THE USE AND MISUSE OF THE ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY. THE TEACHER AS MODERATOR

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ABSTRACT. *The Use and the Misuse of the Online Learning Community. The Teacher as Moderator.* The intention of this paper is to analyse the impact that an online learning community may have on traditional, face-to-face teaching, stressing both the advantages and disadvantages of using blended learning. The teacher as moderator has an instrumental role in creating a fertile exchange of ideas within an online community and this paper will analyze the dynamics of student groups, together with the role that a teacher should play in such groups.

Keywords: blended learning, online learning, group dynamics, moderator, online learning community, communication, community of inquiry, groupware.

REZUMAT. *A utiliza adecvat sau impropriu comunitatea de studiu online. Profesorul ca moderator.* Intenţia acestei lucrări este de a analiza rolul pe care îl are o comunitate de studiu formată în mediul online şi modul în care poate fi folosită aceasta în comunităţile tradiţionale de învăţare. Se va pune accentul pe avantajele şi dezavantajele instruirii combinative. Profesorul ca moderator are un rol important în crearea unui spaţiu productiv pentru schimbul de idei în mediul online. Această lucrare va analiza dinamica grupurilor de studenţi, împreună cu rolul pe care profesorul ar trebui să îl joace în astfel de grupuri.

Cuvinte cheie: instruire combinativă, învăţarea în mediul online, dinamica de grup, moderator, comunitate online, comunicare, comunitate de cercetare, groupware.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to look at the use and misuse of the online learning community in the context of a blended learning approach to the educational process. Traditional, face-to-face teaching can obviously no longer ignore the opportunities and challenges posed by e-learning. Taking into consideration the wide spread of access to the internet - and technology-based resources -, the online learning community has started to play a greater role in

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education. Consequently, the role of the teacher as moderator needs to extend to the online environment as well.

This paper will argue for a subtle involvement of teachers in the dynamics of the online learning community since this medium of communication needs to promote freedom in the exchange of ideas. Students often claim this space as an alternative medium of communication that allows for exchanges sometimes not possible in traditional classrooms. The ad-hoc creation of online groups by students is the first step towards the development of an efficient and fruitful online learning community. The most common form of such groups in the current Romanian context are Yahoo Groups. Thus, our paper will take a closer look at the dynamics of such groups. The purpose of this study on student formed groups is to assess the degree to which they fulfill the role of a learning community. Of course, compared to other groupware suites of programs available, Yahoo Groups offer fewer options that support the teaching/learning process. However, this type of groups is not used to its full potential, as more often than not Yahoo Groups are merely used for announcements. Consequently, we believe that a teacher acting as a moderator in such groups could turn them into an online space of debate and exchange, focusing mainly on outlining directions and facilitating access to information, rather than imposing a set of rules aiming at controlling communication.

Blended Learning

The increased interest in the field of blended learning has led to a number of debates around the concept, and specialists have analyzed this approach comparing it to traditional classroom interaction. Its name points out its meaning: learning as a blend of traditional and online methods. Kaye Thorne describes this new approach as "the most logical and natural evolution of our learning agenda. It suggests an elegant solution to the challenges of tailoring learning and development to the needs of individuals. It represents an opportunity to integrate the innovative and technological advances offered by online learning with the interaction and participation offered in the best of traditional learning" (Thorne 2). Taking into consideration the opportunities provided by blended learning for improving the teaching-learning process, higher education should adopt it and promote it as well in order to be able to develop in a competitive environment, where participants "are questioning traditional approaches and whether they are achieving the high levels of learning promised" (Garrison and Vaughan ix). Garrison and Vaughan argue that the goals of higher education could be enhanced by blended learning as long as three important points are taken into consideration: the need for order, the recognition of the complexity of a deceivingly simple concept and the fact that blended learning is not simply an add-on to the dominant

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approach. The degree to which online learning should be included in traditional classrooms may vary and there is no standard recipe for a successful blending of the two. However, as the authors mentioned above point out, there is a need for order when using this approach in order to avoid confusion among students, and the teacher should be the one to implement strategies targeted at establishing order within online learning communities.

Forming an online learning community is obviously of great importance in the case of distance education, but there are many developments made in this field that can improve traditional classroom interaction as well, especially now when "the most common theme in adult learning theory is that, in order to be effective, teaching must be learner-centered and self-directed" (French 23). The opportunities offered by online resources are met with enthusiasm and some apprehension by those involved in traditional learning since, being a new and rapidly changing field, online learning does not yet have a set of rules established. This is where the role of the teacher as moderator needs to come in.

The Online Learning Community

The learning process is closely connected to a sense of community and, with the advent of new technologies, the community has moved from in-person interactions in the classroom to the online environment. Since this implies a different medium of communication, with different skills and methods required (as Garrison and Vaughn mention), it should not be treated as simply an add-on to traditional teaching. On the contrary, the risks of adopting blended learning need to be anticipated, understood and tackled. In order to better determine what makes a learning community, a series of elements have been identified by Bloom, Sherlock, Vesely in their 2007 article, "Key Elements of Building Online Community: Comparing Faculty and Student Perceptions": a sense of shared purpose, establishment of boundaries defining who is a member and who is not, establishment and enforcement of rules/policies regarding community behavior, interaction among members and a level of trust, respect and support among community members. If one considers these elements, student formed groups on Yahoo meet the requirements for being a community. But the question that still needs to be asked is: are these groups actually *learning* communities or mere communities?

Yahoo Groups

To collect material for this paper, five student formed Yahoo Groups have been analyzed. These groups have been created by students at the Faculty of Letters, within Babeş-Bolyai University of Cluj-Napoca, between the years 2005 and 2010. With the exception of one group, all the others are still

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active. The groups were created by students studying English and Norwegian at Bachelor level. By analyzing the activity of students within Yahoo Groups (public and not moderated groups), one can notice several characteristics and patterns. These will be presented and analyzed in the following paragraphs, by looking closely at the quantity and quality of the posts, but also at the teacher's involvement. Based on these elements, we can conclude that Yahoo Groups formed by students fail to be learning communities. Therefore, the teacher's involvement as a moderator becomes of great importance. Following a review of the characteristics of this type of groups, we will present a number of strategies that can be used by teachers in order to turn these communities into actual learning communities.

Activity spikes during exam sessions and in the month of October. The number of posts in a group can be easily followed on Yahoo since a breakdown by month is provided. For all five groups, in October and the exam session months the number of posts is on average four times bigger than during the rest of the months. For example, in one of the groups, formed by students that major in Norwegian, the number of posts during the busiest months reaches 60 and during the rest of the academic year it may even drop to under 10 exchanges. The reasons behind such increase in activity during these months can easily be inferred as these are the busiest months in the life of a student: the beginning of the school year and the exam sessions. From this point of view, one can draw the conclusion that Yahoo groups fulfill the needs of students to be informed in connection with administrative matters, but do not necessarily enhance collaboration among them when it comes to learning and research.

Closely related to the previous remarks, another conclusion can be drawn: the exchanges are somehow superficial, revolving around exam dates and topics, deadlines or bibliographies. The maximum number of posts for one month has been noticed in a group of English majors (2005-2008) in the month of May 2008. There are 289 posts recorded but, upon reviewing them, one can notice that the great majority of posts refer to the graduation festivity, thus not being connected to a learning initiative. In all groups, the students do not use the community to ask for clarifications or to encourage collaborative exam preparation. The current usage of online groups should be improved and students need to be encouraged to use each other as resources. It does not mean that using Yahoo Groups as a channel of communication for administrative purposes is not desirable, but these groups should also be used as efficient learning communities. The task of changing the online learning behaviour of students ought to be carried out by the teacher who should start by playing the role of moderator. However, students should no longer rely solely on the teacher and the course notes, but should make the most out of collaborative study. Of course, in order for such a community to be established, a certain

degree of teacher intervention might be required for the students to adopt this behaviour and then to maintain it as an integrated part of their learning efforts. The main advantage of collaborative study and exam preparation is that students may feel more comfortable when asking for clarifications from their peers, rather than from the teacher.

Group members are often separated between active and passive. There is usually a group of students that participate in exchanges and share information and another group of students that do not get involved, preferring to observe from the side even if matters discussed concern everyone in the group. In all five groups under scrutiny, there is a leader who makes announcements or answers most questions about administrative matters. Again, active involvement in the community needs to be encouraged so that all members can benefit equally from this interaction. There should no longer be members who have no activity within the group and teachers will need to employ strategies that encourage participation from everybody, in the same manner in which such strategies are needed in traditional classrooms.

The language is informal and personal, so very often conflicts arise among the members, being caused in most cases by misunderstandings. Meaning and attitude is conveyed differently in the online medium, where one can only use the written text and not tone of voice, facial expressions or gestures in order to communicate. Netiquette has already become an academic topic of research and studies in this field should be of great help to all teachers interested in enhancing their usage of the online environment. In all five groups analyzed, the members communicate in their mother tongue even if the groups are formed by students who all study a specific foreign language (English, Norwegian etc). It would be a great deal more useful and productive if members of such groups communicated in the language that they are studying, offering themselves the chance to practise their knowledge and improve competence in the respective target language.

Teacher interventions are limited and sometimes teachers are not even members of the group. Lacking official membership, they are in a way excluded from the community, even if the group format still allows them to post messages. Thus, teachers are not able to provide guidance or facilitate learning. As mentioned in the beginning of this paper, teacher involvement in online learning communities formed by students should be subtle and non-intrusive, aimed rather at guiding students and encouraging a specific behavior. The teacher should not impose rules that can affect freedom of exchanges and the students' willingness to get involved. However, this subtle involvement is vital in developing efficient and well-targeted exchanges.

Yahoo groups provide a series of tools and features designed to enhance collaboration among members, such as the possibility to upload files, create polls or use an online calendar in order to organize activities.

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Furthermore, more complex applications and a chat feature are included, still in beta testing. The applications can be used by a group's owner or moderator so that they can customize them specifically for their groups. Though the templates provided are customizable, they are not designed for the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, there is another popular service provider that offers tools and applications to be used by online learning communities which are designed specifically for education. These are the so-called Google Apps for Education, a free service but which needs to be adopted at an institutional level in order to be used at its full capacity. The core services provide email access, collaborative documents, calendar and instant messaging. These applications are aimed at improving communication and collaboration in order to create an ideal environment for real-time learning. All these different tools provide opportunities that were not available in the past and they have the potential to become an essential part of the teaching/learning process, if put to best use. Students' presence online needs be taken into consideration and understood by teachers. Obviously, there are also disadvantages to online communication and some justly wonder whether it will not have a negative impact on traditional classrooms. However, the online environment will not disappear; on the contrary, it will most likely gain even more importance in the future. Consequently, teachers need to accept it and start tackling it by developing specific strategies. We will present some of these strategies in the following paragraphs. They are based on some aspects noticed while analyzing student formed Yahoo Groups, combined with established methods already generally employed in traditional classrooms.

Teachers as Moderators in Online Learning Communities

One may argue that the purpose of these student formed groups is not to be learning communities but rather channels of communication designed mainly for administrative matters. However, building an online learning community does not exclude the usage of such groups for purely administrative needs; both should continue to exist side by side. In order to ensure the formation of online learning communities, teachers need to get involved and start playing their role as moderators and facilitators. A very interesting approach to online communities is presented by Garrison and Vaughan who design a framework for a community of inquiry that should function in blended learning, where the emphasis is on the inquiry processes. The community of inquiry is defined by the two authors as "shaped by purposeful, open and disciplined critical discourse and reflection" (14). Emphasis should be placed equally on answers and questions and the individual must have the freedom to express ideas. According to Garrison and Vaughan, inquiry is

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dependent upon interaction, but it also needs to be characterized by discipline, respect and willingness to listen.

Two elements are considered essential for the creation of a community of inquiry: establishing social presence and teacher presence. The former is important because it creates a sense of belonging and trust and because together with cognitive presence, it helps to ensure collaborative construction of meaning and knowledge. As far as teaching presence is concerned it "is essential to bring all the elements together and ensure that the community of interest is productive" (Garrison and Vaughan 24). Teachers need to point directions, facilitate research and moderate exchanges in order to make sure that students benefit from online interactions. The online medium is an endless source of information, but students need to be guided in order to be productive and achieve their goals.

To sum up, we will look at some factors that may contribute to creating an efficient online learning community:

- The online learning community needs to be focused on a common goal, i.e. it should be formed around a particular course. This will ensure discipline and a clear direction. The groups analyzed are all formed around the students' major language, which makes it difficult for teachers to organize exchanges and to use the online group for purposes specific to a course. It might be easier if teachers each create a group for their courses and lead the activities. This initiative would be a good solution to the need for order discussed earlier in this paper;

- The teacher needs to moderate discussions and encourage student participation by well-planned activities and debates. However, teacher involvement should be subtle and the goal of this involvement should be to set directions and guide students, not to impose rules and limitations. This might be particularly necessary in the beginning, when students probably do not fully understand the purpose of using the online community and how it might fit into the traditional classroom. Through the effective usage of these strategies, there should no longer be such a separation between active and passive members or posts that have no connection to the teaching/learning process;

- The teacher needs to set the boundary between formal and informal exchanges by providing a model. The online medium is essentially suited for informal exchanges but there are limits that should not be crossed in order to avoid misunderstandings. A good understanding of netiquette and of codes used in the online medium is desirable for all teachers. Very formal language should be used wisely since it might negatively influence the ease of communication that is provided by the online medium;

- The teacher needs to provide timely feedback and set a calendar and expectations for both synchronous and asynchronous activities. Again, the

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need for order has to be taken into consideration. The teacher's online presence needs to be consistent at all times; he/she should encourage the students' presence at the same time. This should definitely not be limited to the beginning of the university year and exam sessions as it is the case now;

- The teacher needs to help students use databases and reliable research sources on the internet. As it was mentioned before in this article, the online medium is an essential part of all students' lives nowadays and it is sometimes preferred to traditional interaction. We do not argue that the time spent in a library can always be compensated by online research but, since one of the qualities of a good teacher is flexibility, a teacher needs to adapt to this new situation and help students make the best of the time spent online;
- The teacher needs to make an effort in order to master a great variety of groupware programs available, including the use of forums, blogs, listservs, polls etc and also needs to be available for assistance to students who have difficulties in using such programs.

Conclusions

In this paper we have discussed a few strategies that can be put to use by teachers in order first to establish an online learning community and then to better fulfill their roles as moderators within such a community. The author of this paper intends to further apply these strategies in her teaching process, and trusts that the outcomes of such blended learning will make the subject of a future enlarged study.

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