

Foundations in Theory and Practice Course Project

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Introduction

Online learning experiences are becoming more prevalent in the education and training industry. With the increase of virtual classrooms there is much debate relating the necessity of socialization to the feelings of satisfaction with online learning. Some theorize that students need to socialize and develop a sense of community to feel the most satisfied with their online learning. Others theorize the socialization is a natural part of group discussion and no further emphasis is needed for socialization. Research supports both of these theories, though students tend to respond more favorably to online learning experiences where they felt a sense of community.

Topic Overview

This researcher has chosen to look at the importance of socialization in the online classroom. Learning more about existing knowledge of the need for a social aspect to the online classroom and finding evidence to both support it and dispute it will be beneficial because. This researcher wants to complete her dissertation on making online learning more accessible, either through ease of access and affordability or through making it a choice of learning rather than a last resort of learning.

As a trainer for a major telecommunications company this researcher encounters a high level of need for training to be completed on a regular basis. Employees need to be trained on system updates, process changes, or policy enhancements. The most cost effective way to address this is through web based training, though its major drawback is that learners speed through the material, not learning anything and only gleaning enough information to pass an assessment. The solution to this problem is the less cost effective method of in classroom

training. Classroom training is cost prohibitive on different levels; first they take longer and require more down time of the employees. Second, it requires the physical presence of a trainer, who may need to be flown in from a different facility adding to the expense of the training. Having an online learning environment that will not only encourage participation but require engagement would be the best solution.

This researcher finds this topic very interesting and intriguing because of the openness of it. This is still a process in its early stages of online learning. Currently the most used processes are virtual classrooms that are moderately successful because you cannot guarantee participation and learners often multitask thus hindering the learning. The alternative, a connected classroom, is technologically advanced and almost completely resolves all of the concerns for online learning; however it is a solution that is immediately cost prohibitive and time consuming. This researcher believes that finding a medium between these two online learning solutions is an area needing much more growth and development. It is also very broad in the practical applications in the job market. Having this skill will open the door to careers in corporate, private, non-profit, government, and military sectors.

This researcher has been thinking on how to narrow the gap between synchronous and asynchronous learning since working on her master's degree. Using an idea from the video, "Creative Inquiry: Thinking Outside the Box (Quake, viewed 2014), on brainstorming this researcher thought about how to narrow the topic down. This researcher thought about the different aspects of synchronous classrooms and asynchronous online classrooms, the similarities and the differences between the two. One difference that stood out because of the different conversations this researcher has had on it and the debates this researcher has been witness to

was the need for social interaction as part of the learning process. This researcher has decided to start with this idea with the intent that researching it will lead me to a specific dissertation topic.

Assumption Analysis

There is currently a focus on the necessity of socialization in online learning. It is suggested that students who are not able to interact with peers and instructors develop a sense of isolation that brings on frustration. This frustration can then cause the learner to disengage from the class and perform poorly or even abandon the class completely (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004).

A study completed by Liu, Bonk, & Lee (2007) identified a direct relationship between a sense of community in the online classroom and the satisfaction of the students. The study indicated that learners are more satisfied and comfortable in an online learning environment when they have a sense of community. The learners also had fewer feelings of isolation and thoughts of quitting the course when a sense of community was perceived (Liu, Bonk, & Lee, 2007).

The problem then is how to ensure an asynchronous online learning environment contains social elements that are accessible and can create a sense of community. Identifying what socialization tools learners are comfortable using in online communication will be the key to developing online learning that creates a sense of community. The purpose of this study is to identify how online learners prefer to interact with others in an online communication because it is hypothesized learners will be more likely to use social media tools that mirror those they are comfortable with (Paul & Elder, 2012).

In talking with colleagues this researcher has identified that different methods have been used in virtual classrooms with varying results. Some instructors have used chat rooms to create an opportunity for learners to share thoughts and processes. In one virtual class a discussion board was added to help learners share information during class and after the conclusion of the class. Others have had synchronous meetings with the learners using software that transmits both visual and audio communication. It has been observed that not all learners are comfortable with the same social media causing some to participate

more than others. Identifying what forms of social media are the most universal in the online environment will provide this instructor with the best option for socialization while new and more advanced forms of social media are developed.

For this project this researcher is assuming that all learners are comfortable with at least one form of online communication. Looking at multiple points of view it is probably some learners may not prefer a social exchange in online learning. For this scenario identifying what social media methods the learner is familiar with will help to identify a universal online social interaction tool. Identifying a universally accepted form of social media that can be used in a virtual classroom will help designers and instructors both in creating a sense of community for the learners. If a universally accepted form of social media cannot be identified then the information from this study can be used to further research and develop a more universal socialization tool (Paul & Elder, 2012).

For this study this researcher will need to focus on the available social media tools and how those social media tools work. It will be important to understand the learners' acceptance level and familiarity with those social media tools because not all learners will embrace them in a virtual classroom. Keeping an open mind to how learners prefer to connect with each other will allow the results of this study to be reviewed and applied in a manner that benefits the majority of the virtual learners (Paul & Elder, 2012).

The best solution for this study would be to identify a universally accepted social media tool. However; multiple tools may need to be considered in the learning environment to meet the needs of the diverse group of learners. In this case it would be optimal to have two social media options to encourage open communication without becoming burdensome for the learner because of needing to access multiple tools to communicate.

Literature Review

Socialization is a process that people use to acquaint themselves with their group (Dow, 2008). This can be either a formal or casual interaction in structured or non-structured

environments. Presence is a sense of being (Dow, 2008), either in face to face interactions or virtual interactions. Social presence is a process to acquaint oneself with the group and develop a feeling of belonging in the group (Dow, 2008). Social presence can be achieved through a social community or a group where the members have a feeling of belonging because of the support that the group provides (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). Interacting or sharing thoughts and ideas does not necessarily include socialization; co-workers can share information that is valuable to a specific process but do not necessarily get to know one another on a more personal level. A person can be part of a group and never have a feeling of belonging, thus not having a sense of social presence within the group. Additionally, communities are not formed from the act of placing a group of individuals together in the same environment.

Socialization in online learning with the development of social communities is thought to create a comfortable environment that improves the overall learning experience. Without socialization students often feel isolated (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). Several studies and feedback from students support this theory. In a study by Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee (2007) it was determined that students did perform better and rated the learning experience higher when they had a sense of community. Adding to the sense of community is the participation level of the instructor. Students felt more a part of a community when interacting with the instructor online (Liu, et. al., 2007 & Pate, Smaldino, Mayall, & Luetkehans, 2009). Students also had an increases sense of social presence and community based off of the frequency and distribution of the instructors' responses. When instructors participated throughout the week and commented for each learner, even if not on the same day, the students felt more encouraged to participate themselves Kehrwald, 2008). In the online classroom the instructor's role is changing from one of the expert lecturer to the facilitator of reflective

conversation (Revere & Kovach, 2011). The instructor now needs to help facilitate dialog between the learners by drawing out more from learners who are less engaged in the conversation and are responding merely to respond. The instructor also needs to set up clear and concise expectations that outline the assignment completely; this is often accomplished with a grading rubric (Dow, 2008).

The use of structured formatting in online learning increases socialization resulting in increased satisfaction with the course. Structured formatting includes requiring a base number of responses to peer discussions to drive participation or assigning projects to small groups within the class that would require the learners to collaborate (Kehrwald, 2008). Other contributors to course satisfaction include self-paced learning which allows for schedule flexibility for learners. Some learners also report a higher level of participation because they feel safer in expressing their thoughts and have less anxiety about any language or cultural differences they may have from their peers (Beckett, Amaro-Jimenez, & Beckett, 2010).

Critics of online learning suggest that socialization does not occur in the online classroom thus not enhancing student experience but rather making it an experience to be endured. In a study by Chen, Bennett, & Maton (2008) cultural differences led to students feeling isolated in the online learning environment. The facilitation process left the students confused about what information was important and whose information was most reliable because the instructor asked additional questions rather than explaining the answer. The students were also afraid to ask questions because they did not want their peers to think poorly of them based on their lack of knowledge. They also did not feel comfortable with asking the instructor because they had not been able to connect with the instructor and were afraid of irritating him or her by asking unwanted questions. The learners also noted that the conversations felt superficial because they

had no common ground to build a relationship with their peers on. At no time did they feel a sense of community and thought socialization was completely lacking in the online classroom (Chen, et.al., 2008).

Social presence can be affected by a number of factors including communication context, personal characteristics, familiarity with technology, and cultural differences (Kehrwald, 2008). Zhu (2011) also found that cultural differences do affect the way the online learning environment is used and the level of socialization the learners' experience. In this study, one cultural group embraced the online environment and was excited to learn more. Their counterparts from another culture did not enjoy the same level of enthusiasm resulting in less satisfaction with the learning. Also the first culture was not comfortable with the process that tasks were assigned in their respective groups while the second group had no reaction to the division of tasks (Zhu, 2011).

Holley and Taylor (2009) learned in their study that not all students desire a social community in the online learning environment. They found that students had little personal interactions with their peers or the instructor; the conversations held in the forums were about the coursework and contained no personal information. The students also viewed synchronous sessions as meetings that needed to be tolerated and discussion boards as extra busy work that detracted from the assignments. These students did not require a social community because they had other physical social communities at work and at home that supported and assisted them with their academic endeavors. In this same study instructors admitted to having little or no connection to their students; many completed the coursework and earned a grade with no social connection (Holley & Taylor, 2009). Evidence from this brings to question the necessity of socialization in the online classroom. Pate, et. al., (2009) determined that additional social forums in the online community were not necessary for learning to occur and for learners to be

satisfied with the courser outcomes. They identified that social interaction took place in the discussion forums among the students' weekly responses. In fact, students gravitated to forums where they were most like to receive feedback from the instructor (Pate, et. al., 2009).

Text based online learners can learn to identify social cues from their peers to create a stronger sense of community (Kehrwald, 2008). However, students may not fully engage in classroom discussions if they are limited to when they can participate because of resource limitation. To combat the feelings of complacency that detracts from the socialization in online classrooms, Revere and Kovach (2011) suggest the use of more mobile friendly communication methods. Students and instructors could use social media sites such as Facebook to connect while on the go, sharing information as it is known, and reducing the lag that occurs when students do not have access to a computer. Also students could collaborate with the use of online tools like Google+ where the learners could work on assignments at the same time. Students would be able to easily transition into a social community because of the ease and speed that they are able to participate and receive feedback (Revere & Kovach, 2011).

Social presence is an important part of online learning, though there are those who dispute it. The level of socialization needed by each student is dependent upon the student. With instructor participation and convenient tools the learner is more apt to participate in the social community of the classroom thus resulting in a greater sense of satisfaction with the course overall. To help students learn to create a social community in the classroom, it is important that instructors supply specific and understandable directions for the online community and the expectations for peer interaction. Additional tools to creating a social community in online classrooms are the use of different forms of media and communication tools. This diversity in

communication options will encourage learners to communicate more frequently because of the ease of access to the online learning environment.

Foundational Elements

Looking at the presentation on foundation elements this researcher has been able to identify three elements that apply to the literature that this researcher compiled in the literature review (Benson, n.d.). Social Cognitive Theory is a foundation element that this researcher has seen in some of the literature this researcher has reviewed for socialization in online learning. The elements of influence on the learner in cognitive theory include personal or self-change, environmental or the actions of others for you, and behavior or change that is socially dependent. In the study completed by Liu, Magiuka, Bonk, and Lee, (2007) they looked at the perception of learners or self, effect of instructor presence in the online community an environmental influence, and the sense of community or behavior that is dependent on social interaction.

Innovation theory or the use of innovative ideas, (Sahin &Thompson, 2006) was evident in the research completed by Revere and Kovach, (2011) where they looked at the convenience and ease of access of using mobile device applications to create a connection in the learning environment. The benefit of the applications such as Twitter is that learners are familiar with them and they are more accessible on mobile devices than virtual classrooms such as Blackboard. Their research also supports engagement theory because they are looking to the newer mobile applications to create interaction and engagement from the learners that is more meaningful and immediately relevant to the learners, (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1998).

Conclusion

Consistently throughout the literature learners are more satisfied with the online learning experience if they have a sense of community in the virtual classroom. How the sense of community is developed or should be developed is the topic of study for many researchers. Some have shown that students prefer a more personal level of communication with their peers and instructors. It is also suggested that the use of social media could increase the sense of community for these learners. Others have shown that online students develop a sense of community through their interactions with their peers in discussions and group activities. Further research into what constitutes a sense of community and how that sense of community should be developed is necessary to determine how to create an online instructional course that will meet the needs of the learners and leave them feeling satisfied with the material rather than isolated as they struggle through the material.

Reflection

One of the assumptions I had made about the development of sense of community is that if learners are interacting in discussion boards discussing content then there would be a sense of community. I can see that this assumption does not include alternative points of view (Paul & Elder, 2012). The sense of community can vary depending on the participant of the exchange. For some my assumption does create a sense of community but for others the content discussion is merely an exchange of ideas and lacks the kind of emotional support a physical classroom offers because of the lack of social exchange. As I approach this topic I need to broaden my idea of what constitutes a sense of community in online learning. With this alternative point of view I can now see how current virtual classrooms have been categorized

as meeting and not meeting socialization needs of online students. This is most likely the first in a number of changes in my thought process, assumptions, and point of view in what constitutes socialization in an online classroom. As I discover more literature about this area of research I anticipate further changes that will broaden my perspective and open my thinking to other alternative points of view. This is to be expected on the information journey from thought to theory during a research study. Literature that I have helped modify my thinking have pointed out the necessity of using more mobile social media platforms to assist learners in staying connected with their peers in an online classroom (Rever & Kovach, 2011). With this in mind I can see how different socialization in a physical class room is from that in a virtual classroom. In the virtual classroom participants focus more on content in discussion and miss the opportunities for casual conversation that visual cues often generate in a physical classroom. I think looking to add components of casual conversation to virtual classrooms will create a stronger sense of social community for participants and can be accomplished with mobile social media technology such as Facebook or Twitter. Using current common social media tools will encourage learners to share less formal and more personal comments with their peers because they the social media tools are already commonly used for sharing small bits of personal information with friends and family.

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