the emergence of a learning community.

One might further speculate that if a group contains a majority of individuals characterised to Quadrants C or D of the typology (see Figure 1, below), then it will be extremely difficult for any sort of community to develop.

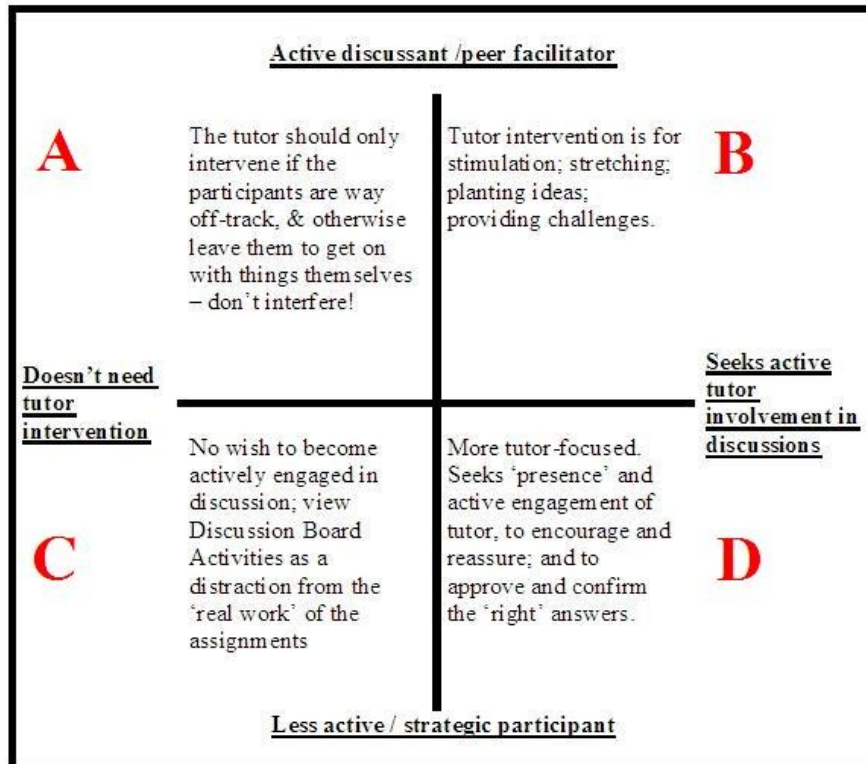


Figure 1: Students' need for tutor intervention in online discussion

This typology is also discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Sherratt, 2008), and is a result of ongoing work. However, it already offers the tutor some insight into the differing needs to be found within a single cohort, and as such, can offer an explanation of why some groups might function 'better' and more collaboratively than others, even within the same course context.

Once applied to future groups, it aims to assist the tutor to achieve the correct level and type of intervention to support and stimulate students, without leaving students feeling unsupported on the one hand, or stifling discussion and thereby reducing both discourse and collaboration, (as Garrison (2006) points out), on the other.

However, it should also be borne in mind that these categories appear to be dynamic rather than static. Thus, the next challenge we face is **how** we can identify where students sit in this typology, and then, what actions we can take as tutors, to **move** students into a more self-directed phase of their learning (represented here by Quadrants A and B). This is the subject of ongoing and future work.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored some differing views on learning communities in the online context, and have asked how tutors might help to facilitate their emergence. I have referred to some of my current work in progress, and proposed that the simple model to describe students' expressed need for support and intervention from tutors might offer some useful insights for the online tutor. And I have suggested that by responding appropriately to students'

individual needs, and helping them to move into Quadrants A or B of the model, we could more regularly and consistently to help to achieve a learning community where students (and indeed tutors!) work collaboratively, learn together, and act as co-constructors of knowledge.

But there is no certainty. Indeed, Charalambos et al (2004:138) have reminded us that "There is no step-by-step approach that guarantees successful community building."

References

- Brookfield, S.D., & Preskill, S. (1999) *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for University Teachers*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Brookfield, S.D., & Preskill, S. (2005) *Discussion as a Way of Teaching: Tools and Techniques for Democratic Classrooms*. 2nd edition. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Carusi A. (2006) 'Power and Agency in Online Text-based Collaborations'. *E-Learning*, Vol. 3, No. 1. pp4-15.
- Celentin, P. (2007) 'Online Education: Analysis of Interaction and Knowledge Building Patterns Among Foreign Language Teachers'. *Journal of Distance Education*. Vol. 21, No. 3, pp39-58.
- Charalambos, V., Michalinos, Z., & Chamberlain, R. (2004) 'The Design of Online Learning Communities: Critical Issues'. *Educational Media International* 41:2 - refereed Papers and Selected Papers from the Oslo Conference.
- Daniel, B., Schwier, R.A., & McCalla, G. (2003) 'Social Capital in Virtual Learning Communities and Distributed Communities of Practice'. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*. Volume 29(3) Fall / automne, 2003.
- Dixson, M., Kuhlhorst, M., & Reiff, A. (2006) 'Creating Effective Online Discussions: Optimal Instructor and Student Roles'. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*. Volume 10, Issue 4 - December 2006. pp15-28.
- Garrison, D.R. (2006) 'Online Collaboration Principles'. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks (JALN)*. Volume 10, Issue 1 - February 2006. pp25-34.
- Garrison, D.R. & Arbaugh, J.B. (2007) 'Researching the community of inquiry framework: Review, issues, and future directions'. *The Internet and Higher Education* 10:3 (2007), pp157-172.
- Garrison, D.R., & Cleveland-Innes, M. (2005) 'Facilitating Cognitive Presence in Online Learning: Interaction Is Not Enough'. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 19(3), pp133-148.
- Garrison, D.R. & Kanuka, H. (2004). 'Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education'. *Internet and Higher Education*. 7 (2004), pp95-105.
- Goodfellow, R. & Hewling, A. (2005) 'Reconceptualizing Culture in Virtual Learning Environments: from an 'essentialist' to a 'negotiated' perspective'. *E-learning* 2(4), pp355 - 367.
- Hara, N. & Hew, K.F. (2007) 'Knowledge-sharing in an online community of health-care professionals'. *Information Technology & People*. Vol. 20 No. 3, pp235-261.
- Henderson, M. (2007) 'Sustaining online teacher professional development through community design'. *Campus-Wide Information Systems*. Vol. 24 No. 3, 2007. pp162-173.
- Henri, F. (1991) 'Distance learning and computer-mediated communication: Interactive, quasi-interactive or monologue?' In C. O'Malley (Ed.), *Computer supported collaborative learning*. pp145-161. Berlin: Springer-Verlag.

- Hung, D. & Chen, D-T. (2001) 'Situated Cognition, Vygotskian Thought and Learning from the Communities of Practice Perspective: Implications for the Design of Web-Based E-Learning'. *Education Media International*. Vol.38, No.1, pp3-12.
- Johnson C.M. (2001) 'A survey of current research on online communities of practice'. *The Internet and Higher Education* 4:1 (2001), pp45-60.
- Mazzolini, M., & Maddison, S. (2003) 'Sage, guide or ghost? The effect of instructor intervention on student participation in online discussion forums'. *Computers and Education*. Vol 40, pp237-253.
- Mazzolini, M., & Maddison, S. (2007) 'When to jump in: The role of the instructor in online discussion forums'. *Computers & Education*, Vol 49, Issue 2, pp193-213.
- Meyer, J.H.F., & Land, R. (2005) 'Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning'. *Higher Education*. 49 (2005), pp373-388.
- Pawan, F., Paulus, T.M., Yalcin, S., & Chang, C-F. (2003) 'Online Learning: Patterns of Engagement and Interaction Among In-Service Teachers'. *Language Learning & Technology*. 7: 3, pp119-140.
- Sackville A. & Sherratt, C. (2008) "'Designing the Dreamcoat" - Helping Learners Discover New Perspectives'. *Proceedings of the 33rd International Improving University Teaching (IUT) Conference*, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, UK. July 2008.
- Salmon, G. (2000). *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*. London: Kogan Page.
- Sherratt, C. & Sackville, A. (2006) 'Styles of Discussion: Influences and Trends'. *Proceedings of the First SOLSTICE Conference*. Edge Hill, UK. May 2006.
- Sherratt, C. (2008) 'Working Together: Perceptions of the Role of the Tutor in a Postgraduate Online Learning Programme'. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning*. Halkidiki, Greece, May 2008.
- Swan, K. (2002) 'Building Learning Communities in Online Courses: the importance of interaction'. *Education, Communication & Information*. 2, 1. pp23-49.
- The Networked Learning Community in Module CPD461, Edge Hill University. (2008). 'Why Did It Work For Us? Reflections on a successful networked learning community'. *Proceedings of the 6th International Conference on Networked Learning*. Halkidiki, Greece, May 2008.
- Thompson, T.L. & MacDonald, C.J. (2005) 'Community building, emergent design and expecting the unexpected: Creating a quality eLearning experience'. *The Internet and Higher Education*. 8:3, pp233-249.
- Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wilson, B., Ludwig-Hardman, S., Thornam, C., & Dunlap, J. (2004) 'Bounded Community: Designing and Facilitating Learning Communities in Formal Courses'. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning* [Online] 5:3. Available: <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/204> (Last accessed September 2007)
- Woo, Y., & Reeves, T.C. (2007). 'Meaningful interaction in web-based learning: A social constructivist interpretation'. *The Internet and Higher Education*. 10:1, pp15-25.