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**Shifting the focus from content to pedagogy in the design of online educational communities**

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## Shifting the focus from content to pedagogy in the design of online educational communities

### Μετατοπίζοντας την εστίαση από το περιεχόμενο στην παιδαγωγική κατά το σχεδιασμό των ανοιχτών κοινοτήτων μάθησης

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#### Abstract

It is clear that at least up to now, face-to-face communication still maintains its core role in getting people together. However, educational technology has proven its full potential by including a number of interspersed individuals and isolated teams in a new dynamic space. It can also offer them powerful tools to cooperate and the choice of time and space to work in. Introducing online interaction in the design of an educational environment involves adopting a different pedagogy from a face-to-face tutorial. Not only does it mean knowledge transfer; it encourages exchange of ideas and a number of useful connections between the material and the participants. These possibilities by themselves are the token for the need of some new pedagogy for online educational communities. In the following paper, an effort has been made to delineate this new philosophy by offering some points concerning the design and the learning outcomes educators are due to expect.

#### Περίληψη

Είναι σαφές ότι τουλάχιστον μέχρι τώρα, η δια ζώσης επικοινωνία εξακολουθεί να διατηρεί τον κύριο ρόλο της δηλαδή να κρατά τους ανθρώπους κοντά. Από την άλλη πλευρά, η εκπαιδευτική τεχνολογία έχει επιδείξει την δυναμική της με το να συμπεριλαμβάνει ένα σημαντικό αριθμό διασκορπισμένων ατόμων και απομονωμένων ομάδων σε ένα νέο δυναμικό χώρο. Μπορεί επίσης να τους προσφέρει ισχυρά εργαλεία για να συνεργαστούν καθώς επίσης και την επιλογή του χρόνου και του χώρου για το σκοπό αυτό. Η εισαγωγή της 'ανοιχτής' αλληλεπίδρασης στο σχεδιασμό ενός εκπαιδευτικού περιβάλλοντος συνεπάγεται την αποδοχή μιας διαφορετικής παιδαγωγικής. Αυτό δεν σημαίνει βέβαια την απλή μεταφορά γνώσεων. Σημαίνει ενθάρρυνση στην ανταλλαγή ιδεών και μια σειρά χρήσιμων διασυνδέσεων ανάμεσα στο υλικό και τους συμμετέχοντες. Αυτές οι δυνατότητες από μόνες τους αποτελούν την απόδειξη για την ανάγκη μιας νέας μορφής παιδαγωγικής στις ανοιχτές εκπαιδευτικές κοινότητες. Στο ακόλουθο κείμενο γίνεται κάποια προσπάθεια σκιαγράφησης αυτής της νέας φιλοσοφίας, κάποιων σημείων για το σχεδιασμό καθώς και τα μαθησιακά αποτελέσματα που οι εκπαιδευτικοί μπορούν να αναμένουν.

**Key-words:** *design, online educational communities, educational material*

### **Introduction - online communities**

“It is not yet clear to what extent electronically supported higher education can provide the necessary opportunities & quality in learning, access, & equity, but indications are that it is a powerful instrument” (Brown & Druguid, 1996; Davis & Botkin, 1994 in Lazenby, 1999, p.294)

Communities come before technology. This also refers to online communities which constitute more than just a conference or a listserv. This is the reason why technology can neither build or maintain a group. The important theme therefore is not the technical, but the pedagogical part, that is, how to create a sustainable online community.

Online communities can communicate either with asynchronous or synchronous tools. Asynchronous may involve email, newsgroups, Blackboard/WebCT. They have an advantage for the participants as they offer them the time to think before they send an answer. Synchronous tools on the contrary, have a high fear factor so designers should be very cautious. Synchronic media involve chat, voice mail, visualization tools, and videoconferencing.

### **Advantages of online educational communities**

An online community is defined as a unified body of individuals who share the same common interests. They are different because they break down the barriers of distance and time and make it easier for like-minded people to get together giving them the option to be anonymous. The advantages for the members are many. Among others are the challenges to work with the network and marketability. Gaining confidence helps personal development and reputation acquisition. Concerning the educational sector, they can have access to expertise. Members can cooperate with colleagues and do some meaningful work. The institution also gains from the network. Knowledge sharing leads to problem solving and is time saving. New strategies and capabilities are developed. Innovation and keeping abreast are easy to achieve. Resources can be reused and talents emerged.

Examining the practical side, Warschauer (1997) defines five features that distinguish CMC (computer mediated communication) from other communication media: (a) text-based and computer-mediated interaction, (b) many-to-many communication, (c) time-and-place independence (d) long distance exchanges and (e) hypermedia links. These categories clearly show that interconnections between the individuals, tools and material are part of online communities.

The need to take into account this particularity of online educational communities, ie the vagueness of the limits between the materials, the tools, time and space as well as the participants, is urgent and has to be faced during the course design phase. There are two forms of online teaching: a) when students participate in instructor-guided group learning as part of a Community of Practice and b) when the students select the material they need by themselves. A viable solution here would be to guide the students wholly or in part at the beginning of their online learning experience and gradually require that they get more autonomous as they get more skilled and knowledgeable.

Information can be far from objective: it can be malleable. The above proposition was made on the grounds that undistilled information can be subjective, ie if not dangerous, at least useless for education. And this is especially true for novices who are unable for some time to weed the unnecessary data from what is meaningful for

their studies. This realization should sensitize designers to the impact of the human interference.

In support of this proposition, Gilster (2002) argues that there is a difference between fact and opinion and to be able to distinguish between the two, one needs specific skills like information evaluation. This skill is mainly practised in higher education. 'Knowledge assembly is the ability to collect and evaluate both fact and opinion, ideally without bias. It draws evidence from multiple sources, not just the World Wide Web; it mixes and distinguishes between hard journalism, editorial opinion, and personal viewpoints. [It] accepts the assumption that the Internet will become one of the major players in news delivery ... but it also recognizes the continuing power of the traditional media.'

Lytard (1984) in the same spirit, saw that knowledge is not free from prejudice: 'Commercialisation of knowledge and emerging new forms of media circulation – including, par excellence, the Internet – raise new ethico-legal issues including intellectual property rights, the state's role in promoting and providing learning, issues of decency, offence and censorship and issues concerning the relationship between the state and information-rich multinationals.'

Starting from the above realizations, it is obvious that the technological tools which course designers as well as tutors possess, are both powerful and dangerous. Any vast amount of educational material will be crammed. And if students are not guided, effective learning cannot exist and biased conclusions will be reached.

Gilster (2002) puts it in the optimistic way: '[n]etworked information possesses unique advantages. It is searchable, so that a given issue can be dissected with a scalpel's precision, laid open to reveal its inner workings. It can be customized to reflect our particular needs. Moreover, its hypertextual nature connects with other information sources, allowing us to listen to opposing points of view, and make informed decisions about their validity.'

### **The implications for the course content so far as knowledge is concerned**

According to Lyotard (1984), 'established knowledge', probably related to tertiary and professional material, 'may increasingly be left to new technologies'. Saying this, he not only stressed the language to be taught (e.g. informatics, telematics), but also the abilities to handle the information source ie, how the question should be addressed and framed in order to get the required information most efficiently.

Another issue he puts forward for professionally oriented students is whether learning some specific information is useful for their needs. Seen under this light, it is more important to find the efficiency of a learning block than assessing its validity.

The internet is a very inclusive medium open to many kinds of information. Unfortunately however, the data it presents, are not controlled or checked for inconsistencies which makes sorting out valuable information a hard task. It seems that it is the amount and quality of available online information which presents the most difficult situation for any course designer.

Nonetheless, the big attraction still remains, that is, a great deal of information on the Internet is both visual as well as written which fact can accommodate more learning styles than the printed material.

### **Design – Course content assimilation depends heavily on human interaction**

As an initial stage, the designer should develop three areas: a)the shared space: the definition of the area and the issues to be developed, b)the whole community including both the relationships among members and the positive/negative climate

that is created and c) the body of knowledge, methods and tools.

### **Interaction**

In education, interaction is a key feature: Garrison & Anderson (2004), support that “Interaction (in many formats) has been a defining feature of formal education. John Dewey’s ‘transactional’ concept of an activity-based education describes an educational experience as a ‘transaction taking place between an individual & what, at the time, constitutes his environment... (1938:43).’” In online conferences, if not the most powerful constituent, interaction seems to be the gist. It can take many forms including, (Garrison & Anderson, 2004): teacher-student, student-student, student-content, teacher-content, teacher-teacher, content-content (the last can be closely-related to the idea of the semantic web).

The designers therefore, should address all of its forms. But, more specifically, teacher-content, teacher-teacher & content-content are not so immediate in the students’ learning experience. However, neither is student-student interaction which is often stressed possibly because it is considered the most underused resource in distance education. In other words, peer learning.

Pettit (1998) showed that technology can activate interaction: “In CMC, participants are engaged in a social exchange.” However, this kind of social exchange needs careful consideration. For example, Davie (1989) notices that “If we want to use humour in a computer conference, it is important that we provide the necessary cues.”

### **Structure**

Structures can be designed according to the learning needs: student level & special circumstances (multicultural environment, age, previous knowledge on the subject etc). The point here is that different conditions in an online environment can have better impact on learning. One example could be about initial impressions (that is, through experiential learning) which can be motivating if they are positive: Davie (1989) proposes: “Typical techniques might involve introductions to other students as well as to the instructor”

### **Collaboration**

Customisation & collaborative work can flourish in connected environments. An example would be, “we'd like you to work together in your small group on the following quiz” (Kaye 2004).

### **Information**

There is also the matter of suitable & properly applied material. Epistemology can help by posing questions. Goldman (1995) wonders: “...it may often be preferable to let students learn truths on their own rather than have teachers (or textbooks) present those truths... who is to decide what is true and therefore what should be taught?... How should schools and teachers proceed when there are divergent opinions in the local or professional community?”

### **Limitations**

Being objective though, many questions remain unanswered. There is an article of Hara & Kling (2000) on technical problems & difficulties in communication. Among these one could discern negative experiences, well-designed but unsuccessful platforms or copied material (from face-to-face environments). “In many instances, teachers...are using the online facilities to provide learners with access to existing

course materials repackaged for Web delivery. The consequence...is the creation of often passive & disengaging environments for learning.” (Ron (1999)) What the students value more is asynchronous discussions. These communities however, do not work on their own. Attention should be paid in developing a sense of community in the group of participants. Students need to be oriented to the online classroom and taught how to learn online.

### **Possible solutions**

Fortunately, there can be some solutions for some of the above posed issues. For instance, it can be valuable to have difficult experiences so long as they are not permanent or repeated. Also, if the students’ output stays low even though there is good design, one can interfere in the student- student or student-content interaction. Lessons from entertainment multimedia are not always negative; on the contrary, they can provide with imaginative propositions. Talking about technical problems concerning computers and modems can create unexpected problems: this could be overcome by well-designed continuous support. Other issues could be faced by experienced tutors. A last note comes from Minshull (2004) where simple fear of e-learning applications might constitute the main hindrance: “there is no strong confidence in what it is done:...”

### **Some propositions**

Researchers have at times stressed principles of good practice mainly for undergraduate studies possibly because such courses are more numerous. A majority among them have stressed the human factor and consequently interaction. Therefore, contact between students and faculty as well as reciprocity and cooperation between students are expected to be encouraged. Other writers believe in diversity and different learning styles, so they propose multimedia presentations and educational material and urge tutors to set high expectations from their students to make them more productive. Then, there are those who trust various teaching techniques such as tasks which activate critical, imaginative etc thought or require time limits and prioritize the omnipotent tutor.

To make participants contented and knowledgeable, there follow some propositions for educational groups. First of all, it is important to intimate the purpose and the focus of the study to the participants. Then the articulation and maintenance of roles and respect of subgroups will facilitate organization and cooperation. Recognizing the characteristics and talents of the individuals will not only give them meaningful ‘virtual’ profiles but also urge them to surpass this image. On the part of the domain, virtual spaces should be engaging and flexible, able to accommodate the novice and the veteran alike. And, emanating from this, a strong leadership model and clear-cut etiquette could limit aggressive member contradictions. To this aim, introducing formality like first time introductions, setting and enforcing rules and turn-taking could present members with an example of appropriate and acceptable behaviour.

Garrison & Anderson (2004) made a significant point regarding the ultimate aim of education: ‘The goal is to give students the abilities and strategies required to manage this overwhelming breadth and depth of information. In working towards this goal, educators began to realize that the only long-term solution was to construct an educational environment in which students would not only learn, but where they would learn to learn. In this regard, the focus of education is shifting to the development of critical thinking and self-directed learning abilities that can serve the individual over a lifetime.’

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