

## Supporting Virtual Communities

### End of Module Reflection

The Supporting Virtual Communities module has raised my awareness of the role of the e-moderator and the various approaches that may be adapted in online learning environments. Palloff and Pratt (1999) suggest that the element that sets computer mediated learning apart from the traditional face to face setting is the interaction among students themselves, the interaction between student and faculty and the collaboration in learning that results from these interactions. This was certainly evident throughout the module. We moved from discussion fora where all members of the class interacted with each other on a variety of topics, prompted and guided by our e-moderator, to working as part of a specified group to debate a topic with our opposition. Then finally we worked as a group to create an e-activity. Whilst Palloff and Pratt (1999) have defined that the approach required for online learning is underpinned by a constructivist approach, they suggest that in distance education attention needs to be paid to developing a sense of community in order for it to be successful. Although we knew each other as a group prior to the module these activities served to further build our sense of community, Lave and Wenger (1991 P.98) suggest that the term community does not imply co-presence but it does imply “participation in an activity system” about which the participants share understandings concerning what they are doing. The role of the e-moderator throughout the module was as Lave and Wenger (1991) describe an established member of the community who encouraged us as newcomers to learn through participation under their guidance, and observation. The high level of interaction by the e-moderator in the earlier stages of the module reduced as the module progressed and led to our involvement as novices increasing in scope, responsibility and autonomy.

My experience as an online student throughout the module coincides with Kenneth Gergen’s (1991) (as cited in Palloff and Pratt, 1999 p. 15) description of the online identity. He suggests that the student’s identity is “continuously emergent, reformed and redirected as the student moves through a sea of ever changing relationships”. Reflecting on my experience of online learning, whilst I actively engaged in discussion and group work it took time for me to adjust to the new online campus. McConnell (2006) suggests that different types of group work and different forms of discussion and debate are necessary to engage everyone at different times. The initial debate activity is not one that I would feel most comfortable in, yet as it progressed the different perspectives that emerged, stimulated me to think in other ways on the topic at hand. I began to enjoy the challenge of debate and saw its effectiveness

in stimulating critical thinking. The level of off line work throughout the module was constant as I researched and reflected on the matters at hand, however for me the level of what I would regard as effective online interaction with my group, increased as the module progressed and I became more comfortable in my surroundings and using technology. Nipper (1989) (as cited in Pallof and Pratt, 1999 p. 11) suggests that it's important for groups to feel that they are working together in real time and that there is a need to establish a sense of presence online. For me this was achieved through use of the chat room which provided me with the connection to other students that I needed. As the module progressed I became what Nipper (as cited in Pallof and Pratt, 1999 p. 8) describes as a "noisy" student becoming more active and creative in the learning process.

The approaches used during the module illustrated how the online student can collaborate through the use of discussion boards, debate and group work and through the use of technology such as wikis, chat rooms, discussion fora and blogs. The role of the e-moderator becomes that of the "guide on the side" as they guide students to deeper insights by identifying and highlighting important points during discussion and course work. Collison, Elbaum, Haavind and Tinker (2000, p.37) suggest that in the online environment carefully articulated written responses are the students' only way to receive feedback and encouragement in the absence of face to face interactions and the e-moderator can "push" the thinking of the group with interventions that "sharpen the focus".

As I reflect back now on the discussions that took place during the socialisation phase and in particular the "icebreaker" discussion I'm struck by the wealth of ideas that resulted and developed throughout the activity due to the role of the e-moderator. Covey's (1989) (as cited in Pallof and Pratt, 1999 p. 119) description aptly describes what took place. He suggests that it's a "volley of views" between people, a "ping pong" conversation where each participant is either speaking or preparing to speak. Pallof and Pratt (1999) suggest that it's important for the e-moderator to allow the volley of views to occur. This can be seen where the e-moderator commented on the ideas discussed and questioned if students could think of further examples or by asking students "what would happen if?" Rather than being at the forefront of the discussion the e-moderator shared some of their own ideas and invited comments from the group. Pallof and Pratt (1999) suggest that at the beginning of online learning it's important to acknowledge contribution as students need to feel welcomed into a new situation. This was prevalent throughout the discussion as individual ideas were mentioned or similar posts connected. Using quotes from previous posts to highlight an idea

and using the students name all served to provide acknowledgement. Finally by adopting a casual friendly tone the e-moderator modelled appropriate behaviour and set the standard for appropriate netiquette. The fact that I can revisit the posts and continue to benefit from the suggestions that were made, points to the main advantage of asynchronous discussion. Reflecting on my own posts to the icebreaker discussion, I have observed that in my haste to reply I replied based on the context that was discussed in earlier posts. I realise now that taking a little more time it would be possible to not only reply but to add to the discussion. My initial post to the discussion related to only one area where I have used icebreakers. If I was rewriting this post I would reflect on the use of ice breakers in the various contexts that I have used them, such as during induction, with existing staff who know each other well and as methods to improve energy levels during training. Another aspect for the post would be to mention where I have taken the decision not to use icebreakers and the positive or adverse effects this may have had on the training activity.

Throughout the module I have questioned how I could encourage discussion as a means of collaboration amongst the learners I deal with every day. I recently took part in an exercise led by a colleague, where a discussion forum was used as a means of providing support and information to my department during the roll out of a training programme across the organisation. It was hoped that through the forum, it would be possible for both trainers and subject matter experts to articulate issues that were occurring and through discussion provide suggestions and ideas as to how the issues could be dealt with. Within this small group of what could be described as active and self -directed learners the discussion failed. My fear is that if it has failed at this level how can we achieve it with the variety of learners occurring within the organisation. McConnell (2006) suggests that there are four factors that influence the cooperation in e-learning. Reflecting on the first two factors which are the willingness of the learner to engage in this form of learning and the need for learners to have an understanding of the benefits of this form of learning provides me with some answers for the failure of the discussion. This was an activity that the participants had never experienced before. Participants were unaware of what was required of them and how it would be of benefit to them, Ko and Rossen (2004) suggest that there is a need to provide an orientation programme for students prior to starting their learning online. In this context I feel that a short orientation covering netiquette, how to post questions and responses, and possibly setting up a trial discussion to allow participants practise posting and responding would contribute to creating an environment where participants were willing to contribute and had

an understanding of the benefits. The orientation could also refer to the final two factors McConnell (2006) discusses which are the need to have an assessment system that rewards collaboration and awareness of the distribution of power between facilitator and participant. Whilst there would be no formal assessment here an indication to participants that at the end of the activity statistics will be posted to show the level of engagement, may provide recognition for participation. The orientation would also highlight that the participants are the owners of the discussion rather than the facilitator.

My reflection on the implementation of discussion fora within the work place has led me to contemplate whether online workplace learners are similar to online students. The activity of the online student may well be influenced by what McConnell (2006) refers to as the need to have an assessment system that rewards collaboration. However in the case that there will not be an assessment the challenge is to motivate the workplace learner to contribute. Hughes (2007 p, 38) suggests that the application of communities of practise model to the workplace will result in the concept becoming “hijacked”. He suggests that Lave and Wenger’s paradigm shift from, learning from towards learning to will be extended a step further to “learning for”. The “learning for” will be learning for productive gain. Although Hughes suggests this is high-jacking the original concept this may well be where it needs to go in order for work place learners to be motivated to contribute in a meaningful way to their community or discussion.

Brown, Murphy & Wade (2006) suggest that everyone in the work place is a lifelong learner and will be a leader, teacher or trainer at various points in their career journey. Dennon & Wang (2002) suggest that collaborative work groups not only support the learning processes of those involved on the team but they also help develop organisational knowledge and leave behind archives and legacies that can be used to guide future informal learners in the organisation. Thus the importance of encouraging discussion within the organisation either formally or informally is important to me. Where we need to start is with our trainers and engaging them as I have been throughout this module in the various modes of discussion. Gilly Salmon’s (2004) five stage model outlining the stages required to engage learners in online discussion provides me with an approach to involve our trainers and one which they in turn can take and use themselves. I would like to see discussion being used as a focus for participants prior to face to face interventions and as a follow up with participants after training to provide a forum where difficulties or issues can be addressed as well as tips and suggestions on how they have implemented what has been learnt.

To conclude, this module had provided me with two perspectives, that of the e-moderator and that of the online student. Both perspectives are important in their own right but invaluable when combined. In my context I'm not sure if there will be a course that will be completed fully online from start to finish. However the various approaches that we have experienced during this module from webinars and debates to group work and discussion are all elements that I can incorporate into face to face training to provide a more active and meaningful experience for our learners.

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