

Ensuring Quality Education in Open and Distance eLearning (ODeL) Through Virtual Learning Communities

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Abstract

A process documentation was employed to determine how virtual learning communities are built in an open and distance education context as one mechanism to ensure quality education in this mode of instructional delivery. The study conducted at the University of the Philippines Open University from June 2008 to February 2010 specifically aimed to: 1) describe what a learning community is in the context of ODeL; 2) describe the process of building learning communities in ODeL; 3) determine factors essential for the building of learning communities in ODeL; 4) determine specific benefits of learning communities in an ODeL context wherein independent studying or learning is the core of the guiding principle. The study is also an attempt to document a good practice in ODeL, especially one that hopes to address quality of the learning process.

Keywords: virtual learning communities, distance education, e-learning, Philippines, learner support

Introduction

Communities are always associated with sharing a common physical (or geographical) space – it being one among the attributes that members of the community share. Hence, formation of learning communities in a residential campus to serve the purpose comes in handy and easy since the basic ingredient is there.

Misanchuk and Anderson (2008) defined a learning community as “a group of people who are brought together to share and generate knowledge in a mutually supportive and reciprocal manner”. They further elucidated on the characteristics of learning communities and the necessity of integrating these elements to form a strong community. These elements are ownership, social interaction, group identity, individual identity, participation and knowledge generation.

With the increasing number of academic institutions offering programs in the Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) mode of instruction, forming learning communities as critical ingredient to social construction of knowledge has challenged the distance education (DE) practitioners.

This paper hopes to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on learning communities in the ODeL context, also called Virtual Learning Centers or VLCs, with focus on how they can

contribute to ensuring quality education in this mode of instructional delivery – something which critics of DE still consider to be a major issue.

Specifically, this paper describes what a learning community is in the context of ODeL; describes the process of building learning communities in ODeL; determines the factors essential for the building of learning communities in ODeL; discusses the specific benefits of learning communities in an ODeL context wherein independent studying or learning is the core of the guiding principle; and describes how learning communities can contribute to ensuring the quality of education in ODL.

Methodology

This study is a combination of process documentation on how the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU) formed online learning communities and an online survey to determine how learners feel about being members of these learning communities. The respondents were the UPOU students based outside the Philippines. They were referred to as “offshore” students to differentiate them from other off campus students who are based in the country. The UPOU offshore students are not covered by the already-in-place-structures of the university like the Learning Centers and Testing Centers, hence the perception that the learning communities will be of more importance to them.

The study documented the process of creating a learning community with attempts to incorporate the other elements and attributes of the traditional/geographically-bounded learning communities. The online survey, on the other hand, attempted to validate university-held-assumptions from the students’ perspectives. Some of these assumptions are 1) being a member of a learning community helps the students in their course completion; 2) learning communities provide them with that sense of belonging to a university; 3) learning communities help ensure quality in ODeL.

The process documentation was done from June 2008 to February 2010 which covered four semesters. The online survey was held in February 2010 when 30 students from different locations participated. The writer has served as coordinator for the UPOU offshore students during the period of the study.

Results and Discussion

Forms of Learning Communities in ODeL

The process of delivering instructions in the open and distance e-learning mode resulted in several forms of learning communities considered to be essential for learning and successful attainment of the goals of the student and the institution.

One is the learning community formed in the learning management system (LMS) where the academic interactions take place. This is where the actual teaching and learning happens to achieve the course goals and objectives. The online academic interactions facilitate the social

construction of knowledge and promote critical thinking which are essential processes in learning.

Then there is the support community which provides the other essentials like learner support services, peer support, administrative support or even the helpdesk to look into students' concerns. This support community comes in various forms. It can be a cyber coffee shop which some teachers incorporate in their course site, e-groups, university community site or even social networking sites like the Facebook.

It should be noted that some of these learning communities are not university-initiated but were formed by students. Examples are the social networking sites like Facebook where students "converge" online and discuss study related issues. The fact that students form these online communities indicates that they serve a need such as to bond with fellow learners outside the "confines of the university" (the university-initiated sites).

Another form is the geographically-based learning communities initiated by the university for the purpose of providing the students with a physical venue where they can sit for their exams. The cooperation, collaboration and communication needed to keep this form of communities active, however, are also done online with the face-to-face meetings happening only occasionally like once or twice per term. The common concerns, such as living and working in a foreign country and studying at the same time or the challenges of a different cultural environment, serve as the binding factors for this form of community.

Characteristics of learning communities in ODeL

Members are mobile and thus are ubiquitous learners. When they no longer share the goal of the community, they cease to participate or end their membership. When their circumstances change, they no longer find membership in the community essential or necessary. One indication of this is requests to be removed from the e-mailing list once they have stopped enrolling or have completed their courses. Therefore, ODeL learning communities need to provide flexibilities for such situations so that the process of communication, collaboration and cooperation will not be disrupted as a result of changing community members.

The members come from diverse cultural backgrounds. Therefore, rules governing the community need to be sensitive and considerate of these differences. Examples are the observance of Ramadan, the fasting month, by the Muslims, the restriction on women travelling alone in certain areas and learners who sit for exams during Sabbath.

Members are geographically dispersed and live in different time zones. This affects scheduling activities such as synchronous online discussions via video conferencing, online orientation and online lectures. Teachers, online moderators and coordinators need to develop mechanism so as not to disadvantage any student in the process.

Members of the learning community select the online technology most appropriate for them. Among the factors to consider are appropriateness to mean accessibility, affordability and ease of use. It is therefore not surprising to find various combinations of different technologies to

facilitate access. It has been observed, however, that there is an increasing predominance of mobile technologies being used to stay connected and be active members of the various learning communities.

Connectivism promotes learning by supplementing the social construction of knowledge. Learning through connectivism can be described as “a process that occurs within nebulous environments of shifting core elements – not entirely under the control of the individual. Learning can reside outside [the individual] and is focused on connecting specialized information sets. [T]he connections enable us to learn more” (Siemens, 2004). Virtual learning communities provide a venue for both connectivism and constructivism to operate in the learning environment.

Building of and sustaining learning communities in ODeL

The following factors have been observed to be essential in building and sustaining virtual learning communities.

A group of people pursuing a common goal or sharing the same interest or circumstances. Since the mode of instruction is eLearning, physical or geographical boundaries cease to be a concern. Potential members can come from all parts of the world and, hence, form global learning communities. The group consists of UPOU students who share the same goal of successfully completing their courses and programs, and also the circumstance of being based outside the country. They have the same concerns such as work conditions and having to adjust to a different culture. In most cases, it is very much different from Filipino culture. Aside from facing the similar academic concerns or issues related to their studies, they also share the same sentiments pertaining to work and professional advancements. Being members of the learning community, some also see opportunities for professional and personal networking.

At the time of the study, there were 326 members of the university’s global learning community based in 40 countries (see Table 1). The number is based on the students’ declaration of their whereabouts at the time of enrollment.

Table 1: Geographical distribution of the UPOU students based outside the Philippines (Second Semester 2009-2010)

Country/ Location	# of Testing Centers	# of Students		Country/ Location	# of Testing Centers	# of Students
Africa	7	10		Bhutan	1	1
Australia	4	6		Brunei	1	3
Austria	1	1		Cambodia	1	6
Bahrain	1	6		Canada	1	2

France	1	1
Germany	1	4
Greece	1	1
Indonesia	2	14
Ireland	1	1
Italy	1	2
Japan	2	17
Jordan	1	1
Saudi Arabia	3	60
South Korea	1	7
Kuwait	1	3
Laos	1	2
Britain	1	3
Macau	1	3
Malaysia	1	5
Myanmar	1	1
Netherlands	1	1
Oman	1	4

Papua New Guinea	1	1
China	5	16
Qatar	1	7
Singapore	1	14
Kazakhstan	1	1
Tajikistan	1	1
Yemen	1	1
Taiwan	1	4
Thailand	1	31
Timor Leste	1	2
United Arab Emirates	2	45
USA	14	34
Vietnam	2	5
Switzerland	1	2
Total		326

During this particular period, offshore students accounted for about 14% of the university's enrollment. Eight students were non-Filipinos. The distribution of students in the various is shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Number of students enrolled per program (Second Semester 2009-2010)

Programs	Number of Students Enrolled
<i>Undergraduate Programs</i>	
Associate in Arts	20
Bachelor of Arts in Multimedia Studies	15
<i>For Teachers</i>	
Professional Teaching Certification	58
Diploma in Science Teaching	1
Diploma in Mathematics Teaching	4
Diploma in Language Literacy Education	24
Master of Arts in Education	26
Master of Distance Education	9
Doctor of Philosophy (Education)	6
<i>Management Programs</i>	
Diploma in Research and Development Management	9

Diploma in Environment and Natural Resources Mgt	13
Master of Environment and Natural Resources Mgt	9
Master of Public Management	20
<i>Computer Science/Information Systems</i>	
Diploma in Computer Science	11
Master of Information Systems	36
<i>Others</i>	
Master of Development Communication	34
Master of Arts in Nursing	58
Cross Enrollee	8
Non-degree	2
Total	326

Shared goal. Just like in any other community, a common goal binds the members. In the case of the UPOU global learning community, it is that goal to complete the courses and the program they are enrolled in. It was observed that these offshore students also share that goal of helping fellow Filipinos back home. This was evident when they mobilized resources and raised funds to help the university staff affected by a typhoon in 2008. This move led them to form the International Student Association of the university.

Shared space. The members of the community should share a space be it virtual or an actual physical space. In the case of the UPOU learning communities, the learners/members interact in a combination of virtual and physical spaces in their pursuit of common goals and interest. Online interactions are integrated into the various processes associated with learning, for example academic interactions, submissions of course requirements and venue for the “push and pull” of information. These usually take place in the LMS, e-groups and online community site. The shared physical space is in terms of Learning Center/Testing Center where the students sit for their exams.

Focal person. Given that the potential members of the learning community are geographically dispersed, there has to be one focal person to initiate the process. This focal person is authorized by the university and can command authority over the other members of the learning communities. In the case of the academic spaces for instance, the professor or tutor assigned to the group will be the one to manage the formation and the subsequent activities of the learning community. The university also assigns staff members to initiate the formation of other learning communities as deemed necessary, examples are Learning Center or Testing Center Coordinators and exam proctors.

The same is observed for students-initiated online learner community where one student will take the responsibility of creating the shared virtual space, informing all potential members and in organizing the community.

Sense of ownership. The members should be able to identify themselves with the purpose of the community and at the same time find things in common with the other members. They should be able to find a role to contribute to strengthening of the community. In the case of the UPOU global learning community, this is usually in the form of providing or sharing relevant

information. This sharing of information is indicative of the responsibility assumed by members of the community to help other members in attaining their goals. For example, arrangements for sit-down exams, changes in schedules, contact points of exam proctors and even sharing of resources for courses.

Constant communication and collaboration facilitated by technology. Since the students do not share the same physical space, communication, collaboration and cooperation are facilitated through communication technologies such as the Internet (email, social networking sites, learning management system) and phones. Face to face interactions or communications are not ruled out. This constant communication, collaboration and cooperation to achieve the shared goal and address common concerns also results in the generation of new knowledge and meanings as a result of social interaction.

Understanding diversities. Members come from diverse backgrounds and they bring their individualities when they join the learning communities. Hence, there need to be that tacit understanding of respect and consideration of these diversities.

Virtual Learning Communities from the perspective of the students

The results of the online survey validated some university-held assumptions with regard to the learning communities, especially in the context of ODeL. The following are the assumptions and students' comments attesting them.

Being a member of a learning community helps them in their course completion. This could be attributed to factors like being inspired by fellow learners and teachers, being connected and being assured that there will be support in case one encounters study-related concerns, and being motivated to learn and share (return-share) the learning to fellow students. Some comments that would attest to this are:

A good thing about the [learning communities] is the knowledge that you are not alone experiencing that, and that others are also watching and waiting, and whichever stance you take still gives you that confidence that UPOU is doing something about it, and that you will not be left out in the process of solving the problem.

The [virtual learning communities] form a vital part of the support system which is very much needed not only in learning, but in one's existence as a whole. Exchanges in the e-groups, whether positive or negative, serves as an affirmation that one is not alone, and there are other people out there, who are in the same boat as he/she is.

... when the moderator is as active, one could just feel special and connected, especially when confusion gets cleared, and data becomes more relevant to the learning. Motivation sets in to search for more options for learning, so that one could also share these with other learners in the discussions.

Learning communities provide students with that sense of belongingness. Results of many studies attest to the importance of providing DE learners with a sense of belonging and its direct effect on persistence or attrition in case this phenomenon is not felt by the student. The sense of community is felt by the willingness of members to assist other students address their concerns, whether they are study related or personal. The results of the online survey component of this study affirmed this observation as indicated in the comments made by the respondents as follows:

I have found the communities to be quite helpful as the members offer a variety of solutions and answers. Each members contributes to the community by bringing their past experiences and expertise to every discussion that is relevant to me.

Being connected with other UPOU students helps me to be in the loop..

Keeps me updated with the happenings.

I think the [learning communities] are great. Its nature is very much different from FB and other social networking sites. The students come from different places in the world but the goal is the same and that is to pursue academic excellence through online learning.

... I just want to be connected, know them, know what they are up to/busy with, etc. - more for social purposes than learning. Being connected with other UPOU students for learning purposes on the other hand, can help the students get tips from the old students to improve their studies, save time, and be more creative.

Connecting with UPOU classmates outside [LMS] does help me with my studies. We talk about so many things including our very personal lives. Connecting beyond [LMS] gives me a feeling that I'm in a regular on-campus university."

Learning communities help ensure quality in ODeL. The quality of education is as much a concern of the students and the academic institution. The students feel that the learning communities help ensure quality education in ODeL and in some cases make it different from the other online programs. Learning communities support or facilitate creation of knowledge through connectivism and constructivism as implied in the following comments by the students:

the online conversations encourage me to read further on what others have posted in the discussion forums...

.. [the learning communities] contribute to my learning process. Being in various parts of the world, they would have seen a lot that I have not seen with my own eyes, and that they will have experienced a lot of experiences that may not be presented well in written materials. Exchanging emails and the sort are nearest to experiencing the real thing.

Another indication of learning through connectivism is from this comment from another student:

I love the discussion boards, it consolidates the pool of brilliant ideas. Not only that you can contribute and impart your knowledge and ideas, but you also get to learn from other people's opinions and experiences that you cannot find from textbooks.

The social construction of knowledge, on the other hand, is implied in the following comment from a student who attributed much of her learning to the online collaboration with fellow learners and teachers.

.... the online discussion boards are opportunities to contribute ideas and learn from my classmates. The discussion boards also challenged me to discipline myself in terms of scheduling my activities and think analytically on the topics posted. Since I work as R&D manager, the lessons I gleaned from the discussion boards and FMAs helped improve my management skills and upgrade my knowledge which are my purposes in taking the course. The lessons are very timely and relevant to my job that I am able to immediately implement the principles I learned. It also served as avenue to know my classmates and FICs.

Ensuring quality education in ODL through the learning communities

In most cases, learning communities in ODeL address concerns like reducing attrition by providing students with that sense of belonging, i.e. by making them feel they are part of a structure which aims to help them achieve their goals. In the experience of the UPOU, learning communities in ODeL not only address this concern but also other learning issues and in the process also ensure quality education.

The Institute of Higher Education Policy (2000) listed 24 benchmarks under seven categories of quality education in ODL. Two are of these are facilitated through the learning communities.

Teaching/learning benchmarks: Student interaction with faculty and other students is an essential characteristic and is facilitated through a variety of ways, including voice-mail and/or e-mail. These interactions are facilitated by the two forms of learning communities in ODL.

Evaluation and assessment benchmarks: The program's educational effectiveness and teaching/learning process is assessed through an evaluation process that uses several methods and applies specific standards.

Learning communities are also formed through the shared physical space through the University Learning and Testing Centers. These centers serve as venue for various learning activities and learning assessments that observe the procedure and policies of the university to ensure integrity of the assessment process.

Frydenberg (2002), on the other hand, listed nine standard domains of quality in e-learning from the point of view of educators. Two of these domains involve the learning communities. These are the student support services and the evaluation domain. Student support services can be further subdivided. They are services needed before students' entrance to a virtual classroom, support during the learning experience, and continued connection between learners and the institution after the particular course or program has been completed. All these are provided by the learning communities in the UPOU model.

As for the evaluation domain, Frydenberg is of the opinion that "while assessment of student achievement is normally described as part of instructional design and tied to specific course objectives, program evaluation is a meta-activity that incorporates all the aspects of the e-Learning experience".

Program evaluation also looks into program effectiveness including these indicators: student retention rates, including variations over time, and student satisfaction, as measured by regular surveys.

Learning motivation is another factor that learning communities can provide, such as fellow students motivating one another directly or indirectly. Through the learning communities, students are reminded by the circumstances of others or why they started studying in the first place.

Conclusion

Learning communities in the ODL context take various forms and their attributes are different from the learning communities in residential instruction. These learning communities in ODL not only address the issue of attrition or persistence by providing learners with the sense of belonging but more importantly help address or ensure quality of education in this mode of instructional delivery. Because of the important role learning communities play in ODeL, it is important that the factors essential to their sustainability be put in place.

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