
Editorial

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Biographical notes: Dr. Ove Jobring is the Research Director of the Online Learning Communities (OLC) Group and a Senior Lecturer in Organisational Science at Göteborg University in Sweden. His research interests lie in digital competence and networked continuous learning and in organisational settings. He has recently completed a trilogy of anthologies on OLCs. Coming from the network organising and learning arena, his research on learning communities was initiated when he was Research Director for the Interactive Learning programme at the Viktoria Institute in Göteborg, and continued when he was Research Coordinator of the Research Program LearnIT for the Swedish Knowledge Foundation. He is currently active in research topics such as the validation of informal learning in communities, and also leads several projects for online knowledge building for professionals.

Dr. Piet Kommers is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media, Communication and Organisation at the University of Twente. His interest is in the effects of new media and the network society in education. He was Research Director of the NATO Advanced Research Workshop on Cognitive Learning Tools and received the UNESCO title of Honorary Professor from the Kiev International Research and Training Centre. He was a Lector at Fontys University of Applied Sciences on the topic 'Didactic functions of ICT' in the teacher-training institutes of the southern Netherlands. His keynote speeches vary along themes like hypermedia, virtual/mobile learning environments, conceptual representations, visual communication and media effects in youth culture.

Introduction

Since the beginning of the 1990s, when Rheingold wrote his book about virtual communities, a considerable number of researchers have focused their efforts on the genesis and development of net communities. Interest has primarily concerned the

WWW, recently, other forms such as mobile technology have also been in focus. The research terminology has been widespread in accordance with rising interest in the phenomenon. In the beginning, the word 'virtual' was used to describe the conditions for human activities in net communities. In modern times, the term 'online' has replaced the term 'virtual', and has hence shifted the focus to conditions for social interaction, rather than something that is 'unreal'. Therefore, we prefer the term Online Learning Communities (OLCs). However, irrespective of the terminology used, the content of an online community remains the same, *i.e.*, the members of an OLC create the major part of the content themselves, supported by the community context and its assembled membership, who share a common language, goals and values.

Research on OLCs has concentrated on empirical categorisation and descriptions of the phenomenon. It has focused on aspects such as participation, collaboration and communication between community members. In addition, the facilitation process and various design issues have been examined from different scientific perspectives. The time is right to broaden the perspective and focus on OLCs in a wider context.

The articles presented here in the special issue 'Online learning communities in context' are aimed at supporting the outcome of a new and vital understanding of online communities by analysing the development of OLCs, showing specific interest in the context in which the OLC takes part and is itself a part. We believe that OLCs, as an empirical phenomenon, have existed for a significant period of time, and it is thus time to raise the following questions:

- The OLC in itself can be viewed as a context, thus a question for the seminar could be: has the context of education essentially been changed?
- Has the context in which OLCs exist changed since the genesis of the internet and the web?
- Is it possible that the context has changed and, in turn, changed the performance and the activities occurring between the participants?
- To what extent have new technologies had an effect, and are they changing the community? If so, in what ways?
- Do new technologies give birth to new practices and contexts?
- Will the fact that the younger generations are more comfortable with online communities create a gap between the generations?

The following articles penetrate these topics using various approaches.

Cuthell explores the development of MirandaNet, an online Community of Practice, and its contribution to teachers' Continuous Professional Development (CPD). He identifies four stages in its development. Its initial stage was a conventional website supported by an e-mail-based listserv, while its second stage analysed the factors that support (or hinder) the participation of teachers in online communities. The third stage developed the use of discussion forums for the communal construction of knowledge. The final stage described the use of MirandaNet as an interactive resource in which members may share, exchange and publish a range of documents and artefacts.

Drawing on literature on learning, the community, and computer-mediated communication, and on the results of a number of studies on learning networks that she herself conducted, Haythornthwaite addresses learning communities from a social

network perspective, including which relations are evident in learning and in learning communities, how the media affects online tie formation, and what benefits can result from successfully maintained learning networks.

In her paper, Hodgson suggests that online learning communities can be considered as learning spaces which participants occupy, and by which individual and collective identities are simultaneously constructed. Some of the processes that contribute to an OLC learning space becoming experienced as a curriculum and pedagogical learning space of open and participative dialogue are described in the paper.

Jaldemark's paper is about changes within the practice of higher education. Communication is analysed and described in terms of different dialogical intersections, and these intersections embrace the tools used in educational communication and the locations where students and teachers are physically situated. The number of intersections has increased, and the use of tools and locations has changed. Finally, this paper questions whether the distinction between distance, face-to-face and online education is meaningful.

Lindberg and Olofsson start with an investigation of the concept of community, and continue by considering an understanding of 'E-OLC in its context' as a question of being-together. They also provide a discussion, inspired by the thoughts of Emmanuel Levinas, which concludes that E-OLCs are conditioned in the unconditioned responsibility of being-for-the-other, becoming a question of taking the Other as the necessary condition for knowing oneself.

De Paoli and D'Andrea show how artefacts rule web-based communities and seek to understand how complex tasks are accomplished by large web-based communities. Their analysis is based on the concepts of translation and inscription taken from the Actor-Network Theory, while their data have been gathered using an ethnographic approach. The main result of their research is the illustration that complex tasks are accomplished by large web-based communities thanks to many small contributions shaped and organised by the rules embodied in artefacts.

Preston explores the emergent theory of Braided Learning observed in the online communication within mature, professional 'communities of practice'. An example of a multiauthored text from Mirandalink, the internal listserv, is investigated in order to provide evidence of new kinds of collaborative learning. One key skill found among members is the e-facilitation of collaborative learning. The conclusions indicate that, over time, online engagement can provide professionals with a thriving community. A sixth step in professional learning is discovered which reinterprets jointly owned online texts to be used in the process of influencing local, national and international agendas.

Sorensen presents a perspective emphasising meta-learning as the most significant and pertinent feature of promoting a democratic, collaborative eLearning-to-learn phenomenon in a global context. By attempting to understand and clarify the powers of the pedagogical design of globally networked e-learning based on learning-to-learn, she makes a plea for learning-to-learn in a dialogic global learning context, offering a vision of global democratic citizens able to engage in critical dialogue with their fellow learners.

In his article, Kommers highlights the still-fragile link between teacher (re)training and the new generation of media in youth culture. His claim is that school-based learning should no longer be isolated from the understanding that social awareness is a process that arises between, rather than inside, its members. Consequently, learning communities

should articulate collaborative and socially constructivistic processes rather than instructivistic paradigms. As instruction rests upon the theorem that learning should be augmented by optimising the external conditions, it is the constructivistic approach that the real learning effect is in the learners' capacity to reorganise his or her cognitive repertoire and improves both the skills and attitude towards self-regulation. Rather than instigating teachers to arrange guided exercises for learning attitudes, it seems more feasible and effective to build upon learners' communication styles as they practise in their peer groups on the web. For subsequent learning by the teacher, it is claimed that a similar collaborative learning via web-based communities should be encouraged. It would alleviate the teachers' motivation as it widens their horizon of more diverse didactic examples, compared to those who only orient in the repertoire of local colleagues.

These articles show, both on an empirical and theoretical level, the significance and importance of developing OLCs. We can foresee the prosperous evolution of OLCs and innovations in learning, which will continuously demand broad and new perspectives as regards how to understand and develop the phenomenon of online learning. These articles will hopefully impact upon our understanding and make their mark on that process.

The articles reflect the synergetic process of our earlier Working Seminar, kindly hosted and supported by Göteborg University in October 2006. We, as special issue editors, hope that this aggregated special issue may work catalytically in the next decade, when we will need more and more integration between education in and around schooling institutes. Surely, there will be an irreversible evolution in teacher roles; its direction seems to be clear, though its speed is still obscure. More important is our conclusion that the driving force for this change will arrive from 'arbitrary' and even 'cosmetic' trends outside of the schools, like the web, and recently, the Mobile Devices. At the same time, we are aware that those trends can 'shape' its real manifestation in schooling practice. Therefore, we need 'self-regulation' at the levels of students, teachers and policymakers; no ready-made scenario will be fit to anticipate this crucial transformation.

Please feel very welcome to react to and alternate with our views in upcoming issues of this web-based community journal.