

Social Dimension of Online Education for Secondary Learners

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The Gulf Islands School District #64 consists of eleven schools and just over 1700 students. Separated by water, the district has schools on Salt Spring Island, Saturna Island, Mayne Island, Pender Islands, Galiano Island, and even a school in North Vancouver. Schools are integral parts of each island community. Though the unique geography and learning contexts present many unique learning opportunities, it also presents several challenges. Recently, there has been a demand from the community for the district to offer more flexible learning options. At the high school level, there is a growing need to make the school's online learning program accessible to all learners in the district. The district aims to give all students access to courses and specialist teachers, and flexible learning options through the district's only online learning program (Shift), which is currently only available to students at Gulf Islands Secondary School.

Although the majority of high school learners attend the main high school (Gulf Islands Secondary School), for many of them the commute is challenging particularly during the end of the fall and winter.

Shift is a hybrid (online / face to face) program offered to students enrolled at the Gulf Islands Secondary School as part of their schedule classes. A teaching team with a variety of specialties develops, delivers and supports most the courses offered through the program. One of the biggest challenges to meet the district's goal to make the Shift program available to all high school learners is to incorporate the social aspect of learning into the online environment. This paper aims to briefly review the framework proposed by the Community of Inquiry model and the Connectivist theory about maintaining the social aspect of learning from the face to face classroom into the online learning environment.

The transformation of the learning process triggered by informational technology changed all aspects of the learning process, particularly on the field of distance education. George Siemens believes that the change is so dramatic that the development of instructional environments cannot longer be explained and / or depend on the three main learning theories (Behaviorism, Cognitivism and Constructivism) therefore there is a need to approach learning from a new theoretical point of view: Connectivism (Siemens, 2005).

Although the concept of distance education is not new, the framework of distance education has been deeply altered by the accelerated development of information and communication technologies. Part of this change is the significant growth of online and blended learning as way to respond to the rising needs of flexible and continuing education and the need to reduce cost (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). Siemens Connectivist theory is an attempt to provide a theoretical framework that supports the new elements associated to distance education empowered by technology.

Traditionally the main concern in terms of communication for distance learning was establishing an efficient two way communication between teacher and learner. The issue was addressed by concepts like Holmberg's Guided Didactic Conversation or the Transactional Distance theory of Moore's. The first attempts to create materials where the dialogue with the teacher is simulated and the later states that distance is not an issue of geography but of pedagogy (Gunawardena & McIsaac, 2004). The 21st Century learning environment faces a more complex reality as learning has expanded its domain out of the institutional walls of schools, colleges and universities (Conradie, 2014) allowing learners to expand their learning environments and connections to communities of practice, personal networks and information sources (Siemens, 2005).

Learning is a process enhanced through social features like team work and collaboration which have been an unquestionable part of the traditional face to face classroom for a long time. According to Barber (2011) higher-order skills like critical thinking (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) are highly dependent on the social dimension of the learning process therefore the purposeful, efficient and consistent inclusion of activities that encourage building a sense community and social presence are fundamental to the quality of the learning process (Garrison & Arbaugh 2007).

Peer to peer interactions are a relatively new element to the distance education field but the development of easily accessible communication technology that facilitates efficient synchronous and asynchronous interactions presents new challenges to course design in online education, even for blended models of online learning. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) conceived by Garrison, Anderson and Archer is a relatively new framework that examines the educational experience from three different but interconnected elements: teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000).

The teaching presence in the Community of Inquiry framework outlines the teacher's role: course design and organization, facilitation and instruction (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). The cognitive presence is the process that provides the learners with an opportunity to construct and confirm meaning like learning materials, activities, discussions, etcetera (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007); and the social presence is the element that provides learners an opportunity to project themselves as "real people" within the online learning environment (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) emphasize the limited amount of research that provides an overall evaluation of the three elements of the Community of Inquiry framework interacting together.

The social presence as outlined by the Community of Inquiry framework should be considered in course design to develop activities that foster a sense of community and trust where the participants feel comfortable taking an active role. The goal of the social presence is to foster an environment that help learners to achieve learning outcomes through higher level cognitive process like critical thinking (Barber, 2011). The importance given to making connections and developing networks (communities of practice / community of inquiry) is a link between the Connectivist theory of learning developed by Siemens and the Community of Inquiry framework, although Siemens's Connectivist theory goes beyond the social connections within a predefined community of learners. For Siemens the learning process must rely on a variety of sources and opinions as well as non-human appliances (Siemens, 2005) while the CoI framework emphasizes the importance developing a sense group cohesion and affective expression (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007) perhaps even similar to the connections developed through face to face interactions.

David Annand (2011) discusses some of the challenges associated with the social presence element of the Community of Inquiry framework. On his article the author questions the impact of online collaborate learning activities that attempt to build the social connections and sense of community that mean to enhance the cognitive process. The author reviews different studies that found the social present element to have a much smaller impact on the learning process.

Conclusion

According to the British Columbia Education Plan some of the core skills required to better prepare students for the future are critical thinking, inquiry, teamwork and collaboration, and technological literacy. Online and blended learning programs seem to be a viable option to meet the Ministry of Education goals. Understanding the importance of maintaining a social aspect of the learning process as well as designing courses that foster connections among learners is a fundamental step to create, deliver and support course that will prepare students in the 21st century.

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