

## CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AND DEFINING THE ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

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### ABSTRACT

*The online learning community is frequently referred to, but ill defined. The constructivist philosophy and approach to teaching and learning is both an effective means of constructing an online learning community and it is a tool by which to define key elements of the learning community. In order to build a nurturing, self-sustaining online learning community, teachers who follow the constructivist philosophy allow students to self-discover, to evaluate and reflect on the progress innate to their own learning, while providing the function of a guide and a coach during the learning process. A constructivist learning environment is evident by students who take charge of their own learning outcomes in a student-centered environment, by students who work collaboratively with other students to create their own goals and learning parameters, and by the demonstration of respect for other learners whose approaches and experiences are extensively different. The online learning community is defined by the idea that effective learning and the presence of a community are intrinsically linked. Community is established and reinforced when staff and other students interact in a manner that demonstrates genuine caring for each other, which in turn translates into increased learning and teaching efficacy. The constructivist approach creates effective learning environments by forming, fostering, and maintaining the presence of community in the distance learning venue.*

*Keywords: Constructivism, Constructivist Strategies, Online Learning Community, Learning Environments.*

### INTRODUCTION

Attempting to understand the manner in which learning is achieved has been the subject of multitudinous researches for more than a century. Theorists have long grappled with how and when learning occurs, the context in which learning is minimized or maximized, and the contextual issues surrounding the learning process. From the introduction of the earliest learning theories such as behaviorism introduced by Skinner, or cognitivism, which progressed from Gestalt psychology, theorists have attempted to understand how humankind constructs knowledge, how prior knowledge is stored, and how new knowledge is acquired, synthesized, and integrated into long term memory.

While the dialogue over how learning is achieved is ongoing, a more contemporary variable or nuance has changed the landscape of the debate because of technology and its ability to separate teacher and the student in the learning context. Until recent history, learning

has largely been viewed and defined through the lens of face-to-face interactions between teacher and student. With the advent of telecommunications, web 2.0 tools, and a growing sector of the public that are demanding distance education, the context under which learning occurs is now moving to the fore as a key variable that determines desirable learning outcomes.

Though it is well established that learning can be equivalently achieved in the distance learning venue compared to the traditional face-to-face classroom, how this dynamic occurs, under which circumstances it occurs best, and what fosters a sustainable model for this equivalency will help provide essential insights into the ever growing field of distance learning (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2012). By understanding and applying the constructivist teaching philosophy while defining and aligning with key elements of the online learning community, both teachers and students will be empowered to capitalize on the abundance of benefits

innate to the distance learning format.

## **Constructivist Philosophy**

Constructivist philosophy has its roots going back to the time of Socrates, when the manner of inquiry and the asking of questions would often lead Socrates' students to new pinnacles of understanding. As a student of Socrates, one was not a passive recipient of knowledge commonly found in the teacher-centered model, but through the process of answering questions, one would discover and construct knowledge for his/her self. Constructivism is a learning theory that posits that construction of knowledge is developed by people, and that people's understanding of the world is achieved through the senses, through experiences, and through experiential reflection ("Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning," n.d.). Early learning theorists like Piaget provided insights into constructivism with his assertions about the logical construction of knowledge, and Vygotsky contributed to constructivist thinking with his zone of proximal learning, where students were encouraged to solve problem for themselves beyond their present level of development with the collaboration of peers or with the direction of adults ("Constructivism as a Paradigm for Teaching and Learning," 2004.). These pioneers and others laid the foundation for an approach to teaching and learning that created a new approach for understanding how people make sense of their world. Constructivism has forever shifted the teaching and learning paradigm as instructional design and learning systems have moved from simply talking about what one should know to practising and experimenting with knowledge.

## **Basic Tenets of the Constructivist Learning Environment**

In order to see how constructivist learning affects the online learning community, it is imperative to have a working knowledge of how constructivist teachers view the classroom, and how constructivist theory works in the classroom. One of the essential components of the constructivist teaching approach is to inspire students to consistently evaluate how any activity that is undertaken is contributing to the students increased understanding. Johnson and Brescia (2006) made the case that "the student's role in interactive instructional environments is to

work with others to discover, construct, and participate in social collaborations that bring about meaning" (p. 57). In essence, in a constructivist learning environment, teachers provide guidance and facilitation, which are the keys in the organization of the classroom, and students take control of their own learning based on their own background and previous experiences. Prior learning provides the foundation for testing and determining the merit and meaning of new knowledge. In order for the constructivist approach to teaching and learning to work, it heavily relies on collaborative learning, where students engage each other with group projects designed to create and foster the reliance of team members upon each other. According to Kerr (2009), "constructivism focuses on student-centered learning and encourages learners to choose their own learning goals, construct their own meaning, and participate in problem solving, collaboration, and reflection" (p. 1). When the constructivist approach is effectively used, students are better able to contribute to their own learning and to others in a way that creates a positive learning environment.

## **Benchmarks of the constructivist learning environment**

When the collaborative efforts previously mentioned are at work, and when students provide the impetus for their own learning, several of the following key indicators will be evident: 1) learning will be embedded in the social experience of the student, 2) the learning environment will foster opportunities for multiple perspectives and students will experience appreciation for the multiple perspectives, 3) students will possess a voice in their own learning, and 4) teachers will create experiences for students that are relevant and realistic ("Characteristics of Constructivist Learning & Teaching," 1997).

One can see that the constructivist approach is designed to move the learning process from the sole responsibility of the teacher to one that is not only shared by the student, but to one that is actually constructed by the student. When reflection, authentic tasks, and self-analysis are encouraged, students are able to successfully apply Vygotsky's scaffolding approach. This in turn enables learning to occur in a manner which promotes retention of the new material. Students taking control of their own

learning and being responsible for their learning outcomes is a key element of the constructivist approach. The constructivist approach relies on the student-centered model, where knowledge construction and not knowledge reproduction is emphasized. It is also important to understand when desiring to create a successful learning experience the role of the online learning environment. In the next sections, the online learning community will be defined and analyzed while viewing how the constructivist philosophy works to both foster and maintain a sense of community that fosters learning.

## **Online Learning Community**

It was once widely held that learning communities in their truest sense could only be established in face-to-face settings. The online learning community is a recently coined phrase that embodies an idea that is very different from the isolationist model that was once widely followed in distance education. The name itself has its origin in the Universities' efforts to curb attrition rates while mitigating negative experiences students had during their first years in college, and this effort has enjoyed noticeable success (DiRamio and Wolverton, 2006). Before discussing the research involved in the composition of the online learning community, it is first helpful to establish and define what a community is within its structural framework. According to Bloomberg (2007), "a community can act as a learning community when it typically engages in the acquisition, creation, or transformation of knowledge" (p. 42). Shared goals, diversity of opinions and a commitment to work together embodies the idea of a community of learners. The notion that community relationships and learning are not mutually exclusive is innate to the concept of the online community as learning and community are inextricably linked together.

The concept of a learning community and its creation is paramount in order to maintain a worthwhile distance learning program (Guillar and Loring, 2008). DiRamio and Wolverton (2008) point out that distance learning only works when an online learning community is established. Moreover, those who participate in distance learning formats rely on the full support of other students and staff in order to create necessary online learning communities.

These formats rely on caring demonstrated from staff to students so that students feel appreciated. While there lacks any completely unifying definition of the term 'learning community' the term is embodied by the idea that, as professors and other students show interest in a student that the sense of value and well-being of that student increases to the point where the barriers and isolation associated with inhibiting learning are successfully removed. Given that, creating a sense of community within a classroom increases student satisfaction and raises the likelihood that learning will occur, it becomes essential for teachers to see the importance of their role in creating course work that is more interesting, while working to strengthen the bond between the teachers and students.

## **Learner and Instructor Roles in Constructivist Online Learning Environments**

In order to foster the online learning environment using the constructivist approach, both teacher and the student must assume certain roles that reinforce the learning. First, however, expectations should be clarified so that every party involved knows that an online learning community is the desired goal. So for instance, if a University wants to achieve an online learning community that promotes a Christian worldview, then the university using the constructivist model should provide and integrate learning opportunities where Christian growth can be experienced and discovered. This aforementioned approach will do more to promote successful online learning than if the instructor simply defines the applicable Christian principles that apply to the learning objectives for a particular module. Next, the instructors must see their role as a facilitator of the distance learning class and not just a purveyor of content. Moreover, the instructor must face and assume certain risks of being a down-to-earth person rather than maintaining a formal persona (Guillar and Loring, 2008). Students must assume a willingness to engage in a manner that is warm and transparent, which places other students at ease and provides all involved in the learning community motivation to reciprocate in kind.

## **Constructivist strategies for online learning communities**

An essential skillset for fostering a productive online learning environment includes communicating efficiently in the

online classroom. Strong, open, frequent, and clear communication is a key element of the constructivist approach and helps to maintain and develop a strong learning community (Stodel, Thompson, and MacDonald, 2006). While for many it is more comfortable to avoid collaboration and default to former isolationist models, it is essential for learners to change their outlook from one that is individual-oriented to one that is community-oriented. As learners contribute to the group, a deeper sense of community is realized.

Creating and maintaining an online learning community using the constructivist philosophy is essential. Several of the following constructivist approaches will help foster the kind of learning community that promotes meaningful learning. One such approach is using introductions (Sang, 2010). This allows for each member in the online class to feel welcome and to realize the humanity of those with whom they are participating. Other approaches include fostering student ownership or facilitating opportunities for student collaboration (Kerr, 2009). At their disposal, the constructivist teacher can use wikis, blogs, synchronous virtual classrooms or places for students to gather either embedded in a LMS (Learning Management System) or through another venue. When students feel a part and when the learning community is tied to the constructivist philosophy, the community that is desired will be realized.

Another essential ingredient of the constructivist strategy that fosters an effective online learning community is embodied in the idea of servant leadership. In traditional settings, those in leadership positions were more interested in controlling people and on accomplishing tasks, but in a servant leadership paradigm, leaders are more interested in the welfare of those they lead (Bunt-Kokhuis and Sultan, 2012). In essence, servant leadership is illustrated by empowering students, connecting with students, and providing students with the tools they need to form a self-efficacious mindset. Teachers who instruct from the constructivist philosophy demonstrate the characteristics innate to the servant leader. Constructivist teachers realize that an imbalance between high tech and high touch can lead to a negative imbalance in the online learning community. Combining the essentials of high-touch as

exemplified with elements of trust and commitment to students helps maintain a sense of connection with students that fosters and builds a vibrant learning community (p. 2). Online learning communities are reliant on the interplay between teachers who are genuinely engaged and committed to the success of the online learner and the student who takes responsibility for his/her own learning while availing themselves to the tools of constructivism i.e. collaboration, goal setting, and mindset of willingness to construct their own learning through problem solving. Providing servant leadership is a fundamental characteristic and aspect of teaching from a constructivist perspective. When servant leadership qualities such as empathy, listening, caring for people and commitment to the growth of those in the learning community are present, the online community is strengthened while reinforcing that community can be achieved in both face-to-face, and in distance learning settings.

## Recommendations

Incorporating constructivist philosophy to enhance online learning communities suggests enhanced effectiveness for both student and teacher; therefore, higher learning educational institutions that transition to online learning formats must shift to student-centered teaching methods and cooperative learning models, or risk creating ineffective online learning communities associated with undesirable student learning outcomes. Included in this transition, must be an ideological transition from attempting to provide equal learning experiences in both traditional and online learning communities to one that provides equivalent learning experiences and equivalent outcomes. The aforementioned will further synthesize the relationship between constructivism and positive online learning communities. Moreover, while the existent research makes a compelling case for the general correlation between constructivist philosophy teaching approaches and a positive learning environment, further study should account for individual variables of student demographics in order to determine to what extent age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status may affect one's ability to benefit from a learning community influenced by

constructivist philosophy. Collaboration and problem solving are innate components of constructivism, but in order for teachers to facilitate these essentials in their classroom, teachers must be able to coach their students in how to navigate through endless electronic resources and tools. Future research must look beyond constructivism alone as a method and a key determiner for enhancing online learning communities, and it must evaluate the growing role teachers must play in coaching their students to gather and assess the essential electronic content for themselves.

### Conclusion

Constructivist philosophy has a long history of trial and error when applied in the teaching settings, but when thoughtfully applied in the distance learning setting, constructivism adds much to student development and learning. The constructivist philosophy relies upon a student-centered approach where students are responsible for setting their own goals and for constructing their own learning. Rather than reinventing the wheel, student's innate curiosity about how the world works is tapped into and students become active participants in their own learning. Historically, the online learning community was nonexistent, but in recent years, through the constructivist approach with its emphasis on genuine caring, valuing the merits of each individual, and servant leadership, a learning community that fosters equivalent learning outcomes of those in the face-to-face settings has become a reality. The evidence shows that a learning community must be present in order for satisfactory learning to occur, and the teacher and other students play a fundamental role in creating this community for each student who enters this community. Knowing the key elements that comprise the successful online learning community will enable teachers who choose to teach in distance learning venues to adopt many of the successful strategies for themselves. Moreover, as students understand the requirements necessary for learning success in the distance venue, such as taking an active role in their own learning, willingness to collaborate, and providing a genuine sense of caring and transparency within the classroom, students will find that the constructivist

approach that works for teachers will also work for themselves in constructing and maintaining a successful online learning community.

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