

Is the village common in a cloud? Cooperative education and social networking

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout time humans have always liked to interact and share with one another. Web 2.0 is only a digital extension of that desire. Web 2.0 communities are for us today what tribal or village communities used to be for our ancestors. They represent a place where we can make new connections, share details of our lives with them, and discuss topics that matter to us (*Why we should care about Web 2.0*, Blonde2.0, 2009).

ISSUE

I liked being able to tailor my learning to the specific weaknesses that I identified by going through the course. I loved the flexibility of the course and found the online discussion forums very useful. All up it has been my favorite subject of my whole degree. McNamara (2009, p. 239.)

This quote, from a law student who had recently completed their first cooperative education course, encapsulates the great strengths of cooperative education, tailoring, flexibility, and participation opportunities. Students enjoy and learn more in courses where their individual learning needs are met, and there is room for them to explore and grow. Learners appreciate sound mechanisms and processes which allow them to participate and collaborate. These are key features of cooperative education programs. Cooperative education courses are complex in terms of content, participation and variability of context. As new technologies are developed and become accepted in education there are opportunities to use new online applications to support educational programs. It is possible that the participative and collaborative nature of the new applications can resolve some of the content, participation and variability challenges of cooperative education courses. Could social networking services and community sites, such as Ning and Social Go, enhance students, staff and hosts experiences in the cooperative education?

BACKGROUND

Managing cooperative education courses is not easy. Balancing the expectations and demands of staff, students and hosts is often an exhausting task for course managers. Complexity and variability are increased as students are off campus, host organisations need to be attracted, engaged, and retained and staff are performing key support roles. Everyone requires information, documentation and methods of communicating. It is essential that information is correct and accessible. Inquiries and concerns need to be dealt with speedily. Hosts have often complained that support and communication from the academic institution could be improved. (McDermot, K., 2008) Generally, the course manager has been the hub in the wheel and all communication and documentation passes through them into various online applications. However, this approach has often left course managers overworked and undervalued.

The course manager has generally created the content and responded queries and questions from individuals. Traditional methods of communicating with students, staff and hosts has been by email, websites, and student learning management systems (LMS). These online tools are usually linked to each other to create a web of interactions and sources of information. The student engages with the course through the course manager and the online content. Students on the course may contribute to the LMS but hosts and staff rarely engage. Students, staff and hosts communicate by email, phone and face to face. This method of working has created a complex set of interactions for each student, staff member and host organization. The number of interactions becomes even greater as the numbers of students engaged in cooperative education placements increases. Recent research has revealed that the time taken by course managers to meet the course demands is high. Administration of the course is a key activity for course directors. Taylor, (2003) reports up to 72% of the director's time is spent on administration tasks. Clearly, the high demands on the course coordinators time make it difficult for them to concentrate on other competing academic commitments. If there is a possibility of "online economies" (Kollock, 1999) course managers are likely to be the main beneficiaries.

What are the advantages of an online learning community for students, academics and hosts? It appears to the author that participation in a community of practice, opportunity to learn, network, create a professional profile, share, link together, celebrate and share are benefits that can be derived from an online learning community. The

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greatest advantage may be the "learning portfolio" nature of the service. The portfolio is the creation of an ongoing repository of artifacts, engagements and interactions which demonstrate the nature of the program and how it has been successful for a large number of students, staff and hosts over time.

DISCUSSION

The Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' has become a metaphor for the world wide web. The traditional meeting place of the 'village common' are now chatrooms, Facebook and Twitter. Physical distance is no problem and new communities and connections are forming where interests, passions and concerns are shared. In recent times, Wenger, White and Smith (2009) trained educators to create online "communities of practice" and encourage educators to become 'technology stewards' rather than transmitters of content. Everything that could take place on the village common, can now be carried out online with Web 2.0, using social networking services.

Childnet International (2007) define social networking services "...as Internet- or mobile-device-based social spaces designed to facilitate communication, collaboration and content sharing across networks of contacts." While engaging in these social networking services students will:

- Communicate with existing networks, make and develop friendships/contacts;
- Represent themselves online, create and develop an online presence;
- View content/find information;
- Create and customize profiles;
- Author and upload content;
- Add and share content;
- Post messages – public & private; and
- Collaborate with other people

According to Budd, A. (2005) Web 2.0 is a state of mind, where there is a service not a product and new technologies are used to create a richer user experience. The key concept is that the web is changing from a document delivery system to an application platform and in this process it is easier for people to participate and collaborate. O'Connell, (2009) suggests that flexibility and personalization are at the core of our re-purposing of education. If students think about the Internet as a virtual locker, backpack and notebook, then we must create flexible learning environments which support the use of multiple resource tools, including Web 2.0.

The key challenge in cooperative education courses is to make available and accessible the multiple resources tools for students, hosts and staff. This is often a large group. Traditionally, this group has been considered a loose community. Now the community can be connected by Web 2.0, they may be a better functioning and committed community of practice. According to Etienne Wenger (1998), three elements are crucial in distinguishing a community of practice from other groups and communities:

The Domain. A community of practice is something more than a club of friends or a network of connections between people: "It has an identity defined by a shared domain of interest. Membership therefore implies a commitment to the domain, and therefore a shared competence that distinguishes members from other people" (Wenger, 1998, p. 45). In cooperative education communities shared competence is found in the study and practice of the discipline.

The Community. In pursuing their interest in their domain, members engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. They build relationships that enable them to learn from each other. Learning is the key component of the cooperative education experience. Students, staff and hosts are all open to new learning opportunities while participating in cooperative education.

The Practice. Members of a community of practice are practitioners. They develop a shared repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools, ways of addressing recurring problems—in short a shared practice. This takes time and sustained interaction. Cooperative education is strongly focused on the student practice of their discipline within the workplace.

A cooperative education course is a community of practice. There is a discernible network of connections between students, academics and hosts. They have relationships built on student learning. There is evidence that hosts and academics also learn while participating in the community. All members of the community are practices in a particular field. They share commonality in their interests and passion for their work. Their community is widespread and may be located across the globe. It would appear such a community of practice could be enhanced by the addition of social networking services. There are some subtle distinctions between a community and an online community. Misanchuk and Anderson, (2001, p. 1) define an online community as, "a group of people who are brought together to share and generate knowledge in a mutually supportive and reciprocal manner." Online communities are very similar to traditional communities. However, they are driven

by individual members who desire to share experiences, knowledge and ideas. It is how they are using and adapting to the technology that makes them unique. Wenger (2009) explains that wide adoption of community-oriented technology is due to the fact that it expands the available infrastructure for something fundamental to our humanity: social interaction. White (2009) explains that technology is designed for groups but experienced by the individual and that users are creative and the success of a social networking service will depend on fostering that creativity.

Students, academics and staff will not necessarily move easily into an online community of practice hosted by a social networking service. Reynard (2009) identifies the key challenges in using social networking services in education environments. She explained that research by Hayman (2009) identified the greatest challenge to online communities is student willingness to 'present' ideas publicly. Students were reluctant to share their ideas open and they believed they were of no value to the wider community. Reynard (2009) identifies the key challenge for an educator is to ensure students have the confidence, learner autonomy and collaborative learning skills to participate in any learning community. Academics and hosts will need to have the same skill sets as students to fully participate in the community of practice. The course manager's role is to identify and foster the key skills for participation and collaboration in the online community of practice. Blogger, Marcia Connor (2008) suggests that social networking services all involve social skills developed through collaboration and networking. These skills include traditional literacy, research, technical skills, and critical analysis. The goal of the teachers is to encourage and develop skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks and self confidence to participate in contemporary society, which includes communities of practice. It is the responsibility of the course manager to ensure an online community of practice is "dynamic, rich and reflective" of the students, academics and hosts participating in it.

It is essential to unlock the key motivations for students, academics and hosts to participate in an online community. Understanding why people participate online provides useful clues for the design and facilitation of the social networking service. Kollock (1999) believed there were three main motives which supported online collaboration. He identified these as; Anticipated reciprocity (an expected exchange of information and ideas), increased recognition (acknowledgment of expertise or contribution) and sense of efficacy (supporting their community). In addition, Noff (2008) added his own list including; Connections within the Community (friends help other friends), Emotional Safety (a sense of belonging within a community), Common emotional connection (community is based on a common emotion), Altruism (the joy of helping others). Social networking may enhance student learning experiences in cooperative education. The possibilities on a functioning online community of practice which supports a cooperative education course appear boundless and exciting. However, before embarking on the creation of Ning and Social Go, course managers would be wise to consider the comments of Reynard, Hayman and Connor. Students, staff and hosts will need to be prepared for 'publication' of their ideas. They will need guidance, perhaps resources and guidelines, as to what is and what is not acceptable. There will need to be models and examples to follow. All will need confidence, autonomy and collaborative learning skills. These skills will need to be acquired prior to or in the early stages participation in the online community. Staff and hosts will need to be prepared for participation in the online community. The course manager will need to plan a platform that is dynamic and responsive to the community. It will need to be rich in content, participation, ideas, and experiences. Finally, the online community will need to provide reflective space that can be managed to allow private/public reflections.

CONCLUSIONS

Cooperative education course managers can no longer ignore Web 2.0. The flexibility of social media creates a unique opportunity for managers to establish effective communities of practice to support student learning. However, there are some identified skills that staff, students and hosts will need to fully participate in the community. Any social networking service selected to form an online community should be designed to address these concerns. Once operating, the social networking application should be evaluated to explore the perceptions of users. A project similar to Groenwald's (2009) or McNamara's (2009) should be undertaken to assess the value of the pilot social networking media. It is through research into student, staff and host experiences and perceptions that the cooperative education community will be able to assess whether social

networking application enhances teaching and learning or merely adds to the existing tools. The research should provide valuable insights to cooperative education course managers who are considering developing their own social network sites and identify whether there are competitive advantages in creating collaborative and participative learning environments for internal and external participants.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of research into social networking use in cooperative education courses will provide valuable insights for course managers. The research should identify tools, resources, processes and interactions which support student learning and the functioning of the wider community of practice in cooperative education.

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