

Developing virtual learning communities in higher education



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Virtual learning communities differ significantly from their physical counterparts. Communication within them is mediated by technology, largely text based and often asynchronous. Social cues are reduced and much discussion is archived.

These communities are superficially transparent, with most interaction taking place in a public arena. Questions about deadlines, relationship building and petty squabbles, all the many aspects of a learning community which could reasonably be carried out privately in an offline environment, are both presented to the group and preserved by the conferencing software.

Participants carry out the majority of their educational, organisational and relational work in the view of the entire community. The complex interplay of these types of work influences participants' approach to learning. Understanding these influences is crucial to the development of the learning communities which support deep approaches to learning.

Educational

Ideally, students will adopt a deep approach to study, focused on meaning (1), rather than a strategic approach oriented to assessment (2) or a surface approach based on accessing and memorising information.

However, approaches to study are not innate but are influenced by contextual factors (3). 'Dolly' (below) demonstrates a deep approach at first, orienting to meaning.

As the day progresses, it becomes apparent that other group members are not going to be reciprocated. The questions asked by one group member about background material and referencing suggest that she is happy to sit back and leave the hard work to Dolly.

Faced by this response from the group, Dolly changes her approach and by the end of the day she begins to demonstrate a surface approach to study.

Dolly 11am

The research on chunking can be related to a number of concepts eg Atkinson and Shriffrin short and long term memory, George Miller stm is limited to plus or minus two bits, also Klatzy

Dolly 9.40pm

A lot of the research can be found in GCSE and A level books... A friend suggested that you try one of the regular search engines.

Kelly, Nov 28

Just thought I'd say hi to everyone. Looking forward to working with you all.

Judith, Nov 30

Looking forward to working with you all, feeling a bit daunted by it all I have to say though.

Dolly, Nov 30

I am not quite sure what to do... as I have never worked online... I will do my best to keep up with you...

Kelly, Nov 30

Have to say I am pretty daunted by this project myself... There seems so much that we have to decide on by Thursday.

Relational

Lacking the usual social cues, students make judgments about their fellow students based on their postings. They also have to decide what to reveal about themselves.

The speech bubbles above show three students introducing themselves. 'Kelly' initially introduces herself neutrally but, after 'Judith' and 'Dolly' say that they are daunted, she falls into line with them. The evidence of subsequent messages suggests that Dolly and Judith are being self deprecating, while Kelly appears to be describing her feelings accurately.

In these first days, the students have to make important decisions about how they work together, who will take a lead and who they can rely on. Yet the data available to them when they make these decisions is ambiguous and interpreting it requires a steep learning curve.

Supervisors: Professor Karen Littleton and Dr Denise Whitelock

Data collection

Textual data from a FirstClass conference related to an online psychology course at the Open University (OU) was archived and analysed qualitatively.

This course is a wholly online version of one of the OU's intensive residential schools for undergraduates and requires students to develop and carry out a research study in a small group with students they have only met online.

The main course conference of several hundred students is divided into sub-groups of five or six students working on a research project with the support of two or more tutors.

Two complete sub-groups were coded according to the approaches to study evidenced within them, relationships between messages were considered and significant sequences of messages were considered in detail.

Organisational

Students who only encounter each other online struggle to organise their study, orient to deadlines and signal when they will next be available to participate in the group.

'Carmen' (below) was part of a group of eight students who posted a total of 178 messages between them. Of these, 152 contained some organisational element.

The FirstClass software used on the course did not provide timetabling or voting applications, so decisions and scheduling had to be negotiated by the group.

As several of the students had irregular work patterns and one was based in a very different time zone, much of their energy in the asynchronous conference was devoted to developing the skills necessary for them to function effectively as a virtual community.

Implications

In order to develop an online environment in which participants will adopt a predominantly deep approach to learning, it is important to consider holistically the educational, organisational and relational elements of study, and to take their complex interplay into account.

References

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