

ONLINE EDUCATION AND ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES — SOME REFLECTIONS

Tor Söderström
Department of Education
Umeå University
Sweden

Abstract

The paper examines online education and online learning communities. Does online learning necessarily support student interaction, the sharing of ideas and the creation of a community? It is based on an analysis from two cases, folkbildning and special needs, of online higher education in Sweden. The analysis suggests that the special needs case shows more evidence of an online learning community but also a stronger pedagogical steering. The participation and sharing opportunities among the students in these courses differed and communication technology learning systems may provide opportunities for conversation and community formation when pedagogical steering is applied. Adoption of the label “online learning community” for online education can be misleading. It may underwrite an ideal of online education, while masking the fact that practices often fail to honour such ideals. It may lead to educational regressive consequences as handbooks for teachers that simplify complex phenomena where the delivery of information takes priority over the exchange of meaning.

Introduction

Community, we feel, is always a good thing.

(Zygmunt Bauman, 2001, p.1)

Teaching students in online environments without physical meetings has become more and more common in Sweden. For instance approximately 70% of the new students at Umeå University are distance or online students. This means that teaching in higher education is in the middle of a transformation process where online education is becoming important for nearly all academic disciplines. The field of learning and information and communication technology (ICT) is underpinned by a lot of ideas about knowledge and learning. One of these ideas is the notion of online learning communities (OLC). This notion is linked to assumptions that users of an information system necessarily constitute a community. This was evident in the 1990s. Jones reflected upon that and noted, for instance, that

Critical to the rhetoric surrounding the internet use is the promise of a renewed sense of community and, in many instances, new types and formations of community. (1998, p. 3)

However, recent studies have shown that it is more complex than only connecting people in order to achieve an OLC (eg., Breton; Weinreich in Henri & Pudelko, 2003; Söderström, Hamilton, Dahlgren, & Hult, 2006). Even though, we today are aware of the complex link between technology and community, the emergence, in contemporary society of Web 2.0 technologies lends support to the assumption that technology by itself can create community. Web 2.0 technologies are in many cases portrayed as the tools that will build online learning communities since they promote participation and knowledge sharing opportunities (Hara, Shachaf, & Stoerger, 2009).

In this paper I will look more closely to this complex relationship between technology and community as it is practised in online education. As a way of addressing this question I intend to look closer at the *participation* and *sharing* opportunities in online education courses. In the paper I report data from two Swedish online courses which will work as a foundation for my arguments about online education. It is important to note that my analysis and argumentation is built on a sample of courses and, to that extent, does not give a general or universally valid picture of educational participation and sharing on the net.

Online Learning Communities — Background

The term online or virtual community derives from the conception of community. Saville-Troike claims that “all definitions of community used in the social sciences include the dimension of shared knowledge, possessions, or behaviours derived from Latin *communitae* ‘held in common’” (2003, p. 15). Likewise, Keller suggests that there are standard dimensions that form the bedrock of the community whereas sharing is important (2003, p. 267). Bauman points out:

The kind of understanding on which community rests *precedes* all agreements and disagreements. Such understanding is not a finishing line, but the starting point of all togetherness. It is a ‘reciprocal binding sentiment’— ‘the proper and real will of those bound together’; and it is thanks to such understanding, and such understanding only, that in community people ‘remain essentially united in spite of all separating factors’. (2001, p. 10)

Definitions of online communities derive from traditional understandings of community although they differ in structure whereas most obvious is the absence of physical presence (Lloyd & Duncan-Howell, 2010). This means that an online community has to embrace the mutual and reciprocal sharing of ideas, thoughts, experiences — meaning-making processes. For instance, Lövheim (2002) claims that online discussions which show evidence of sincerity, engagement, and mutuality are a form of community. But others mean that engagement and participation are relevant signifiers, even if such

participation and engagement display the transience of a post-modern lifestyle. Helleve (2010) suggests that the roots of the term community of learners emphasize the importance of interaction between learners and the necessity of an instructor who can guide the learning process. The members in the community work together, although not always in agreement — they strive toward a shared and common understanding.

There are also empirical findings that support this view on online learning as a community. For instance, Hansen (2008) found that a majority of students in the study group were involved in the discussion in the online chat while only a few of the students talked in the classroom setting. Furthermore, other studies on project work (open source projects) shows that those online communities foster collective learning and knowledge building whereas members collectively reflect and create new knowledge (Hemetsberger & Reinhardt, 2006). Even though there is evidence of community formation in online education there are also findings that show that the participation activity and reciprocal meaning making communication from the members in the course is low (eg., Pena-Shaff & Nicholls, 2004; Söderström et al., 2006; Williams & Pury 2000).

Online Education Cases

Folkbildning Courses

The first case of online adult education in Sweden presented here is based on more than 3500 postings by students and teachers from eight adult education distance courses. Communication is organised with the help of a version of so-called ‘forum’ or ‘conference’ software known as FirstClass. A range of ‘conferences’, where participants confer, are created on the basis of the course content. Sites known as ‘cafes’ are also created where participants can engage in ‘coffee-break’ conversations. In addition, a variety of task-related conferences are created where participants work on common topics, making their contributions to the life of the course. The course leader can also use conference sites or separate web pages to provide course information and instructions. The courses examined in our study varied in length between 10 and 17 weeks, and the number of participants admitted to the courses ranged from 9 to 22. The first course activity was, typically, a written self-portrait by the participants, which sometimes included pictures. Thereafter, the task-based course work commences, building on the course materials, materials available on the Internet, and the students’ own experiences. The courses were designed around weekly tasks and some course leaders divided the classes into smaller groups which worked together on their allocated tasks. The instructions given by the course leaders urged participants to communicate via message postings for about five hours per week.

The results from the courses (previously published in Söderström et al., 2006) show that the students’ posting activity was highest during the early weeks of the courses yet gradually declined towards the end of the courses. Similar patterns of decreased activity are also evident in the students’ reading activity. The results indicate that, overall, students posted more messages than they read. Further, the result also suggests that both postings and readings were more even during the final month. At the level of individual

behaviour, the results show that, in most courses, the teacher and a minority of students took up most of the communication. Söderström et al. (2006) point out that:

. . . a small group of students dominated the posting, and that there was a disjunction between posting behaviour and reading behaviour (p. 4).

In five of six courses the teacher together with the core students increased their dominance during the life of the courses. However, the results showed a decrease in the activity of both students and teachers during the life of each course. The analysis of the postings showed that a majority of the postings could be classified as informative, statements, etc. not leading to dialogue with other students (Dahlgren, Hult, Söderström, & Hamilton, 2004).

Higher Education — Special Needs Teacher Training Course

The second case described in this study derives from a 10 week long course within the programme for special needs teacher training (previously published in Liljeström, 2009). In this course the 60 students were supposed to work with a peer assessment task where each student should write a research report. The students worked through five online asynchronous workshops (open for 5 days) in groups of 7–8 students. In the first workshop the students were supposed to be aware and learn about course criteria in order to establish some consensus about course criteria. In the following workshops they applied their shared understanding of course criteria by assessing example texts — discussing and argue for their judgments. Thereafter they presented their literature to be assessed by the rest of their study group (peers) and in the final workshop all research reports were presented and discussed within the group. The findings were based on questionnaire data from the students and posting data from their discussions in the study groups. The results showed that all students were involved in the discussions in the workshops although some students contributed more. The analysis of the postings showed in many cases that previous postings by other students worked as starting points or reference markers for argumentation. Liljeström points out that:

There are many visible signs in the remarks the students made to each other's postings that they took a great interest in other's point of view (2009, p. 62).

The students were tutored by the teacher in the workshop in order to more deeply engage in the texts by being asked questions if they could identify signs of independent and critical thinking, etc. This tutoring triggered the students to engage further in collaborative analysis of the texts. Liljeström also highlighted in her conclusions that, even though participating in peer assessment was not an obligatory task in the course and no rules were set up for minimum of performance in the workshops, a majority of the students participated.

Discussion

In this discussion I will argue that the results should not be seen as general claims — rather they raise a variety of second-order, or pedagogical, questions about online education and online learning communities. In the remainder of this paper, then, I comment on the results in this paper from such a perspective.

It is clear that the two cases differ from each other. The peer assessment case shows more evidence of an online learning community but also a stronger pedagogical steering. The teachers gave clear guiding questions and advice in the workshops which continued and deepened the communication among the learners. The role of the teacher in stimulating and maintaining activity in online environments is also noted by previous research (e.g. Cher Ping Lim & Poh Teen Cheah, 2003; Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 1999; Hult, Dahlgren, Hamilton, & Söderström, 2004). The decreasing activity from the teachers during the course in the folkbildning case could be one explanation for the decreasing student activity and especially for the inactive students. It might be that the inactive students needed more help and pedagogical steering. Even though students were organised in groups and collaborated the *participation* and *sharing* opportunities among the students in these courses differed from each other. Collaboration by itself did not support learning automatically. Pedagogy seems to be the crucial point. For instance, Dillenbourg, Järvelä, and Fischer (2009) claim that by asking “under which conditions are collaborative learning effective” can learning better be supported (p. 6). Without a well designed and planned pedagogy, as in the peer assessment case, collaboration that supports learning and online learning communities will be difficult to reach. This conclusion is often taken care of in books directed to teachers in higher education who teach or will start to teach online courses. An early example of this is *Understanding the New Information Technologies in Education: A Resource for Teachers*:

We want to affirm that the re-framing of teachers’ understandings of the new information technologies in education must be based in the current practice of teachers, including the nature and conditions of teachers’ work (Bigum & Green, 1992, p. 4).

But the rapid technological development, today manifested in Web 2.0 technologies, also bring promises about community formation that without a critical perspective may point to educationally regressive consequences. Söderström et al. (2006) claim that:

There is a danger, we believe, that the feel-good language of community serves as a de-centring device, drawing attention away from intrinsic difficulties in the organisation of teaching and learning as forms of communication (p.11).

There are also publications, a de-centring device, that do a disservice to educators who want to develop effective learning environments and in the next section I will discuss one recent Swedish example of that.

The Handbook Example

A new release in Sweden is the book *Netbased Education: An Introduction* (my translation) by Hrastinski (2009). The book is directed to all teachers since information and communication technology is a part of their everyday teaching. In the book Hrastinski elaborates on the characteristics of net-based education. He presents examples of ingredients in net-based education such as wikis, blogs, discussion forums, etc. In one chapter he elaborates upon communication. Online communication is described in an almost unproblematic way with possibility to by itself lead to learning. Communication is seen as a thing that will happen by itself and only has to be arranged for. To accomplish group work the teacher has to create rooms for group work on the online platform. Supporting different types of communication is more a question of choosing a chat or wiki than working with the underlying pedagogy. The book gives advice to teachers on what to think about when teaching in online education but it gives no evident advice on how to work to make an online learning community possible.

The advice offered in handbooks, like the one mentioned here, may lead to teachers stimulating a posting culture without taking the reciprocal character of participative sharing which distinguish communication in online learning communities into consideration. In conclusion, many references to online communities, such as the handbook described in this paper, are theoretically limited. They have turned communication into community (Jaldemark, 2010). Resnyansky puts it this way:

The understanding of dialogue as a contact may be natural for the communication technology specialist who defines communication in terms of the number of participants, the direction of message exchange and the mode used for the transmission of signals. However, why does it seem natural for the education specialist to think in this way as well? (2002, p. 49)

The consequence of this is that no collective exchange of experience between students can be made and consequently no learning community is possible. Handbooks not linked to the pedagogical context might instead of inspiring to new pedagogical approaches only enabling the transformation of campus education to the net via Web 2.0 technologies, which in its worst scenario make bad education even worse. Finally technology is too often regarded as “the activity creating tool.” Cuban (2001) claims that new technologies have a tendency to produce exaggerated expectations in regard to its impact on learning and do, by themselves, little to help students to develop competence. For instance Luca, Cowan, and Macloughlin (2004) concluded that “Collaborative learning technologies offer some unique opportunities both for peer and electronic support of team building and collaboration” (p. 6), but they also concluded separately that there are some key criteria that have to be established for hosting a successful online forum. They are pedagogical.

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