



Social Learning Sites – A Key Enabler for Extending Learning Outside of the Classroom

For the past two decades a transformation has been occurring in teaching and learning circles. There has been a transition from the traditional lecture centered model of instruction to one that emphasizes student discussions and active engagement with curriculum content. The term “Collaborative Learning” has been coined to describe strategies that support the latter model. The rapid advance of information technology and the growing popularity of social networking sites have provided additional opportunities to support Collaborative Learning activities in academia.

Collaborative Learning

Collaborative Learning is an umbrella term that is used to describe a number of techniques whose goals are to improve student learning. Collaborative Learning is built on the beliefs that learning is an active process involving knowledge use and construction, and that learning is fundamentally a social process. In fact, Collaborative Learning can be defined as “the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other’s learning”. Small groups are used to promote improved student engagement with the curricular material and improved cognitive activity.

The teaming strategy promotes positive interdependence with its concomitant benefits of supportive relationships, higher psychological well being, and improved performance for the student. Teaming is also known to improve student engagement in the academic and social life of the institution.

Learning Communities

In light of the benefits associated with increased student engagement, many universities are moving to adopt learning communities. There are varied strategies for implementing learning communities including Linked Courses, Freshman Interest Groups, Clustered Courses, or Coordinated Studies. The unifying theme among these approaches is that they involve co-registering students for courses and then having them work together in smaller study groups. The results of multiple studies have indicated that the shared learning environments offers a number of distinct advantages when compared to the traditional teacher centered approaches.

These advantages include students spending more time engaged with faculty and other students and also committing more of their free time to academic activities. In addition, students in learning communities persist at a higher level than other students. Students in learning communities also

become more involved in extracurricular activities. Lastly, students have described their learning in these communities as “better”.

To further realize benefits of the learning communities, i.e. increased social and academic integration and the increased immersion in academic pursuits, universities have acted to establish living-learning communities. Living learning communities move the learning environment to where students live by having student groups, or cohorts, share dormitory space. This approach is currently being implemented at Cornell University, for example.

Virtual Learning Communities

Web 2.0, which is a term to describe trends promoting creativity, collaboration, and web services, has presented new opportunities to facilitate collaborative learning and the formation of learning communities. The ability of this new paradigm to encourage personal connections is best exemplified by social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook.

SNS have been defined as websites that “allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system”. These SNS activities are commonly supported by tools such as blogs, forums, and digital media sharing.

The effectiveness of SNS in connecting people can be substantiated by their user bases. Facebook is among the most popular SNS having a subscribed user base of 100+ million members. In addition, Facebook has gained significant traction among college aged individuals. A recent study at Michigan State University found that over 94% of the students there were Facebook users.

Despite their prevalence, however, SNS in and of themselves do not provide the optimal platform to facilitate increased learning. Students use them primarily for non-academic purposes, and furthermore, SNS primarily function to facilitate communication between friends, not between strangers. The goal of using these sites to promote traditional networking has largely gone unmet among the established SNS such as MySpace, Facebook, etc. It has been suggested this is the result of site design. Traditional SNS are similar to the “walled garden” models of the original ISPs, such as AOL and CompuServe. Users are attracted to the functionality offered by the site but not by shared interest, and therefore do not use the site primarily to connect to new people. Newer sites are being generated which use social networking tools to join individuals by interest. With respect to learning communities, and collaborative learning in particular, the user interest model holds much more promise.

Social Learning Sites (SLS)

To fully realize the benefits of Web 2.0 in academia requires the development and expansion of a new class of sites, the Social Learning Sites (SLS). SLS provide the ability to expand one’s network by rapidly creating contacts to people, as with traditional SNS. In addition, SLS follow best practices for encouraging improved student learning outcomes and persistence to graduation.

Decades of research on undergraduate learning has distilled several principles which improve student learning. As cited above, many of these are currently leveraged by learning communities and account for their success on university campuses. Key principles include:

1. Encouraging interaction between faculty and students;
2. Developing cooperation among students;
3. Encouraging active learning;
4. Emphasizing time on task;
5. And facilitating student integration on campus.

Facilitating Collaborative Learning

SLS can be a key enabler of student achievement. Much like living-learning centers, which extend the learning environment into where students physically live, SLS are also able to extend the learning environment into where students live virtually (e.g. Facebook).

When Dr. Wade Boykin, Professor of Developmental Psychology at Howard University, was initiating a new collaborative learning project that targeted students in STEM disciplines, he looked for an SLS to support the program. Dr. Boykin selected ConnectYard because of its ability to easily facilitate the formation of study groups and sharing of information through popular social media.

ConnectYard addresses key features of physical learning communities to support “better learning”. In particular, ConnectYard:

1. Leverages Facebook Connect. This allows messages to be passed to Facebook through ConnectYard without having to “friend” individuals. Participants can then keep important personal details hidden from study partners, students, or faculty. This privacy helps to facilitate student-student and student-faculty communication through preferred communication channels – Facebook;
2. Contains a suite of tools including Walls, Discussion Boards, Chat, Whiteboards, and Teleconferencing which support extensive online collaboration. The synchronous (chat, teleconferencing) and asynchronous (walls, discussions, etc.) discussion modes encourage:
 - a. cooperation and collaboration remotely via the tools;
 - b. active learning – by allowing students to share documents and discussions;
3. Provides extensive notifications. Using the ConnectYard platform students are able to receive notifications for important events via email, Facebook, and text messaging. The bridging of the academic and social worlds allows students to spend additional time on task;
4. Incorporates a unique matching engine that “pushes” students study partners, content, and events that are relevant to their interests, i.e. , rank, class, and major, as well as social and learning interactions on the site. Notification of relevant university-wide events, student organization events, career opportunities, etc. facilitates the integration of students into the campus. This has been shown to be a key component of student persistence.

Conclusion

In order to improve student learning, colleges and universities are increasingly relying on collaborative learning strategies featuring small study groups. These strategies have been shown to improve student academic performance and increase student's integration into campus life. Web 2.0 has provided a host of tools that can support these strategies. The ability to leverage chat, walls, and boards, while simultaneously facilitating connections with study partners, are in consonance with collaborative learning strategies. SLS, like ConnectYard, extend the learning environment into where students live and socialize and better connect them with the academic resources they need to excel in their classes. Their effectiveness in facilitating virtual living learning communities should assist in the continued adoption of collaborative learning strategies at additional colleges and universities.