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Communities of/for Learning: Enhancing student engagement in changing HE environments

David Simm\textsuperscript{1} and Alan Marvell\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{1} Bath Spa University, \textsuperscript{2} University of Gloucestershire

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Structure of talk

• What are Communities of Learning (CoL)?
  – student engagement and community
  – the challenges of the changing HE environment
• Learning from Communities of Practice (CoP)
• Applying CoPs and Situated Learning to HE
• How communities develop practice
• What forms do CoLs take?
• How can CoLs be fostered/ facilitated?
• Adapting our learning teaching strategies
• Conclusions: evolving co-learning, Communities of/with/for Learning
Student engagement and community

- **Student engagement:**
  
  “the quality of effort students themselves devote to educationally purposeful activities which contribute directly to desired outcomes”


- Role of social interaction in learning *(Walsh et al., 2014)*
- Academic partnerships develop between students and institution/ tutors/ course
- Viewed as a healthy and positive situation *(Lenning & Ebbers, 1999)* with pastoral, educational and TEF benefits
The challenges of the changing HE environment

• External and internal factors influence students’ perceptions of study and expectations, affecting behaviours
• Students’ versus Faculty expectations
• “This dialectic has been falsely integrated into a dualist epistemology that reduces knowing and learning to either the individual or the collective pole”
  (Roth and Lee, 2007, cited by Emad & Roth, 2016, p.585)
# What are Communities of Learning (CoLs)?

- Encouraging better student engagement through creating a sense of community and identity
- Shared knowledge, knowing, responsibility (Tinto, 2003)

### Benefits:
- Student-focused ways of learning
- Peer support network
- Better academic outcomes
- Better student satisfaction
- Wellbeing benefits

### Characteristics:
- Identity and belonging
- Engagement
- Commonality
- Collaboration
- Mutual network support
- Comradeship
- Willingness to participate
- Greater involvement
- Break down fear of internal competition
- Fosters co-production
- Confidence to set own agendas and goals
- Informal learning
- Potential to change the student-tutor relationship
Learning from Communities of Practice

- CoP – learners or practitioners in the same profession learn from each other, disseminating information and good practice
- **Situated learning theory** (Lave) - learning is situated, i.e. learning is embedded within activity, context and culture
- Learning through **social development** (Vygotsky)
- **Legitimate peripheral participation**: “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” (Lave and Wenger, 1991)
- **(1) Domain, (2) Community, (3) Practice**
- Through social interaction and collaboration learners become involved in a CoP which embodies certain beliefs and behaviours to be acquired
- Move from periphery to centre of community, novice to expert
Applying CoPs and Situated Learning to HE

- Composition of members
- Motivations
- Authenticity
  - Utilising real-world scenarios and data
  - ‘Quasi-communities’ in education through guest speakers and alumni (Mead & Roth, 2016)
- Communities of Interest (Emad & Roth, 2016)
- Cognitive apprenticeship (Brown et al., 1989)
- Social participation
- Incidental not necessarily intentional learning
What forms can CoL take?

CoLs may take many forms:

- traditional to new and innovative
- formal to informal
- structured to transient
- (a)synchronous interaction
- academic to pastoral

**Formal:**
- Peer mentoring
- Supplementary instruction
- Group projects
- VLE discussion boards

**Informal:**
- Study groups
- Online social networking apps
- Extracurricular, e.g. GeogSoc
How can CoL be fostered or facilitated? (not created?)

Attributes to be fostered:

– Identity
– Peer-peer interaction
– Connectedness
– Collaboration, not just co-operation
– Collectively motivated
– Sharing and respect
– Awareness and motivation of ‘acting for others’
– Reflection
Issues facing Communities of Learning

• Encouraging community ‘spirit’ and ‘endeavour’ (Tinto, 2003)
• Collaborative learning
  – Mutual dependence
  – Requires participation
  – Active learning
• Naturally-forming versus artificial and/or constrictive?
• Self-selecting, cliques?
• Accessibility and inclusivity - inclusion versus periphery versus exclusion. Social integration is important.
• Collusion/ plagiarism, freeloading, lone workers
Learning and teaching strategies

• Creation of learning and support environments
• Adopting appropriate L&T strategies
• Existing good practice in Geography, e.g. active learning, fieldwork
• Role of tutor – facilitator, not creator
• Effective CoLs have:
  – Self-supporting groups
  – Active participation, e.g. in class
  – Friendships
• Changing tutor-student relationship, power shift
• Co-partnership opportunities
• Lifelong learning
• Identity and learning spaces – affiliation and appropriation (‘third’ space), communication.
Conclusion: Evolving Communities of Learning

• “Learning communities do not represent a ‘magic bullet’ to student learning” (Tinto, 2013, p.6)
  – Student engagement is essential and has many benefits
  – Student engagement takes many forms, informally or formally

• Communities of Learning can stimulate …

• Communities for Learning - students take possession and responsibility of their own (and others’) learning

• Educational citizenship:
  “norms which promote the notion that individual educational welfare is tied inexorably to the educational welfare and interests of other members of the educational community” (Tinto, 2013, p.6)

• Communities with Learning (staff-student partnership)


References


