

Community in a Virtual Classroom

Abstract

The main research objectives were presenting experiences of virtual classroom learners in the context of being part of a community or being indifferent towards it, as well as getting to know the value of the community in view of respondents, and the attitudes of respondents to the community. The research operated within the interpretive paradigm. The respondents were twenty six students of different majors at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. All the respondents emphasized the value of being part of a community; still, the opinions were diverse with regard to individual predispositions, skills and aptitudes of the learners. The obtained results are of great significance to the educational thought and practice and in relation to the growing importance of e-learning and its popularisation.

Keywords: *community, virtual classroom, blended-learning, education*

1. Introduction

During the last few decades, the overpowering influence of rapidly developing information and communication technologies on people, social life and education has been observed. This brings about great changes and generates alternative methods of communication and participation in the cultural life, as well as new areas of learning. Numerous debates and studies present certain divergences concerning the value of this influence. Opinions have been expressed that regard the crisis of culture and value, progressing atomisation of society, and weak social bonds, as well as a lack of social participation and commitment, which lead to callous indifference to human matters and moral issues (cf.: Misztal, 1997, p. 1, as cited by: Olszewska-Dyoniziak, 1998, pp. 159–160). There are also different

opinions suggesting that “the Internet affords a new and different avenue of social interaction that enables groups and relationships to form that otherwise would not be able to, thereby increasing and enhancing social connectivity” (Bargh, McKenna, 2009, p. 3). To re-express the ideas, one can state that the Internet technologies can contribute to weakening of human relations, while it is also possible that these strengthen the relations and give a different value to them.

2. Reference Books Review

Over the past few years, scientific studies have been discussing the sense of togetherness in an educational virtual community increasingly often. A community, described as “1) showing the same characteristics, shared property and experiences; a community of inclinations, desires, aspirations; 2) a thing that joins, unites, [...] 3) a group of people of the same origin, culture, interest, and property [...]” (Słownik języka polskiego, 2006, p. 1171 [*Dictionary of the Polish Language, Translation from Polish*]). In the worldwide literature, there are numerous publications discussing empirical research studies focused on explaining the process of creating community within a virtual classroom, strategies used in this process, and the role of factors influencing it (Brown, 2001, pp. 18–35; Palloff and Pratt, 2007; Rovai, 2001, pp. 285–297; Chang, 2012, pp. 154–161; Poole, 2000, pp. 162–177). Interesting research was done by Lak Chidambaram and Robert P. Bostrom (1996, pp. 159–187), who indicated that members of groups with a high sense of community communicated more effectively and offered active participation in shared undertakings. Diversity and intensity of relations between group members make them more willing to exchange information. The sense of bonding between group members was also the subject of the study by Caroline Haythornthwaite (1998). The researcher analysed the frequency and nature of interpersonal connections within a group created by means of different media. The results showed that most of the connections between the participants concerned preparing projects. The researchers agreed on the importance of cooperation as a foundation of the Internet community development (Hudson, 2002, pp. 53–90, as cited by: Palloff, Pratt, p. 26; Kimball, 1995; Misanchuk, Anderson 2001). They mentioned the strategies significant for developing proper relations and maintaining a sense of belonging to a learning group. Brent Muirhead (2001, pp. 108–112) noted, on the basis of research, that some students expressed their concerns over the fact that group work on the Internet could result in unfair requirements concerning a few individuals who did most of the work. The mentioned author’s hint was that the teacher could

prevent negative experiences of a group thanks to close monitoring of group work, intervening when it is necessary, and grading learners' work on the basis of their actual contributions.

Polish scientific discourse also poses important and apt research questions concerning the sense of togetherness in virtual educational communities (Bednarek, Lubina, 2008, pp. 45–54; Siemieniecki, 2006, pp. 9–57; Wieczorkowski, 1997, pp. 289–298; Dziedzic, 2002, Orczykowska, 2006; Olcoń-Kubicka, 2009). On the basis of his own research and observations of didactic work with students using the information and communication technologies, Stanisław Juszczak (2003, pp. 188–189) drew certain conclusions concerning the functioning of the educational community. It turned out that the functioning of learning communities depends on willingness, needs and preferred forms of connection of their members, as well as the level of participation in group tasks, forum discussions, etc.

On the basis of the reviewed reference books, the issue of self-reflection of the learners of the virtual classroom in the context of being part of a community or being indifferent towards it seemed especially interesting. Further in the text, there are the analysis of qualitative research, conclusions and recommendations concerning future investigations.

3. Methodological Foundations of Own Research

The main research objective was presenting the experiences of virtual classroom learners in the context of being part of a community or being indifferent towards it, as well as getting to know the value of community in view of respondents, and the attitudes of respondents to the community. Another goal was showing the areas of focus for educationalists, teachers, e-learning training creators while initiating and developing community. On the basis of extended literature review and the executed qualitative research, answers to the following questions were sought: 1) **How do the learners themselves relate to being a part of a community on the Internet?** 2) **What are the profits of being part of a community?** 3) **What can the teacher do to initiate and develop proper relations between virtual classmates?** The selected research questions required a reference to individual experiences of students of different majors at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, who attended blended-learning classes in the 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 academic years. The research operated within the interpretative paradigm. The phenomenological perspective, which consists in the description and observation of 'lived experience', was used to investigate the heart of the matter (cf. Pilch,

Bauman, 2001, p. 270). The research method was a semi-structured interview, which is “[...] open to the context and a casual conversation with a respondent; still, it allows for asking detailed questions in the process. An interview is always focused on some issue” (Rubacha, 2008, p. 140) [*Translation from Polish*]. The sample selection was intentional. Among the interlocutors there were students of first-degree and second-degree Education Sciences, Mathematics, Polish Studies, English Studies, and interfaculty individual Humanistic Studies. Narrations of twenty six respondents of essential experience connected with learning on the Internet were obtained. A single interview took from one to two hours. The interview was a casual conversation and the interlocutors were encouraged to give answers. The process of gathering information was terminated on the basis of the so-called “theoretical saturation”, which means that no new information is obtained- a conversation with another person will not provide new threads or contents (as cited by: Konecki, 2000, p.31).

4. Community in the Educational Internet Group Perceived by its Members

Most of the interlocutors had participated in several blended-learning trainings. Therefore, they were experienced in learning in this form, and aware of its specificity. Foreign language, methodology or information technology classes were the most popular. Several first-year students admitted that they had experienced initial uneasiness and anxiety in relation to distance learning. Still, together with subsequent units and successive tasks, they were gaining in confidence. In his book “Wspólnota. W poszukiwaniu bezpieczeństwa w niepewnym świecie” [*Community. Seeking Safety in an Insecure World*], Zygmunt Bauman claims that “we have all experienced a feeling of being lost as individuals immersed in the liquid and unpredictable world of deregulation, flexibility, competition and common uncertainty; still, each of us experiences these fears in solitude, as a personal problem, a result of personal faults and a challenge put out to our cleverness and a personal ability to cope [...]” (Bauman, 2008, pp. 192–193) [*Own translation from Polish*]. The statements of more experienced students showed that first they try to cope with tasks and solve problems on their own; they look for answers in additional sources. Asking for help is the last resort. The students of first years are more willing to integrate and be part of a community. Interestingly, all the students admitted to mutual observation and evaluation of contribution and commitment of others.

[...]I'd definitely rather work by myself since group work requires commitment of all the people involved, and we can't expect the same commitment from everyone, it's impossible for everyone to have the same contribution. Using e-learning on my own, I can be sure that I'll do something that will serve my goals and I know I'll do it right without a fear of someone's shabby work, colloquially speaking. (*Wiktoria*)

In virtual teamwork, there might be considerable difficulties in understanding different perspectives of perceiving a certain problem. In order to maintain a proper level of cooperation and coordination, and prevent conflicts, one should organize regular virtual consultations. Taking personal characteristics into consideration is also advisable as some people tend to be more anxious than others. And anxiety hampers the learning process; therefore, being in touch with others can be more important in relation to soothing inner anxiety than providing learning materials.

We like being needed and useful. A person who helps, gains in confidence in that way. Sharing knowledge and experience is advantageous to both parties who derive additional emotional benefits from this sharing.

It is easily noticeable who really cares about others, who is willing to help, who is really kind and helpful. And later, when we meet in full-time classes, this attitude translates into relations within the group. (*Kasia*)

Members of an e-learning group motivate each other thanks to forum conversations, hints, and information on their progress. There will be people who appreciate an opportunity of learning something new, but there will be also those with a discouraging attitude. Motivating each other to get to know something, which is not one's area of expertise, requires support of others. With some experience and ability of seeing their own mistakes, learners motivate others to learn. It is an important contribution of group members. A computer cannot do it. Beata mentioned the same thing:

People tend to get motivated in a group, for instance, we're doing something together, a big task, we share the work, everyone has something to do. I like this kind of classes more since I am a people's person, I don't like being on my own. (*Beata*)

What is more, the interviews showed that the respondents gain a sense of solidarity and togetherness when being a part of the learners' community. Knowing that a particular task is a problem of the whole group, not a single person, is definitely reassuring to them.

I felt comfortable [about distance learning classes] because I knew the others had the same task to do and I could ask the leader or anyone in my group for help at any time [...]. (*Agata*)

Furthermore, the respondents offered certain hints connected with initiating and developing the sense of community in a group of learners. They emphasized freedom of choice in relation to group members. Interestingly, for some respondents, cooperation was connected with the necessity of subordination, subjection to others, fitting in, and it does not suit everyone. Zygmunt Bauman (2008) also mentions this fact: “a lack of community is a sign of a lack of security; entering into community means a quick loss of freedom” (p. 10) [*Translation from Polish*]. Carolyn Shaffer and Kristin Anundsen express a different opinion (1993, as cited by: Palloff, Pratt, 2007, p. 28), stating that being a part of community does not have to mean giving up on one’s autonomy and necessity of subordination in order to become a part of a group. Currently, commitment in a community means conscious and voluntary participation with an emphasis put on the needs of self-development and social bonds. Anthony Picciano (2002, p. 24, as cited by: Palloff, Pratt, 2007, p. 50) rightly states that maturity, wisdom, and unselfish commitment of the learners concerning the whole community are of great significance in creating a community.

5. Deliberation

A virtual learning environment- being much different from a university classroom- brings about essential changes in the teaching and learning methodology. It enables to create a community of learners in the virtual space, giving a new dimension to it. The interviews showed that the learners did not feel left alone or isolated, knowing that they were part of a larger group of learners who were in the same situation. Awareness of the fact that a particular problem was not their own problem but the group’s problem was reassuring. Most of the more experienced students emphasized their individuality and willingness to work independently. The respondents admitted to mutual observation, and evaluation of contribution and commitment of each member. Sharing their knowledge, skills, and experience they simultaneously derived additional emotional benefits from it. One of the respondents admitted that receiving unexpected assistance was a really nice surprise. They mutually strengthened their confidence. The respondents claimed that they motivated each other in the community. Simple information that a particular person had already finished and sent the task was a great motivation for others.

According to the respondents, a sign of community was a need for protecting others from making their own mistakes. Admittedly, it is a noble stance. Making mistakes is a natural process of learning. The teacher's support in this is advisable—this is a person who can inform learners of their mistakes regularly.

What is more, the respondents expressed their opinions concerning developing a sense of community in a group through organising webinars, online consultations, posting photos in one's profile, creating one's own portrait, designing mind mapping, a glossary, writing a diary, stories, poems, using compulsory integration tasks, connotation tasks, online design work, writing an essay together, creating Wiki, meeting online after classes, etc. Several respondents admitted that team work was connected with the necessity of subordination to other members, while they would rather work on their own, at their own pace and using their own ideas.

The development of the Internet community is a distinguishing feature when comparing this form of learning to simple correspondence courses sent via e-mail. It is important to aim at creating a community of learners in the virtual space who would try to reach certain goals according to certain norms and values. Creating positive relations and a learning environment in this situation is not considered to be much different from doing it in a traditional classroom. The principles of the course should be presented clearly. Namely, they should be published on the main page of a course in order for learners and teachers to be able to refer to them. For instance, the principles can include guidelines concerning professional communication online, activities of learners, dates of consultations online, credits and any obligations. On the other hand, teachers can have different requirements, which are not always consistent with the expectations of learners. These issues are worth discussing at the beginning, and one can ask students for their feedback concerning offered methods. This will enable to create a coherent community of learners where everyone can openly express their feelings and experiences, learning from each other. Learning in a virtual classroom must be perceived as a safe place for all participants. Everyone should be heard and respected.

In a virtual classroom, similarly to a traditional classroom, there are informal groups formed, in which learners are more willing to talk to each other; one can observe likes and animosities. Participants can share their problems, achievements and life events. Celebrating these rituals together is an important expression of the sense of community (as cited by: Palloff, Pratt, 2007, p. 58). In the process of distance learning, the student generates knowledge, cooperates, manages their own learning, and creates an educational Internet community (as cited by: Palloff, Pratt, 2007, pp. 17–18). This student's characteristics are honesty, flexibility, readiness to take responsibility for creating a community, willingness to cooper-

ate, and openness to share life, work, and learning experiences (ibidem, p. 19). The above-mentioned indications have something to do with wishful thinking. Students often encounter various personal and technical problems, etc., which hinders their commitment. It is important to be able to return to a course and continue education. The student must understand that the essence of learning in a virtual classroom is being in touch with all the participants and not only with the teacher. Coming to this understanding and readiness to take responsibility for creating a community are the foundations of this community (as cited by: Palloff, Pratt, 2003, p. 19). With regard to communication, an important issue is honesty towards others and oneself. Students are willing to learn through experience gained thanks to cooperation in connection to a certain task or project. Thanks to honesty, a sense of confidence and dependence between members of educational community can develop. Students with questions or problems concerning tasks can be encouraged to solve them within a group, showing mutual support. Furthermore, discussion and dialogue may contribute to a better understanding of the mentioned issues.

6. Recommendations Concerning Future Investigations

The research is an inspiration to taking up another interesting issue in the future; namely, determining correlations between learners' individual features and creating a community in a virtual classroom, as well as relations between the strategies of developing an educational virtual community and satisfaction of group members. Research studies within this scope can contribute to determining the influence of e-learning on an individual and society. Furthermore, together with the growing popularity of blended-learning, learners will experience both traditional and virtual classroom learning. Their personal experiences and educational achievements are worth investigating. This can prove extremely helpful for students and teachers, enabling them to take advantage and avoid mistakes.

The conclusion of the deliberations is a statement concerning a modern human being immersed in the environment of the modern technologies, who seeks another person and everything related to this person: closeness, feeling, dialogue, understanding, all these human things, person to person, creating a community in a different dimension of learning (Miąso, 2010, p. 204) – in the virtual dimension.

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