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The Virtual Teacher's Lounge: How Teachers Meaningfully Connect Through Online Networks

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Abstract

This study seeks to illuminate an understanding of naturally forming online communities of professional educators in the context of off-line communities. Essentially, an online discussion forum for educators is evaluated for the purpose of determining whether the forum provides a “space” conducive for the development of a community of professional educators as benchmarked against an understanding of offline community formation and existence. The primary approach to this study is qualitative in nature with some quasi-statistical support to elucidate analysis and conclusions. The study employs the use of QSR NVivo 7 to collect, catalogue, and analyze discussions from this online forum, examining discussions topically, contextually, and structurally. The study finds that online communities closely resemble offline communities in structure and interaction, but only for select participants (about 10% of the total). Those participants who did not participate heavily in discussions primarily remained in the more formal and professional set of exchanges, whereas those with higher levels of participation in the analyzed discussions participated both heavily in the more informal and “playful” discussions and in the more formal professional discussions, with the participation in the latter type taking on more of an “expert” role.

Keywords

Online communities, professional educators, computer-mediated communication, community, networked community, teacher's lounge, professional communities

Introduction

As globalization continues to bring more individuals to computer-mediated communication (CMC), the education community is embracing the technologies that exist to better address social, pedagogical, and professional needs. The United Kingdom has looked to technologies (current and emerging) as cornerstones of recent educational reforms (Selwyn, 2006). It is only reasonable for the educational community, speaking in general terms, to purposefully explore the latest technological innovations as possible means of assisting in the execution of what is expected most of educators – communication – for the purposes of professional development, collaborative support, and for the discovery and connections of important content expertise. These tools can be the connecting points between education professionals on opposite sides of the globe and around the literal corner. The challenge is to properly determine the most effective methods to allow educators the opportunity to use resources and time to best meet the needs and demands of the 21st century global environment.

The primary question asked in this research is whether virtual environments can serve the informal social needs of educators. Can such environments essentially become virtual teacher’s lounges, or more generally educational “third places” (see Oldenburg, 1991)? This question is addressed through a primarily qualitative study examining a single naturally forming educational community in an online environment.

Description of Study and Context

This poster emerges from research performed on a teacher Web site’s discussion forum. The forum served as an asynchronous gathering place for more than 300 users, whose interactions were recorded in

this study. Their communications were analyzed against the constructed model of analysis, formed from literature reviews in the areas of sociological research, research on professional communities, and research on technology-based communication.

More specifically, the research addresses the following purposes (as aligned with a literature review associated with the performed study, as noted above): establishing general definitions of an informal social community, exploring the development of a social community construct in the context of this study (like Oldenburg's Third Place), examining the significance and contributions of social capital to these considerations, delving into the nature and construction of virtual communities as we understand them, and establishing the relevance of communities of practice and professional educator communities. These areas were explored for the purpose of illuminating theoretical constructs for analysis of an identified teacher community formed in an online environment.

The included review of literature allows the emergence of a framework — 12 characteristics of community — in which to evaluate an online discussion forum and its efficacy as an informal community of professional educators. Conversational analysis and general observational techniques were employed to accomplish this study's goals. Coding analysis provided opportunity to study these discussions adhering to the identified characteristics, looking at the level of escapism the "space" provides its participants, the nature of access, the types of interactions (examining evidence of playfulness vs. work-focused vs. personal), the connecting themes (as found in interest, personal and cultural identity, professional identity), the exchange of ideas, and the nature of the "regulars" who return to this "space."

Brief Conclusions

Upon analysis of the gathered conversational data, this study initially concludes that a select few individuals self-identifying as professional educators form communities of users in online environments much in the same fashion (and containing the same general characteristics) as off-line communities. This conclusion is based on the existence of a body of individuals (identified as "regulars" and numbering 30 out of the total 300) who exemplify the general nature of the sought-after characteristics of informal social off-line communities. These "regulars" prove to be easily distinguishable from their non-regular counterparts not only in analysis of the volume of posting, but also in the nature of conversations and the roles they take on in this virtual space.

The limitations of this research and the restrictions on collection and data types make this a tentative conclusion that needs further solidification through other modes of data analysis. This formulation of a community appears to be anomalous as compared to the entire body of potential and registered users.

The significance of this research remains – that we need to examine the nature of the transformation from casual participant to identified community member and that we need to examine the nature of this type of online community as it impacts our understandings of communities of practice for education. With a deeper understanding of this space for use of connecting educational professionals comes better understandings of how to shape professional development, informal support systems, and community connections for educational practitioners to meet these growing needs.

This research, at its core, examines the development of understanding of virtual, establishes benchmarks for analysis, examines an existing community for adherence to benchmarks, and uses conclusive results to further the discussion of the reality of, the importance of, and the benefits of virtual communities in the professional educational sector. This has been an untouched area heretofore and is ripe for examination.

References

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