



Virtual Learning Communities – a Study Case on Romania's Nowadays Situation

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to provide a comprehensive examination of the virtual learning communities (VLCs) in the world, in order to better understand what profound and irreversible changes the continuous development of the Internet Era have generated.

It is clearly known that this field is rapidly developing in Romania, as well as in other countries, and that is why today specialists have shown a growing interest in this particular matter. Of course, everything started with the ideas of the new economy and of the knowledge based society.

Our paper "Virtual Learning Communities – A Study Case on Romania's Nowadays Situation" starts with a literature review part, where we have made a complex presentation of the most significant contributions of the researchers working in this field.

Virtual learning environments, which are often referred to as on-line learning or e-learning, have proliferated at different levels and that is the reason why virtual learning communities (VLCs) are relatively new phenomena. Traditionally, literature regarding on-line learning has focused largely on technology and learner-computer interaction. In our paper we also referred to the pedagogical implications of the virtual learning communities. Our believe is that an overview of the field of virtual learning communities in Romania will proof the growing interest of the individuals towards competitiveness, knowledge society, new economy and a better way of learning and living.

Introduction

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Learning communities – the key for the future of education

At the beginning of our research we consider that a definition of the learning community is needed, for the reader to better understand the notion and to have a clear image of what we believe in. In this matter, learning communities for the next century implicate harmony moreover solidarity or unity, and they are, defined in a very simple way collections of individuals who are bound together by natural will and a set of shared ideas and ideals.

Specialists believe that learners and everyone within a learning community, including teachers and administrators, has a will to do what is "right" and "good" in accordance with group - set values and ethical principles. But also, the specialists's view of a learning community depends not on libertarian constructs but on autonomous, independent individuals engaged by influencing each other within a learning process. This view presents a new concept of community, technology and learning. That is the reason why relationships occur via many non-traditional (electronic) or non-mediated language discourse(s) within environments (<http://www.usask.ca/education>). A community requires a highly interactive, loosely structured organization with tightly knit relations based on personal persuasion and interdependence (Nohria and Berkely, 1994, p. 115).

The virtual learning community functions in a virtual learning environment which will normally work over the Internet and provide a collection of tools such as those for assessment, communication, uploading of content, return of students' work, peer assessment, administration of student groups, collecting and organizing student grades, questionnaires, tracking tools, etc. New features in these systems include wikis, blogs, RSS and 3D virtual learning spaces. Nowadays, virtual learning environments are often used in schools and other educational establishments in order to make the learning experience more interactive (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_learning_environment).

Of course, the virtual learning environments were originally created for distance education, but today they are the most often used to supplement traditional face to face classroom activities, commonly known as Blended Learning. These systems usually run on servers, to serve the course to students Multimedia and/or web pages.

In some programs, such as Elluminate, a virtual learning environment can be similar to a face-to-face classroom environment in that it allows direct communication with the teacher. Students can use emoticons to "raise their hand," show that they are confused, show that they understand what the teacher is saying, and even give applause for something that the teacher says. Students are also able to talk to the teacher when called on. In many of these virtual learning environments the students are able to write on the "virtual classroom chalkboard." This allows them to show their work for the rest of the class to see. Students can also be split up into groups in order to work with each other and discuss topics that the teacher introduces. Many virtual learning environments give teachers the ability to share multimedia files such as video and audio files as well as the ability to transfer important documents directly to students.

Virtual learning communities, as part of learning communities

Virtual learning communities represent learning communities based not on actual geography, but on shared purpose. With the help of technology, learners can be drawn together from almost anywhere, and they can construct their own formal or informal groups. As such, virtual learning communities are



separated by space, but not time, as communication can be facilitated by technology in real time, partially overcoming geographical inhibitions. In this matter, Bellah (1985) believes there are at least four types of virtual learning communities, according to the purposes they serve, such as:

- a) The Virtual Learning Communities of Relationship, which is in fact a community, built on a relationship that promotes special kinds of connections among people, interconnections that result in a type of harmony similar to that found in families or collections of people.
- b) The Virtual Learning Communities of Place, where individuals have a common habitat or locale, which is able to offer them a sense of security, commonality, and heritage. The idea of such a virtual learning community is that it enables people from several countries to gather in one virtual place on the internet.
- c) The Virtual Learning Communities of Mind are communities of mind which reinforce people's commitment to other people, to common goals, shared values and shared conceptions of being and doing.
- d) The Virtual Learning Communities of Memory represent a virtual learning community which is based on a shared past or a common sense of history, which is able to connect people who might otherwise be alone, and also provides a focal point for interpreting and understanding commonly experienced events.

Virtual learning communities in Romania

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Of course, regarding Romania we can clearly say that the learning communities here are at the beginning of their development. These communities implicate mainly the interest that different categories of people have in learning a foreign language (such as French or English), which can be seen in the case of The American International School of Bucharest (http://www.international-schoolfriends.com/schools-American_International_School). Creating a learning community is in fact extremely easy and it implicates, in the essence, the interest of a number of people of sharing their ideas, experience and knowledge with the help of the Internet. There are even special designed sites on the Internet that are meant to help people to create such a useful environment.

Conclusions

Virtual learning communities are extremely numerous in the whole world, but in the case of Romania it is a notion that is at the beginning today. We are extremely optimistic in this matter, and we strongly believe that our learning communities will develop far more than the learning communities that we



have today, because this is in fact a better way for the future, an optimal way of sharing knowledge and a successful method to learn and to get into contact with specialists all over the world.

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