

BASIC CONSIDERATIONS ON THE BOUNDARIES OF LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENTS

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***Abstract:** The current pandemic has forced us to switch from traditional teaching environments to virtual ones in a question of moments. This paper discusses several concepts employed in English for Specific Reasons (ESP) from an ecological approach of learning languages. The main objective is to cast a reflective filter on basic concepts which have been differently declined within this period of online learning and teaching. Defining and redefining pivotal concepts in teaching practices has nevertheless influenced our approach and students' feedback and assessment. After more than a year of teaching in virtual learning environments, there is more need of clarifying the evolution of our practices, individual or/and collective, and establishing an adaptive framework.*

***Keywords:** learning communities, environment, ESP, language learning, virtual environments.*

INTRODUCTION

A strong learning community “sets the ambience for life-giving and uplifting experiences necessary to advance an individual and a whole society” (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999). In academic environments we are persuaded that autonomous learning communities could help students to develop useful skills both for their professional and personal life. However, the 2019 pandemic has oriented our joint practices, students', and learners', to a prioritized virtual community without too much reflection on the impact that it might have on our practices.

It is of utmost importance to define some core traits of digital technologies with such great an impact on learning practices. First, the ‘inhumane’ speed cannot compete with a human being even in its best shape. Second, virtual environments ‘catch’ us all in the net, we are all connected. Traditional learning communities take longer periods of time to create space for their members to know each other and collaborate whilst

virtual networks perform this process almost instantly. Third, democratisation and total immersion are pivotal concepts in virtuality. We are dealing with an absorbing environment which blurs boundaries and constantly revisits limits between different types of members. A fourth characteristic is given by the non-linear access to information as we are using tools such as hypertext and hyperlink and wonder in several directions at the same time. Information *per se* is found/acquired/ built from within various paths of accessibility. The virtual environment is no longer an alternative but has become a part of reality. Undoubtedly, the virtual environment has led to a democratic dissemination without any precedent doubled by a strong process of tribalisation. One common example is the way students are giving feedback to a casual piece of information. In a conventional classroom environment, either written or oral, the answers are simple, less content, mainly monosyllabic while on a WhatsApp communication group they tend to be parted in pros and cons or often judgmental.

Learning within this specific type of environment, and even more, learning communities gain power and efficiency. Researchers and practitioners have overloaded the literature with accounts, studies, specialized models, and theories about how to effectively design and assess learning communities. Higher retention rates, higher grade point averages, lower risk of academic withdrawal, increased cognitive skills and abilities, and improved ability to adjust to college are some of the advantages of being in a learning community mentioned by Lichtenstein (2005). Furthermore, Zhao and Kuh (2004) bring powerful insights concerning integration of academic and social experiences, noticeable gains in various skills, and overall satisfaction with the college experience.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Our analysis has taken place within the ecological framework of language learning with a special focus on the articulation between virtual and non-virtual environment in the context of a long period of online teaching. The 200 students who took part in our study were 1st and 2nd year students at the University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine “King Michael I of Romania” in Timisoara, Romania. They accepted to participate on a voluntary basis having an attendance of more than 80%. The analysed corpus gathered course observation and one-to-one feedback discussions.

BOUNDARIES IN LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Switching to online learning without any clear academic guidelines and procedures has led to a higher degree of blurred boundaries between students' ancient learning practices and the emergent ones. As West & Williams (2018) underline the most frustrating aspect of researching learning communities is the overwhelming acceptance of a term that is so unclearly defined. This characteristic of fuzziness of indecisive beginning or ending could also be a starting point in defining the community from its outskirts to centre. Even this topic of boundaries has been highly controversial between researchers (Glynn, 1981; Lenning and Ebbers, 1999; McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Royal and Rossi, 1996). The most recurrent method of defining community boundaries is in terms of learners' sense that they share access, relationship, vision, or function.

1. Access to community

Access might have been at one point the easiest way to define a community. Nevertheless, because of modern educational technologies, the meaning of being "present" or having access to one another in a community is unclear as some researchers emphasize that "present" in a community includes virtual rather than physical opportunities for access to other community members. Before the pandemic we made the distinction between being physically present in the classroom, but passive or with little interaction with peers or teachers, and actively engaged in learning activities. The online teaching period has shown that concepts like time and space are revisited and questioned to ensure more adaptive and flexible learning. During the first 4 weeks after the introduction of online activity, we have noticed an increase in course attendance by 20 % to 30 %. A transversal qualitative analysis helped us understand that this percentage refers to full-time working students who normally had poor attendance and the majority was on the verge of quitting the academic program.

Despite challenging discussions in our Language Department, we agreed to give priority access to courses for all the students, the benefits being a better understanding of our students' need, a higher cognitive progress caused mainly by constant participation, more peer encouragement, and a more efficient communication between learners outside the virtual class. Nevertheless, after 2 months, more and more students used to close their camera and interact only in written by chat, and rarely by verbal interventions. We accepted this new boundary as the previous results have been constant and attendance did not suffer any significant changes.

The negotiation among teachers about what it means to be accessible in a learning community, including whether these boundaries of access are virtual or physical, is still ongoing as there have also been short periods of time of traditional physical teaching. Our criteria remain: the degree of peer collaboration and learning autonomy, the extent of assuming learning responsibilities outside the course and the emergence of learning initiatives within the community and mainly stimulated by its own members.

2. Defining relationships

As we have previously stated being formally part of a community, attending courses in our case, does not mean you are engaged too, in connection with its members and actively sharing their practices. Often a learning community is defined by the types of connection between its members, how they connect emotionally and whether they feel they can trust, depend on, rely on, share knowledge with, get help from, and enjoy the benefits of quality relationships. (Kensler et al. 2009) From this perspective, emotions and their impact are determining the shaping of a learning community. These emotional ties were easier to develop in a conventional classroom frequently mediated by the intervention of the teacher. However, switching to online has had a profound impact on the emergence of this emotional network. First, our corpus analysis put forward an important gap between 2nd year students who have already been part of a learning community and the 1st year students who started directly in a virtual community. The latter perceived a lack of emotional trust or connection within their group of peers and, therefore, they mainly related to the teachers as the highest authority and emotionally available. Members of a community need to feel that they belong to the community, which includes feeling like one is similar enough or somehow shares a connection to the others.

On one hand, the online communication has been enforced by various digital tools such as the official digital platform of the university, communication devices (personalised WhatsApp groups), Google classroom for content sharing, etc. On the other hand, students engaged more during online classes, sometimes repeating the knowledge already shared on virtual networks. The lack of emotional connection, socially-constructed meaning and belonging become more important than the community's cognitive aspect. As practitioners we had to make temporal choices, namely, to include a discussion slot at the beginning of each course during which students safely engaged and contributed to the rising of their community. A preliminary conclusion leaves us aware of the incompleteness of the community's emotional layer as the process has been fragile and easily fragmented by various factors. In addition, the absence of other collective activities, such as sport, going out at weekends

or sharing cultural passions, has even more disrupted the natural emotional web.

3. Defining vision

Although communities defined by relationships and access are more frequent, those defined by a common vision are also possible. Rather than focusing on belonging to a community, people can define a community by thinking they are a community. In other words, members share the same vision for what the community is about, share its goals and believe they are progressing as a community towards the same end. This type of community is particularly difficult in the current Romanian education environment as the model puts a lot of weight on individual performance, and not on the group progression. Therefore, we do face a follow-up of this model in the academic environment with few changes of shaping it differently or towards other goals.

The results of our analysis evolve around the vision shared by students at a specific time in their academic journey. In other words, although we cannot talk about a conceptualized vision, there are some aspects our learners share such as:

- common purposes related to educational tasks;
- a shared perspective on the outcome of their academic performance;
- information on failure and possibilities of reducing it;
- shared knowledge on the potentiality of the academic experience.

4. Communities and the role of function

Previous parts have underlined the easiness or difficulty of accessing communities, the flexible or rigid network of relationships and the shared vision that define learning communities. Another way of talking about boundaries and the degree to which they may stretch is by what the members do. In our case, the members are students in an academic environment, they attend courses and practical activities, and they are supposed to create a world revolving around the activity of studying with its different aspects: time, frequency, modality (individual, tutoring, peer learning, etc.), goals (long term or short-term), feed-back (from the teacher, peers, personal assessment).

Learning communities are based on the members' activity and engagement, they are functional, and their work is organised to achieve a particular goal. Moreover, they hold together as long as the work is held in common. When the project is completed, these communities often

disappear unless ties related to relationships, conceptions, or physical or virtual presence (access) continue to bind the members together. Our observations are mostly around the language courses students attend. More than two thirds of our students share the common goal of passing the final exam. It is around this common goal that the learning community is built. Unfortunately, as there is not a coherent transdisciplinary approach and the language department is not perceived as part of students' professionalization, there are few chances that these communities continue to exist once the goal is achieved.

Relying on functional boundaries to define a learning community has proven to be particularly useful with online communities. Frequently, a distributed and asynchronously meeting learning group can still work on the same project and perhaps feel a shared purpose along with a shared functional assignment, sometimes despite not sharing much online social presence or interpersonal attachment. Online teaching created more space for content exchange and developing new learning skills with more student assignments under the format of projects or teamwork activities.

CONCLUSIONS

Academic learning communities are a landmark in students' evolution and professional development as they are important to student learning and satisfaction, attitude, and expectations. By clarifying our understanding and expectations about what we hope students will be able to do, learn, and become in a learning community, we can more precisely identify what our ideal learning community would be like and distinguish this ideal from the less effective/efficient communities existing in everyday life and learning. Our aim is that these communities have a long life, that they move towards autonomy, sustainability, and a high degree of maturity so that they could give birth to other communities.

This pandemic has, not surprisingly, opened new paths in the research of these boundaries that define our learning communities. By understanding more precisely what we mean when we describe a group of learners as a learning community, we can better orient our research on the outcomes of learning communities by accounting for how we erected boundaries and defined the subjects. Sharing a common goal, doing projects together or simply interacting during a language class provide with us useful content to recalibrate the community and offer help to its members. Furthermore, practitioners can also develop better guidelines for cultivating learning communities by clearly communicating more effectively what types of learning communities we are trying to develop.

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