

DE Community

Questions:

1. What current and future ICT learning and management skills and knowledge are required by staff and students within a distance education community?
2. What forms do distance education communities take, and what are their key characteristics and differences?
3. What benefits can engagement with broader community groups bring to educational institutions, and to students?
4. How can distance education providers work more closely with surrounding communities?
5. How are technological trends changing the nature of distance education communities?
6. Is there a relationship between physical and virtual/online environments?
7. How can communities help keep people 'connected', and how can they help reduce student attrition rates?
8. How does participation in an online distance educational community differ to that of a physical educational community?
9. What are some of the key concerns, or inefficiencies, amongst staff engaged in distance education programs?
10. How can the transition to, or across, online educational communities be made easier?

The Distance Education Community theme considers the need to provide a sense of inclusion and community for distance education students within the Australian tertiary education sector, and the need for distance education courses to engage with broader social and cultural community groups around the world. A central online agency would enable professionals to access, understand, and implement world's best practises in developing new, and supporting existing, communities for distance education courses, units, and programs. The focus on this theme could seek to simplify the ICT learning and management requirements of both staff and students, whilst also improving and streamlining the delivery of distance education programs.

Of the three key themes explored by DEHub, Distance Education Community has the broadest scope, is relevant to the largest number of people associated with distance education, and is fast being recognised as of central importance for the continued success of distance education programs. Across the Australian tertiary education sector, distance education communities take on a wide range of official and unofficial shapes and forms: online discussion post forums, online chat forums, e-mail groups, Facebook groups, Second Life groups, MySpace groups, and many more. At other times distance education programs relate to a broader, less structured understanding of community. For example, institutional stakeholders may be monitoring the progress of a new and innovative program, or there may be local non-institutional assistance and involvement in the delivery and/or receipt of program material. There are also the more distant residential-community relationships with distance education providers. For example, the University of New England's symbiotic relationship with

the city of Armidale and the New England region, or Charles Sturt University's research-based relationship with the viticulture and equine community of Australia.

'Community of learners'

With regards to staff-student communities centred on tertiary education programs, a central online agency could make available resources to assist in the design, construction, and management of online and interactive 'classrooms', 'tutorials', and discussion groups. This could facilitate the access, understanding, and implementation of best practices to enable patrons to create and support their own virtual communities within which staff and students to engage each other as a 'community of learners' (UNESCO 2000, Learning Development Institute 2001, 2005 [Moore, p. 640]).

As technologies evolve, so too do technological trends. As these trends change, so too must distance education systems change to facilitate the shifting needs, desires, and learning styles of students. Historically, the increased availability of the home PC enabled a greater number of electronically typed papers; the increased availability of the internet enabled increased access to online knowledge systems for use in these papers; and the increased availability of laptops made both electronically typed papers and the accessibility of online knowledge systems a 'portable' activity. Furthermore, as these technologies and trends change, so too do the cultures that support them. Wireless hot spots in café's and parks allow students to engage in active learning in a range of physical environments, whilst the proliferation of software has supported an almost equally diverse range of 'online' or 'virtual' environments (such as Facebook, MySpace, and Second Life).

To remain connected to the 'community of learners' students often need to feel engaged and involved with others. Wenger (1998 [Moore p. 573]) argued that learning is a form of social participation; in a distance education environment educators must ensure that they provide a space where healthy levels of 'social participation' can be encouraged and maintained. Woudstra and Adria added that 'individuals engage in and contribute to the practices of their communities' [Moore p. 573]. In order to 'engage in and contribute', individuals must first feel they are a valued member of a valued community, and furthermore, that their contributions will be valued. Geographical distances should not be allowed to disrupt intellectual and social engagement. Thus, in the absence of the traditional 'physical' learning community environment (ie: the classroom), educators must be able to provide an appropriate 'virtual' learning community environment. Again, as technological trends change, these virtual environments must also change. To remain fixed on one idea for too long is to remain fixed on the past, and outside the cultural and intellectual interest of the increasingly technologically savvy student body of today.

Providing a 'space' for a community to develop is not enough in itself. A lecturer would not simply place a group of students in a classroom and expect them to begin to drill down to the core issues of the subject (they are more likely to discuss the weekends social outings). Ryan and Fitzgerald (Handbook of Research on Social Software and Developing Community, p. 171) noted that 'we have not built into our programmes even the simplest of ways to engender a learning group ethos'. The open and visible nature of online learning communities makes the distraction of social discussions less likely, but some basic direction is still required. A million students on a million typewriters left in a room for an infinite time *may* produce the collected works of William Shakespeare, but it will not be done in a single day, or even a single teaching semester. To assist in guiding the process (be it producing the works of

Shakespeare, or discussing the set weekly readings), educators need to engage with this community and provide direction.

Educators also need to personally connect with these learning communities to continue to make education *accessible* to the changing student body. Accessible not only in terms of being able to find and *physically* ‘access’ the material, but also, and importantly, of being able and willing to engage and *intellectually* ‘access’ the material and the modes of delivery (for ‘intellectual access’ see Doiron and Davies, 1998, pp. 14, 44). It is one thing to set up the facilities for an online learning community environment; it is another thing to ensure that students feel valued and are intellectually engaging within this community.

A central agency could also support these communities by facilitating the smooth transition to, or across, virtual educational environments. By focusing on the priorities of ‘ease-of-access’, ‘ease-of-understanding’, and ‘ease-of-implementation’, this agency could enable both staff and students to quickly engage and interact in these new environments with a minimum of fuss. Consideration should be given to the range of educational needs in the Australian tertiary sector, and provision should be made for a corresponding range of educational support systems and pedagogical approaches. Of primary importance is assisting tertiary education providers in the management of these communities.

Community Engagement

The Distance Education Community theme also considers broader engagement between tertiary education institutions and other non-university communities. The distance education experience can be enhanced, and the strengths of the host educational institution improved through innovative engagement (both direct and indirect) with broader community associations. The US-based Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching classified US tertiary institutions based on their type and level of community engagement. Amy Driscoll noted in a paper on the resulting community engagement classifications that:

One of the major strengths of the institutions that were classified as engaged with their communities was a compelling alignment of mission, marketing, leadership, traditions, recognitions, budgetary support, infrastructure, faculty development, and strategic plans – the foundational indicators of community engagement (Driscoll, p.39).

With regards to academic programs, courses, and units, the benefits of community engagement to students and staff include the enhancement of learning outcomes ‘through curricula that are relevant to community issues and priorities’, the ‘development of increased opportunities for student experiential learning and internships’, and improved funding opportunities for scholarships, fellowships, and grants as research partnerships develop (AUCEA Position Paper, p. 3). Driscoll also argues that the exact nature of community engagement can take a wide range of forms: ‘cooperative education and extension coursework, learning centers, institutional resource-sharing (libraries, technology, and cultural offerings), student volunteerism, and professional-development centers’ (Driscoll, p. 41). On a similar note, Buys and Bursnell also listed some of the benefits of successful university-community partnerships, including new insights and learning, better informed community practice, career enhancement for individuals involved with the partnership, improvement in the quality of teaching and learning, increased

opportunity for student employment, additional funding and access to information, more frequent and higher-quality publications, and more rapid speed of internationalisation (Buys and Bursnell, p. 74).

At the most basic teaching level, in the classroom, lecture theatre, or online discussion thread, the benefits of such engagement include the variation of the weekly teaching routine and interaction between students and members of the related community. Such variation and interaction introduces new teaching staff, new knowledge backgrounds, new perspectives, and new approaches to teaching (Buys and Bursnell, pp. 77-78). Community figures often present 'real-world' experiences, insight, and perhaps even a broader level of 'expertise' than can be offered by a single lecturer alone. Chickering argues that:

Pedagogical practices need to call for behaviors that are consistent with our desired outcomes and that generate learning that lasts: collaborative and problem-based learning, case studies, learning teams and research teams, socially responsible learning contracts, criterion-referenced evaluation. These pedagogical practices need to incorporate concrete experiences and reflection, applying and testing academic concepts, principles, and theories in real-life situations such as service learning (Chickering, p. 93).

A range of concrete experiences and reflection, application and testing of academic concepts, principles, and theories in real life situations can be conveyed to students through academic engagement with broader non-university communities. These partnerships enhance learning and teaching and present students with 'cutting edge' research by, as Buys and Bursnell argue, 'embedding it in the real world' (Buys and Bursnell, p. 80).

A central agency could also assist in fostering closer collaboration and engagement between tertiary institutions and external communities by providing a central resource repository on best practices in university engagement with communities. This could consider the different levels within institutions at which community engagement occurs, the different reasons why community engagement occurs, and the different types of collaboration and cooperation required. As with the other DEHub themes, the priorities of 'ease-of-access', 'ease-of-understanding', and 'ease-of-implementation' could also apply to the material available on community engagement to enable both tertiary institutions and community partners to recognise and access the full mutual benefits of closer cooperation.

DEHub Open Learning

DEHub's 'Distance Education Community' theme could also explore Open Learning within Australia in an effort to review and improve teaching practices, technological innovations, and student approaches within Open Learning environments.

Open Learning styles demand the development of new skill sets amongst students. Traditional views of learning within a lecture, tutorial, or seminar environment have been rapidly transformed with the advent and widespread proliferation internet-hosted communities and multimedia tools. The potential now exists for a class of students to sit within the comfort of their respective lounge room, kitchen, bedroom, bathroom, back yard, local coffee house, or local beach to 'conference meet' with a tutor or lecturer and a dozen or so other students online. Students can easily complete an entire course/degree without having to ever see another human being.

From an educational standpoint, the advantages of Open Learning have long been expounded: a more diverse and larger student body, greater access to education for disadvantaged students, more flexible learning environments, and the increased ability to manage long term careers and full time employment with study. From an institutional standpoint, the advantages extend to increased flexibility in course delivery, greater diversity of course content, further opportunities to expand internationally, and greater opportunities for inter-university and institution-community financial, educational, research, and institutional cooperation and collaboration. DEHub is positioned to explore best practises in Open Learning for the Australian higher education sector.

● ● ● *innovation in distance education*