Virtual Communities

An Emerging Technology for Educators

By

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One of the emerging technologies that will dramatically impact schools and the quality of education delivered is known as virtual communities. Also called online communities, these networked individuals can share information and ideas freely through the use of the PC, Internet and a host of other technologies becoming widely available. The fundamental impetus to this form of communication has come from the same human desires that have formed real communities since civilization began. That is, people need to connect with other individuals to feel a part of a larger whole. This brief overview will describe virtual communities, touch on how they are typically formed, and suggest the promise these communities hold for education. Two examples of viable, existing communities are also included create a clear picture of the profound impact this confluence of technologies has made on education.

One definition of virtual communities may be the following: virtual communities are online groups of like-minded individuals who utilize the Internet to share ideas, exchange information, and post relevant topics of discussion and use to the members. These individuals come together either naturally or in a contrived manner to network on the Internet. The following elements are common to most virtual communities. They usually allow the members to establish an identity and visit more than once. This builds trust among members of the community. These communities usually offer message boards or instant messaging to keep members in touch. They often have relevant links and resources and act as a clearinghouse for the members to add their input. Many of these communities allow sharing of software and documents. This enables the power of these tools and ideas to become available to all members. These fundamental elements are necessary to build a community online or in real life.
Online communities develop in many ways. As indicated before, they can spontaneously arise from a Usenet group established to help PC users understand their operating systems or they can be deliberately designed in an attempt to enhance a commercial venture. Boettcher (1999) outlines the main types of communities seen on the web today and how they can be developed. She states that "the purpose of your community and the needs of the group will dictate the tools you use and the kind of virtual community you build."(p.1) This would imply that a deliberate attempt to start a community should be done carefully using design principles and sound methods. Jesse Berst, Editorial Director of the ZDNet AnchorDesk identifies six ways that companies and individuals are designing communities on the Internet. He lists the following: Homesteads, Special Interests, Chat, Navigation, Geography, and Commerce. Homesteads give members space on the web and this allows them to gather in "neighborhoods" to share information and ideas with other members. Special interest groups come together around specialized topics and information. Chat rooms enable members to communicate with members using synchronous or asynchronous methods. These are often less formal and often have guidelines of conduct and use. These rules reflect similar rules and mores established in a real community or culture. Navigation is offered to train individuals to use certain portals or search engines within the community. The commercial benefit of this method of development is that the community is depending on the wisdom and expertise of the portal to make their online experience pleasant and meaningful. Geography also plays a part in the development of virtual communities. Many online communities grow from regional interests and concerns. Members can continue discussions and debates about local issues in cyberspace and have a voice in the political process. Commercial ventures also make an attempt to develop a community of
customers to better provide goods and services as well as to have quick access to market research.

Virtual communities hold great promise for education. Parents can build interest groups around common issues of child rearing such as adolescence, drug use, reading, etc. They can support one another in the daunting task of raising children and share wisdom and resources in a safe way. Teachers and parents can form strong communication alliances to help support the children who may be having difficulty in school. Students can take an active role in the process and assume responsibility to communicate with the teacher regularly. They can also collaborate on projects and develop a synergy that will make for a more meaningful, constructivist learning environment.

One example of a successful online community is Harvey. Harvey was developed by Lloyd Tabb. A successful co-developer of Netscape Navigator, Lloyd built much of his code into the design of Harvey. This virtual community combines all of the elements of communication, information and document sharing and collaboration presented earlier. Lloyd has made this technology available free to more than ten school communities world wide.

Another example would be The Wellspring. Instructional Systems Inc. and Teachers College, Columbia University developed this community. The mission is to provide distance educators a forum for support, ideas, reading rooms, and online seminars. The community is available to those educators delivering web-based instruction to their students. Relevant links are provided and chat events are hosted to address key issues facing online educators.
Both of these virtual communities effectively combine the essential elements to form alliances among like-minded individuals. They promote innovative methods to create communities of learners and educators. This model of education will forever alter the methods crystallized into pedagogy from centuries ago. This emerging technology will transform the roles of the educator and student. It is within this context that a new type of learning will develop.
REFERENCES


