

Reflective Practice in Action: Online Communication

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While learning is meant to be a social process, teaching tends to be a somewhat solitary profession even when efforts are made to engage in collaborative work with colleagues. How can we improve our practice without seeking the opportunity to learn with and from others? It is through social interaction that we are able to engage in higher educational experiences.

Powerful learning is meant to transform our ideas about the subject through experiences that offer the learner an opportunity to construct meaning. Every activity should prompt the learner into accessing prior knowledge, making connections through analysis, critical thinking and of course engaging in dialogue with peers and instructors (Conradie, 2014).

During the past weeks I participated in the 503 – Online Communication course as part of VIU's OLTD program. The course was divided into 5 student lead seminars that engaged us in a process of reflection about our current practice by giving us the opportunity to take control of the course for a week and walk a mile or two in the shoes of the learner. We explored many aspects related to online communication and experienced directly some of the benefits and some of the problems. This paper aims to summarize and reflect on my learning through the OLTD 503 Online Communication course.

Blending for Learning

When it comes to learning, building a sense of community and belonging is essential if we wish to achieve a learning experience where the students engage in tasks that promote critical thinking and reflection that lead the members of the learning community to take greater responsibility for their learning and are able to develop individual learning goals (Salmon, 2003).

The Community of Inquiry Model CoI developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer identifies three elements within the online learning environment: Teaching Presence, Social

Presence and Cognitive Presence (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Prior to the official start of the course and during the first few days after, the teaching presence was the dominant element. A strong teaching presence at the beginning of the course was crucial to helping us achieve a certain level of proficiency with the course materials in order to maintain motivation to engage in the course (Salmon, 2003).

The first course assignment (Images of Online Communication) set the stage to help us engage into an online socialization process by giving us an opportunity to share our personal ideas about the course's theme. The teaching presence was still strong but the social presence begin to emerge and connections started to materialize. As the days went by, discussion forums provided a space to share our personal experiences and get involved on each other's reflections about the content.

Discussion forums are a fantastic space to help students who are not as comfortable contributing to discussions within the face to face context or synchronous online meetings. Kear (2010) highlights the importance of designing activities that prevent information overload and low participation within the online learning context to increase the success of discussion forums.

The experience was a bit different for me. As an ESL learner I have the tendency to feel uncomfortable with activities that require somewhat informal written input. I am very confident speaking in front of my peers and often participate actively on discussions either face to face or through video conferences. When it comes to asynchronous activities where writing input is required I do not feel as confident therefore it takes much more time and effort to take part on them. It was clear to me that in order to engage all members of the learning community and provide them an opportunity to demonstrate their learning, we must keep in mind that our identity or "persona" is not necessary the same online and face to face (Salmon, 2003).

During the last two weeks of the course, it was palpable that our learning community was well established and we were able to be more independent and take greater responsibility for our learning (Salmon, 2003). As the teacher presence became less dominant, the cognitive and social presence grew exponentially. We became a community of inquiry as it was evident that we were able to “listen to one another with respect, build on one another’s ideas, challenge one another to supply reasons for otherwise unsupported opinions, assist each other in drawing inferences, from what has been said, and seek to identify one another’s assumptions” (Lipman, 2003, p. 20).

The opening of the Google + Community, set the stage to connect socially and interact at a personal level. We share our hobbies, our stories and some of our concerns. Often within the K-12 context, teachers may have the tendency to underestimate the importance of social interactions among students. The past few weeks made me reflect about the sense of security and comfort that provided me to connect with my peers at a personal level and how much this connection enhances my learning experience.

One of my most powerful reflections during this course came as a result of the student lead seminar assignment. Not only was I expected to collaborate with the members of my group but also to present it to our peers and instructor. This assignment and the follow up reflection allowed me to see “in practice” many of the concepts I can identify through literature review ongoing in the OLT program.

In the context of online education, learning activities should not only align to the learning outcomes but also should push the learners into collaborative projects in order to grow the sense of community and therefore increase the quality of the learning experience. Critical thinking which is considered a high-order cognitive activity is highly dependent on the social dimension of learning (Barber, 2011). Through the development of our group project each seminar team

went from “open communication (interaction), to purposeful academic exchange (discourse), and finally, to achieving a feeling of camaraderie” (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 160). This feeling of camaraderie outgrew the individual teams as each one of us went over the planning, development, delivery and reflection process required by the assignment.

George Siemens (2005) explains on his Connectivist theory how the development of information technology is altering the type of learners we are and how the teacher is no longer at the center of the stage. Beladarrain (2006) also brings attention to the transformation of the roles of teachers and learners as emerging technology tools facilitate communication among the members of the distance learning setting. As we progressed through the 503-Online Communication course we witnessed how the teacher’s presence went from being at the center of the stage, making sure we felt welcome and develop a level of comfort with the technology and course materials to being a partner in learning who simply held the course from behind the stage to support our learning (Salmon, 2003).

Conclusion

During the past six weeks we had the opportunity to embark in an experiential learning process where we played a variety of roles through synchronous and asynchronous activities. Through the effective use of technology we shared resources, opinions, experiences, expertise, fears and hopes for the future. Every experience and learning activity through the OLTD program forces me to analyze and reflect about the process at two different but strongly connected levels: first as a learner and second as a teacher.

One of the principles of the Connectivist theory states that “Learning is as process of connecting specialized nodes or information sources” (Siemens, 2005, p. 5). During our time in

OLTD 503 we began to identify each one of our areas of expertise to create connections and develop networks (Conradie, 2014). We begin to build a strong learning community through our experiences in the course and as students this will support us in establishing meaningful connections and achieve greater professional growth.

As a teacher this experience helped me to reinforce, refine and deepen my initial philosophies about online communication as it refers to teaching and learning in any context, but particularly online. I believe that meaningful, continuing and quality learning is only possible in the context of a learning community where students feel welcome, safe and have sense of belonging. The relevance of the sense of community in a learning environment remains unchanged regardless of the delivery method (face to face, online, blended, etc), what changes is the tools used to build that community. Salmon's Five Stage Model (2003) is as pertinent in a fully online learning context as it is in a brick and mortar classroom. We should aim to achieve Salmon's stage 5 on any learning environment as it fosters quality learning experiences.

I leave this course with a bag full of new tools and a brand new Social Justice 12 blended course that reflects my learning.

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