

A DESIGN FOR ENCOURAGING COMMUNITIES OF LEARNERS IN A COMBINED ON-CAMPUS AND DISTANCE-LEARNING MBA CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to serve all their customers, universities and organizational trainers are combining on-site and distance-learning students into one body. This conceptual paper suggests the use of current social learning theories to create “communities of learners.” A framework is presented using applicable learning theories and then describing a class designed to encourage communities.

INTRODUCTION

Universities are attempting to prepare graduates for a life within a technology- and knowledge-based environment. Organizational trainers are expected to provide meaningful training that affects the bottom line. In an effort to serve distance-learners, both universities and trainers must provide learning virtually.

Learning theorists, however, increasingly consider the social aspects of learning to be critically important. As organizations compete in the race for knowledge, today’s business theorists and practitioners are beginning to embrace the importance of a “learning, practicing community.” The challenge, then, is to find a recipe for learning that reaches all students, that provides the social interaction critical to learning, and that fulfills the goals of universities and organizations. This is quite an order, and this paper explores a practical example of such a mix.

LEARNING AND COMMUNITY THEORIES

Reviewing the development of learning theory over the past 100 years provides insight into how individuals learn. In recent years, the study of learning has moved from the individual level to the social, group level, where the communities of the learners are considered critical. In taking learning from a strictly educational environment to an organizational one, Senge and Kofman (1994) made a connection between a learning organization and a learning community. Most recently, Wenger, in his 1998 book *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, provides a “conceptual learning architecture” for the nurturing of communities in both settings. Brown and Campione (1998) observed classrooms of communities of young learners and identified the use of five characteristics and six principles. Senge (1997) proposed five operating principles for an organization that desired to build an environment conducive for organizational learning. These theories can be used to create a learning environment that encourages the social, community elements in a classroom.

CLASSROOM APPLICATION

The class curriculum developed to encourage communities was a recent Operations and Quality Management (OQM) MBA-required course at a major southeastern university. The MBA program included three groups: On-Campus (OC), Video-Based Distance Learners (VBDL), and Executive MBA (EMBA). The course requirements and methods of delivery are similar for each of the programs. It has been observed that the students in each group possess varying levels of maturity, motivation, and drive. The OQM roster listed 20 OC’s, 21 VBDL’s, and 29 EMBA’s, a total of 70 students for the instructor. The OC students attended lectures, where videos were made and sent to the VBDL’s and EMBA’s.

Curriculum and Classroom Design

The OQM instructor is highly technical and systems oriented. Although the course web site (27 pages and links) appears to be controlled and detail-oriented, it is a framework for a flexible classroom. The following illustrates how the course utilizes the key components of Wenger’s design for the development of communities.

Encouraging Experimentation: The instructor expected students to experiment. It was “OK to bomb.”

Schedule: Every aspect of the schedule gave the message that, “taking notes, memorizing and regurgitating them is not the method of learning in this class. A deeper, theoretical understanding is expected.”

Resources: Various resources that Wenger refers to as “artifacts” were provided and used.

- **Textbook:** The textbook’s interactive CD gave inexperienced students an opportunity to see and hear what OQM vocabulary words mean. Memorization requirements were minimal; however, some memorization was necessary for learning the basics.
- **Virtual Schoolroom:** The virtual schoolroom was set up for the students to enter the on-line software and participate in various student “discussions.” (See Class Participation.)
- **Web Links:** The instructor continually stressed the importance of students searching for new information, browsing the web, exploring.

Requirements: The graded course requirements, discussed below, 1) provided a means for the instructor to measure a student’s learning (grades) and 2) covertly encouraged learning and the forming of a community.

- **Class Participation:** Each group of students was required to enter the software and chat -- for points -- with peers. Criteria for measurement were specific. Several important issues regarding schoolroom discussions were congruent with the community guidelines.
 - Exceptional thinking and sharing were rewarded with rare, high points.
 - Mistakes were rewarded. Students were encouraged to ask questions from the lecture where they were confused or did not understand. Personal attacks were punished with a loss of points.
 - Practical application examples were rewarded. The VBDL students were generous in sharing examples of how lecture concepts were used in their jobs. Company tours were also helpful..
 - Learning was encouraged versus “getting the grade.” No “A” was given to any student who had not made a substantive and effective attempt to participate in the online discussions.
- **Company Visits:** The students were able to actually see and hear how OQM concepts were applied. Each OC and VBDL student was required to set up and coordinate one tour. Bonus points were given if a tour report was formatted for web publication. The instructor posted it on the web.
- **Group Project:** This was a team project for the EMBA’s, in lieu of a final take-home exam required of the OC’s and VBDL’s. Completed virtually, students were encouraged to tap into external resources, contacts, suppliers, customers. They were required to organize their findings and propose a model of success or failure for the phenomenon they were studying, including a diagnosis of the general conditions where the model would work or fail.
- **Take Home Final Exam:** Of eleven questions, students were required to answer four, each drawn from an assigned web site.
- **Bonus:** VBDL’s and EMBA’s were encouraged to schedule an on-line chat in their area of expertise.

Characteristics in a Community Classroom Environment

In addition to Wenger’s architectural components, the classroom design also included several Brown and Campione characteristics of a community classroom environment, discussed below:

Individual responsibility, coupled with communal sharing was deeply embedded. Individuals had the responsibility for their own learning, for their grade. A large portion of the individual’s grade was earned by sharing within the group, or community. “Majoring” was evident in the on-line discussions.

Ritual and familiar participant structures were illustrated with crosstalk among discussion groups. Simply combining the OC’S and VBDL’S forced crosstalk. The lecture, then, connected the basic concepts within OQM.

A community of discourse was encouraged and rewarded through the on-line discussion and questioning of opposing views. The instructor interceded only when critical clarifications were needed.

Multiple zones of proximal development (ZPD) were plentiful. “Experts” came in the form of supplemental materials, the interactive CD, company tours, on-line chats, web links, lectures, and student “expert” presentations.

Lectures, readings, and web sites **seeded ideas**. Various students within the community would find ideas of interest and share them with others (**migration**). Those students who found an idea to be of interest would enter that particular discussion (**appropriation**).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNITIES

Teams and groups can become a community, but organizations or teachers do not create them. Teams are formed by others for specific purposes. Communities evolve from their own shared purpose and interests. Brown and

Campione described communities: "...where members are critically dependent upon each other, cooperative learning is necessary for survival, and learning depends heavily on creating, sustaining, and expanding the community" (1998: 181).

A ten-week quarter did not allow much time for deep communities to evolve. Students began to group themselves for the purpose of completing the requirements of the class, or to "catch a ride" to a tour. However, there was evidence that several communities were developing. The EMBA's made it clear that they valued their separate status from the OC'S and VBDL'S. Early in the quarter, after the first few tours, several OC students began to bond, share ideas, discuss applications. They identified VBDL's that posted particularly interesting discussions on-line and interacted with them. Conversely, a group we called "the slackers" seemed to form a community for complaining. We refrained from calling them a community of learners; in fact, they could be called "learning-averse."

IMPLICATIONS

Organizations have begun to seriously observe how tacit learning occurs, how it "just happens," and how it affects their learning ecology. As a result, they are looking for employees who are not only technologically competent, but those who continuously seek new knowledge, who are flexible, who network and share among several diverse communities, who can be independent as well as dependent on others, can think critically, make decisions, and are not afraid to practice, fail, and try again. Universities, then, must ask how they can encourage these skills in their students.

Somehow, universities will need to quickly reskill their faculty (Ives & Jarvenpaa, 1996). These teachers will need to move from the traditional classroom to a mode of participation and collaboration with co-workers, external resources, and students. In areas where educational budget cuts have become the norm, these institutions will need to find the means to tap into the necessary artifacts needed to encourage student exploration, collaboration, and practice.

Because the global economy is providing opportunities for learning in inter-organizational exchange relationships (Araujo, 1998), universities should encourage the same. This allows each educational community to expand its boundaries for increased resources and artifacts. It also teaches students -- by example -- to share and expand their own boundaries.

With many university classrooms containing hundreds of students in one lecture hall, methods need to be put in place to encourage the development of small communities of learners. This does not mean that universities should shy away from or eliminate requiring students to "know the basics" in their general studies or in their field of choice. In this case, lecture is a viable delivery method. How learning occurs and builds upon this foundation of knowledge is the critical issue. Methods of evaluation other than information-regurgitation will become necessary. The issue of weeding out the "slackers" still exists in a community environment. However, this should not be confused with constructive discussion, questioning, and criticism for learning's sake.

ZPD's can be implemented not only utilizing faculty members, but by encouraging "older" students to enter an "expert : novice" relationship. Everyone learns.

This discussion is not limited to the on-campus environment. Although distance learning classes provide some design challenges, this case illustrates that very few alterations were required to accommodate the two distance learner groups. In reality, students who participate in virtual communities are developing yet another skill they will be required to use when they are gainfully employed with a virtual or global organization. This is particularly true for the on-campus student "forced" to participate in a virtual classroom environment with peers she or he has never met. The irony is that the technology that is forcing the changes is the same technology that will become a primary community artifact.

Issues for Consideration

Admittedly, a shortcoming of this study is the limitation of our observations to one classroom. However, we felt it provided a good example of encouraging communities of learners. We are not attempting to dictate how business educators should be teaching. Nor, do we have answers on how the topics in this paper translate to the organizational training classroom. Our intent was to share our observations to encourage future study concerning the use of communities theory in a classroom. We would like to begin this exploration by proposing that individuals who are creating curriculum and classroom environments ask themselves questions such as the following.

- Because organizational structure is changing so rapidly, how can I remain current in what my students need to perform successfully? Do I know what they need to know, what they need to be able to do?
- How can I instill in my students the importance of and an excitement for continuous learning? Do I illustrate

- that I am continually seeking new skills and knowledge? Can they tell that I am excited about learning?
- What technological skills do my students need? What attitude concerning technology must they embrace? Do I set an example by utilizing the most current technology available to me, and can I provide advice about the hardware, software, and skills they will need?
- How can my students be prepared to share knowledge, ideas, resources, either in a team environment or as an individual contributor? Do I set an example by sharing what I know, what I have experienced? If I don't know, do I ask them to find out and encourage them to share with the class?
- Do I provide opportunities for and suggestions to network with experts? Do I also involve older or past students in my classroom to enhance everyone's growth?
- Am I flexible? Do I encourage my students to be flexible? How can this be accomplished without frustrating the students and appearing to be "out of control" of the classroom?
- Do I minimize the number of basic topics I present in my curriculum? Are my students aware of the basic concepts they must know, those that provide the foundation for the course? Then, do I allow students to "major" in an area of interest and share that information with other students?
- Am I performing the role of "expert" for my "novice" students? Can I identify the individual differences and needs in my students and interact with each of them on an appropriate level (using ZPD concepts)?
- Are students allowed to practice without repercussions? Is failure seen and rewarded as a learning experience?
- Do I encourage inter-organizational exchange relationships by weaving my curriculum or classroom with other classes? Can a Finance major enrolled in a Human Resource course, for instance, tie these topics together in some meaningful way?
- Am I pushing my students to be critical thinkers and decision makers? Can I show them how to jump from theory to application? By the end of the course, can they illustrate their learned application skills?
- Do I allow for negotiation of meaning, where students may disagree, discuss, and constructively criticize other students and me?
- Do I look at the process of organizational issues as much as content? Do I look at the process of learning in my class as much as the content the students are supposed to learn?
- Do I incorporate human values such as love, wonder, humility, and compassion in my interactions with and expectations of students? Do I encourage them to practice these values with their peers? And,
- Have I set up the curriculum, media, technology, outside consultants, and internal and external resources for my students to learn all these lessons? Do I have an array of artifacts and presentation methods for learning?

A final issue that cannot be ignored is that of funding, or lack of funding in many cases. Universities and training departments are increasingly finding their funds cut to the minimum. How can instructors and trainers remain excited, acquire the necessary technology and artifacts, and aid learning on such a budget? The answer is embedded in the communities ideals: Get outside the classroom. Use your experts. Take the students to the artifacts if you cannot obtain them inside. Ask to borrow tools, policy manuals, stockholder reports, videos, examples from organizations. Solicit experts from industry, from departments outside the school of business, use graduate students. Let the students teach. Let groups explore. Better yet, go learn with them.

CONCLUSION

The final result of an effort to encourage community learning will be, as Brown and Campione propose, a system where all the principles of communities (and their participants) feed each other and are closely intertwined. This system will be a learning ecology producing students who can immediately enter the workforce not only with the basic knowledge, skills, and abilities required by organizations, but additionally with the flexibility and internal and external resources to adapt to any environment.

Can all this be accomplished overnight? No. Is this just another passing fad? No, not if an institution intends to survive. "Organizational learning" and "communities" may be buzz words today, but the underlying philosophy will continue to emerge and evolve because it is required for survival.

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REFERENCES AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST