

LEARNING COMMUNITY IN ONLINE EDUCATION

Ziad D. BAGHDADI

Faculty, Riyadh Colleges of Dentistry & Pharmacy, Riyadh, SAUDI ARABIA
Faculty, Damascus University Dental Faculty, Damascus, SYRIA

ABSTRACT

Establishing learning communities early in online education helps bridge distances and differences between physical and virtual worlds of teaching and learning. This article sheds light on the importance of learning communities, and gives readers advices for creating communities that connect, engage, and inspire. Several tools for assessment of learning are provided to appraise online learning communities' benefits to learners at all levels.

Keywords: Online education; learning community; learning assessment; social learning.

INTRODUCTION

Social learning depends on the premise that our understanding of content is based on our interactions with others, and that what matters most is *how we are learning* not *what we are learning* (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). The social view of learning is, *we participate therefore we are*. This is in contrast to the Cartesian view of learning in which knowledge is a substance and pedagogy determines the best way for transferring this substance from teachers to students under the premise: *I think, therefore I am* (Brown & Adler, 2008).

In this sense, fellow students become teachers, and "one of the best way to learn something is, after all, to teach it to others" (Brown & Adler, 2008, para. 10). Learning communities built in online learning courses are one effective method enabling students to become co-learners, as an online class provides space, time, and a sound educational environment for students to meet, interact, and learn.

Moreover, this aesthetically pleasing environment, in which learners feel secure and share information in positive ways, drives them to build their own networks of friends and colleagues fostering further their academic, professional, and even social endeavors (Porter, 2004).

BUILDING LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Porter (2004) defines an online learning community as " a group of people who communicate with each other across the Internet to share information, learn more about a topic, or work on a project of mutual interest" (p. 193). She also divides learning communities into two types: internal learning communities involving people within the context of the course (mainly students and their instructor) and external learning communities involving people outside the course such as family members, friends, and subject matter experts (Porter, 2004).

Although there are other definitions for learning communities (see Sullivan, 2010), all definitions involve learners gathering, sharing information, collaborating on projects, and proactively participating, which foster cooperation and mutual support rather than encouraging competition found in other team environments such as traditional learning classes.

In addition, other terms such as trust, respect, secure, values, honesty, ethics, and beliefs are also important elements to consider when people of a certain learning community actively engaged in learning together from each other. Obviously, the Internet is the perfect medium for connecting people, enabling them to share information and knowledge.

It is important to know that sharing information is a type of learning, but by itself it would not be enough for mastering skills and acquiring knowledge needed for solving real-life problems; rather, learners need to acquire the habit of discussing the value of the shared information through rational, critical thinking and synthesizing new sets of ideas that broaden input perspectives and experiences. McMillan and Chavis (1986) coined the term *sense of community* and defined it as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9).

Four key factors define a sense of community: 1) membership, 2) influence, 3) fulfillment of individuals’ needs, and 4) shared events and emotional connections (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Based on these factors, the participants of a learning community must be loyal to the group of community (membership) and feel empowered to have influence over what the group does (influence). At the same time, group cohesiveness has influence over its members by meeting their particular needs (fulfillment) by allowing personal opinions, sharing emotions, and finally attaining spiritual connection and bond (emotional connection).

In an online learning community, people work on the Internet through computer-mediated communication to achieve a shared learning objective via textual discussion (synchronous and/or asynchronous), audio, video, or other Internet-supported devices, course management, collaborative and social networking, and blogs. This is an apparent move away from teacher-centered models of instruction to more learner-centered and community-based models (Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004).

Community-based models may be categorized as knowledge-based, practice-based and task-based. Many times a learning organization may aggregate these different forms of communities into a comprehensive structure that supports learning. Community is a word that comes from the Latin *commune*, meaning together, a group of people committed to common and shared duties (Lilera, 2007). When the groups of people are organized around a task, working together for a specific period of time to produce a product, it is task-based. Practice-based learning communities correspond to the idea of communities of practice. The goal of a practice-based learning community is the practice – “what you will DO differently in your day to day work, and how the group can help each other DO that” (Gottlieb, 2009, para. 6).

Finally, knowledge-based learning communities focus on producing external knowledge about the practice, contrary to practice-based communities which depend on their own members for providing supported conceptions for learning (Lilera, 2007). Mixing external and internal communities, *emic* and *etic*, within a class offers learners the opportunity to work with other professionals who expressed an interest in working with learners and have certain expertise, that will be a good¹³ addition to the community and individual participants’ learning (Porter, 2004).

Learning emerges as an interaction between the subjects' personal and social life and their cognitive mastery of skills and abilities that are supposed to be acquired (Lilera, 2007). It follows the Confucius aphorism, "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand" (Zhao & Kuh, 2004, p. 115).

ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

Of worth, learning communities *per se* do not produce positive effects on the subjects; rather, they enhance students' involvement, which in turn positively affects student success (Pike, 2000). Therefore, assessment of students' performance that estimates the direct and indirect effects of learning communities on desired learning outcomes should be conducted. Several methods are in order for such an evaluation.

Choosing appropriate types of assessment depends on the learning goals being developed and the institutional resources available. Based on these two factors, a certain institution offering the learning community venue can select standardized or customized tests, quantitative (numerically-based) or qualitative (narrative-based), and direct or indirect measures of student learning (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2007).

Direct methods of learning evaluation assess that a student has command of a specific subject, content area, or skill, or "that the student's work demonstrates a specific quality such as creativity, analysis, or synthesis" (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2007, p. 5). On the other hand, indirect methods of assessing student learning involve "data that are related to the act of learning" (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2007, pp. 5-6), such as factors that predict or mediate learning or perceptions about learning that do not reflect learning itself. Indirect evidence often is acquired through the use of self-report format surveys, questionnaires, and interviews (Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 2007).

Additionally, both direct and indirect measures of learning have several levels of evaluation: course level, program level, and institutional level.

The simplest direct ways for student learning evaluation at the course level are examinations and quizzes. However, examinations and quizzes by their nature are more suitable for onsite environments rather than online environments because usually these measure the individual 'gain' of knowledge rather than collaborative ability and participation, and therefore have limited applicability in learning community evaluation. Other tools of assessment include rubric-scored term papers, student surveys, and course evaluations. Research skills as demonstrated by students' performance on a research paper, for example, offer a clear picture whether a learning outcome was achieved. Pass rates or scores on licensure, certification, or subject area tests are also valuable tools of learning measurement at the program level.

Other assessments may include student-led discussion forums, group assignments, peer evaluations, student-directed wikis or blogs, and interactive video presentations. Alumni survey and data from benchmark institutions can give a practical evaluation of the learning at the institutional level. Whatever a method or a combination of methods is selected and implemented, the ultimate aim of assessment should be improving teaching and learning for the service of the whole community, which in turn consists of several learning communities.

CONCLUSION

Summarizing, when people come together in an online space with the purpose to talk, learn, share information, or collaborate on projects, they have formed an online learning community. To be effective, members of learning communities must meet the needs of the other learners through proactive participation.

The premise of learning via communities is based on the assumption supported by some evidence that what matters is *how we learn* not *what I learn*, and this requires interactive and robust inputs from all the members. The effectiveness and efficiency of learning communities should be periodically evaluated, and the findings should be used for improving and upgrading these communities.

BIODATA AND CONTACT ADDRESSE OF AUTHOR



Ziad D. BAGHDADI is a faculty in the Department of Pediatric Dentistry Dental College at Damascus University, Damascus, Syria and in the Department of Preventive Dentistry at Riyadh Colleges of Dentistry & Pharmacy, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He is a consultant of pediatric dentistry and postgraduate program director. Dr. Baghdadi authored more than 15 publications in peer-reviewed journals and worked as a referee for several international journals. This article demonstrates his passion for online education.

Ziad D. BAGHDADI
Faculty, Riyadh Colleges of Dentistry & Pharmacy, Riyadh, SAUDI ARABIA
P.O. Box 67126 Riyadh 11596 SAUDI ARABIA
Phone: 00966-564181589
E-mail: ziadbaghdadi@hotmail.com

REFERENCES

- Barab, S., Kling, R., & Gray, J. H. (2004). *Designing for virtual communities in the service of learning*. Cambridge: The University of Cambridge.
- Brown, J. S., & Adler, R. P. (2008). *Minds on fire: Open education, the long tail, and learning 2.0*. Retrieved from <http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSE+Review/EDUCAUSEReviewMagazineVolume43/MindsonFireOpenEducationtheLon/162420>
- Brown, J. S., Collins, A., & Duguid, P. (1989). Situated cognition and the culture of learning. *Educational Research*, 18(1), 32-42.
- Gottlieb, H. (2009). Learning communities, communities of practice, learning circles. Retrieved from http://www.help4nonprofits.com/NP_EDU-Cm_Learning_Communities.htm
- Lilera, J. L. R. (2007). How virtual communities of practice and learning communities can change our vision of education. *Educational Sciences Journal*, 3, 113-120.
- McMillan, D. W., & Chavis, D. M. (1986). Sense of community: A definition and theory. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 14(1), 6-23.

Middle States Commission on Higher Education. (2007). *Student learning assessment: Options and resources*. Philadelphia, PA: Author.

Pike, G. R. (2000). Assessment measures: Methodological issues in the assessment of learning communities. *Assessment Update*, 12(2), 14-15.

Porter, L. R. (2004). *Developing an online curriculum: Technologies and techniques*. Hershey, PA: Idea Group, Inc.

Sullivan, J. (2010). *Definition of an online learning community*. Retrieved from http://www.ehow.com/about_6577737_definition-online-learning-community.html

Zhao, C. M. & Kuh, G. D. (2004). Adding values: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115-138.