Finding the Right Balance: A Reply to Jones’ Research on Building Communities of Practice Using a Wiki

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Are we expecting too much from a wiki? Reflecting on her lived experience of using a wiki in a graduate course, Jones shared a number of insights with regard to the capacity of using such technology in support of learning in a community of practice context. As she examined her experience and benefits, Jones identified tensions that impacted the social and communal aspects of what was shared in the wiki; she also explored the level of rigour that influenced the reliability of the content. Jones argued that wikis have potential in supporting the development of a community of practice only if specific social elements are addressed. As we reflect on our perceptions and expectations of developing and fostering learning through an online community approach, we need to carefully consider the balance between the affordance of the technology and the preparedness of students in terms of collaborative learning in community to foster knowledge building. “Use of the technology does not spontaneously cause communities to occur; communities of learners must be planned” (Moller, 1993, p. 120).

The contemporary online learning environment provides an array of opportunities for collaborative learning and learning within communities of practice with the affordances of asynchronous and synchronous communication technologies. Collaboration needs to be seen as a way of learning that fosters knowledge building within these technology-enabled learning environments. As noted by Picciano, Seaman, and Allen (2010), “adding technology without changing the pedagogy does not necessarily result in any major change to teaching and learning” (p. 28). Utilizing the capacity of a collaborative peer editing tool such as a wiki requires students to develop an understanding of what the technology can do in relation to the learning task. Scaffolding may be required to be able to maximize the capacity of the wiki learning experience. Such scaffolding helps students to transition from providing individual contributions to being active contributors in sharing and critiquing—this directly impacts the richness of knowledge building through community.
From Jones’ description of her experience, it seemed there was a perception that the wiki itself accommodated for various actions such as sharing of resources, building of knowledge, and fostering a social dynamic among peers. Socially and pedagogically speaking, can this technology be all things to all people? The establishment of a social presence and developing a sense of community takes time and requires the development of trust among users. Would student learning be better served if we coupled the wiki with another technology suited for fostering social relationships? For example, how could the use of synchronous chat help students to develop a greater sense of connection? By fostering the social interactions in the synchronous environment, it may help to influence the depth and breadth of the interactions that may not exist through purely asynchronous interactions within a wiki. A combination of purposefully selected synchronous and asynchronous technologies may create a virtual space where students are able to engage in conversations that will help them advance and deepen their work around knowledge building.

A critical factor that influences the development of learning within a community is readiness. How ready are students to work collaboratively in a public forum with the goal of knowledge building? Strategies and supports need to be in place to enhance the preparedness of students to actively engage in using a wiki environment for knowledge building. Students should also develop skills around how to be discerning consumers of information when preparing to work within a wiki context. Content can be easily shared within a wiki; are the users able to critically assess the quality or rigour of what is being shared? Supporting the development of such skills need to be part of the learning experience.

Further, a key element of readiness involves supporting the shift from an individual to a collaborative learning experience mediated by the technology. This transition requires fostering of a disposition towards socially constructed learning, learning through community, and engaging in knowledge building. For instance, Jones shared an example of how her edited contributions had a tendency to inhibit peer interaction in relation to knowledge building. This critical incident of learning changed how she approached working in this online environment. As we consider the potential of using wikis in our courses, how can we better prepare students to engage in collaborative and communal learning processes that foster knowledge building?

Jones’ article is a reminder of the delicate balance regarding the relationship between technology and the design of learning. As stated by Dias and Atkinson (2001), “effective integration of technology has everything to do with teaching pedagogy and very little do with technology itself. We should not be impressed with the mere ‘use of technology’ unless that use is supported by a carefully crafted pedagogy” (p. 10). The wiki provides a platform with the capacity to support social constructivist learning. As students engage in learning using the wiki, they need to be oriented and supported as they develop their confidence and competence in working as a community to meet the goal of knowledge building.
REFERENCES
