Developing Best Practices for Facilitating Online Learning Communities: A Case Study at New York University

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Abstract— *This paper presents a framework for replicating the online learning community framework that is central to the award-winning Management and Systems distance education graduate programs offered by the Division of Programs in Business at New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies. Through a case study analyzing use of this framework it is anticipated that a set of best practices will illustrate the affordances of synchronous and asynchronous technologies to support collaboration, teaching, and effective forms pedagogy.*

Index Terms— *Distance Education, Online Learning, Community Building*

1. INTRODUCTION

THE term, distance education, is not new; however, in recent years it has taken on new meaning. Initially, distance education was synonymous with correspondence courses used to meet the needs of rural areas. The steady evolution of telecommunications and multimedia has considerably influenced the development of distance learning (Johnson, 2003). The first and second generation of distance education delivery systems were capable of distributing learning materials and asynchronous communication, however provided limited opportunities for live communication between students and faculty. The third generation of distance education technology includes a combination of the following tools and applications: Wikis, Blogs, the integration of dynamic learning content, instant messaging, discussion forums, and interactive synchronous audio and video-based environments. Teaching and learning in the online environment has been transformed from a content-driven delivery environment to an interactive student-centered learning space.

New York University's School of Continuing and Professional Studies (SCPS) has been

offering distance education since late 1950s with Sunrise Semester (New York University's Office of Information Services, 1958). The NYU SCPS Distance Learning group is an entity within SCPS that facilitates the offering online of courses, certificates, undergraduate and graduate degrees.

In trying to conceive of the best methods for building a community within the online Management and Systems program, many options were explored. Some of these included online clubs, forums and other informal student-led activities. The option that sustained itself and was most favorably received by faculty and students was to provide opportunities for community building within, rather than outside of, the classroom. The rationale underlying adoption of this approach to community building was simply because the community of faculty and students were comprised of working professionals. The students, in particular, had little or no time to devote to extracurricular community-building activities. In addition, many of the faculty members who taught the program's courses held full-time, high status positions in industry.

Other similar programs in business have moved towards executive education and other forms of convenient education for working adults looking to earn an advanced degree. The Management and Systems program differs in that it is offered completely online, but still shares the similarities to other business programs with specific class meeting times and dates. However, all the class meetings are conducted via distance using multimedia environment with voice-over IP technology and the ability to display visual, aural, textual, and graphical artifacts. The assumption underlying many asynchronous forms of learning is that students can learn merely from written forms of communication. According to Mayer (2003) it is essential to engage multiple senses in teaching to facilitate learning. Moreover, to promote initial bonding amongst students Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker (2000) advocate the use of synchronous technologies. Through the examination of the Management and Systems program the researchers seek to demonstrate the forms of pedagogy to promote learning

communities that are supported by the course management system.

2. THE CASE STUDY

This case study to be undertaken aims to demonstrate the affordances of synchronous and asynchronous technologies to support formal and informal learning while contemporaneously building learning communities. An "educational learning community is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process, develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment" (Buffington, 2003, ¶ 16). The program aimed to build a strong community of learners to promote collaborative learning, sense of belonging, and dynamic online classroom interactions. Specifically, "when the development of a community is encouraged, the educational experience is more inspired as strong relationships develop amongst students" (Palloff & Pratt, 2003, p. 15).

2.1. Proposed Solution

Community-building in an online environment is essential for student engagement with peers and faculty (Johnson, 2003). To address the challenge of developing online learning community was to design the courses and overall curriculum to allow for social interactions among peers and faculty within the course environment. The community-building efforts were based upon principles and best practices recommending the construction of groups of students into cohorts, drawing upon the individual differences among students, providing opportunities for student interaction with experts in the field of management and systems, and establishing expectations of faculty as to the importance of community building within the program. These principles and best practices provided the foundation for community building in the virtual classroom.

2.2. Student Cohorts

"Research on learning in cohorts indicates that cohorts foster a sense of belonging, create an environment of mutual response, promote risk taking, and provide a forum for critical reflection an shared understanding, and encourage and sustain multiple perspectives" (Huber & Lowry, 2003, p. 81). The Management and Systems master's students, although they had never met in person, self-evolved into cohorts that progressed through the curriculum together. The cohorts structure established the foundation for social learning and community-building within the classroom.

2.3. Capitalizing On The Individual Differences Among Students

The community of faculty and students in the program are unique. For example, a driving principle of the program is to draw upon the individual differences among its students. The program's students come from diverse backgrounds and represent a variety of professional and academic experiences. The common denominator is that they are all seeking to update and upgrade their skill sets by assimilating the latest management techniques into their arsenal of talents. A powerful way of accomplishing this truly holistic approach is to mine the experiences of both program faculty and students and amalgamate students' individual differences into a collective repository of best practices.

2.4. Faculty Expertise and Commitment

Faculty members in the program understand that their contributions to the social and team aspects of the class is crucial to adoption by students. "Faculty must work to create a sense of community within the class" (Johnson, 2003, p. 113). The faculty member, in addition to being the knowledge expert, also must be able to facilitate the discussion at times to allow students to construct their own understanding of knowledge, rather than deliver it strictly though lecture. However, in order for this aspect to be successful, it requires an introduction to this type of learning based on the best practices with the student responsibilities and instructional techniques to facilitate community formation such as attributes of openness, flexibility, honesty, willingness to take responsibly for community formation, and willingness to work collaboratively (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). The Division of Programs in Business consists of some full-time professors but relies heavily on an adjunct faculty. Its approach to hiring faculty entails having a continual, robust recruitment process that focuses heavily on professional achievements at a senior management level or as a consultant in addition to superlative communication skills. Mentoring of these newly recruited faculty members is provided by colleagues and the Divisional Dean as well as through the support services offered under the auspices of the Office of Faculty Affairs. The creation and development of various documents and templates imparting instructional guidelines for teaching in the Virtual College has greatly aided the synchronous and asynchronous online tools used in training faculty. However, not all faculty members who are successful in a traditional classroom setting are able to adapt to the interactive, learning-based approach that is required in the online educational model used at NYU SCPS.

3. ANTICIPATED FINDINGS

The program places a strong emphasis on peer-to-peer learning and teamwork supported using a robust learning management system.

The system encourages various forms of communication through voice, written text, and chatting. A particular strength is the voice-over IP synchronous environment that allows for real time discussions between faculty and students. By examining how students take the same classes and seminars together, gravitating towards self-formed cohorts, it is hoped that the results can demonstrate how a foundation for social learning and community building within the classroom can be established. It will also be vital to analyze the differences between students and capitalize on the added value to the learning process that diversity brings.

For example, students in the program desire opportunities to network and learn from experts in the field just as they would in a traditional classroom. As a core component of the pedagogical design of the program the expertise of the faculty, professionals in the field, and student expertise is embedded is central to the student experience in the classroom. In the program the technology enables students to easily network with their peers, build relationships, and share experiences during opportune times. One way that the program supports community building is through drawing on students' shared experiences in the workplace. For example, students shared how they dealt with the repercussions of a hurricane or 9/11. Students collaborated and compared their experiences to establish a common understanding of the salient issues, ways to address those issues, and methodologies for sharing best practices.

Students often measure their satisfaction with a program by how its curriculum helped them become more accomplished in their professional careers. By providing them with a thorough understanding of core business competencies, access to faculty expertise, and highly specialized knowledge in a systemic approach, it is possible aggregate the experiences of both program faculty and students into a warehouse of business paradigms.

4. CONCLUSION

Most traditional online programs in the United States focus primarily on asynchronous forms of communication. The most prevalent reason for student dissatisfaction is the lack of interaction, both between students and with the professor, creating a sense of detachment from the learning community. The Management and

System program supports multiple methods of engagement with the course content and strives to engage and stimulate the learner through text, voice and visuals. By studying a successful distance education program that offers a variety of perspectives and approaches to education and incorporates them into the online platform and pedagogy, it is anticipated that a model of best practices for online continuing education programs will be developed and that such a model would factor in the need for informal learning and learning communities that extend learning outside of the classroom and promote life-long learning for the adult learner.

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