INTRODUCTION

In opposition to the mechanistic learning paradigm, we defend the community paradigm which proposes the serendipity of discovering unknown or unarticulated relationships and connections as the ideal learning context. Moreover, in this ambit, we consider that the conception and deployment of virtual learning communities (VLC) as learning contexts, allows the realignment of the learning process from context to content. In this sense, and having recognized the impossibility of managing other people learning, we metaphor the management of learning as the management of the learning context [2].

Following the propositions that emerged from the attempt of answering the question of “how do virtual (learning) communities emerge”, by that meaning learning contexts - which seem to suggest that context is generated by the individuals (learners) through shared anticipations, a first iteration of an answer points towards the shared construction and maintenance of the connection and sharing between needs. This presentation will discuss some ideas for the strategic management of learning contexts embodied as virtual (learning) communities, namely that:

• The creation of a (virtual learning) community is a collective exercise of imagination based upon the principles of collective construction and of collective transaction.

• The management of a learning context, envisioned as a learning context, involves the management of the technological, relational and pedagogical contexts of the “non-place” in which the community develops. It will conclude with an attempt to elaborate on some general guidelines for the creation and management of virtual learning communities (VLC).

OUR APPROACH

1. Contextual approach: learning communities as learning contexts

We defined the community paradigm, which defends the crucial role of context in learning. As we have previously proposed “a large extent context, context is interactions. Context is what the learner feels like the context of the learning experience.” [2] p. 12, [2]. Context is here understood as a fluid and permanently evolving learning zone, defined by the individuals, by their individual and shared goals, by their interactions.

In the (social)constructivist paradigm, where creating meaning is creating knowledge and creating one’s own knowledge, learning management is above all a metaphor. To the extent that we cannot manage the learning of others, we understand learning management as the management of learning contexts and, in this sense, that is an adaptive exercise.

Inspired by the postulate that a learning is a social and contextualized process, and focusing on the crucial relationships that are established through it, the main aspect of the framework we propose is the concept that the individual engages in VLC in order to participate in the social practices of these same communities while learning.

2. Virtual Learning Communities as Learning Contexts: our view and assumptions

It is in the current scenario of space virtualization that an alternative learning paradigm is inscribed, taking on the contours of community-centered models that support the development and construction (individual and collective) of knowledge within collaborative and creative activities. Thus, in a paradigm that views learning as a social process of knowledge construction through interaction and constructive activities, VLC are considered as multidimensional contexts, that facilitate and sustain learning by promoting interaction, collaboration and belonging in the community as a collective project.

VLC may represent an important alternative to the more traditional teaching-learning contexts, and current technology makes them more tangible today than in the past. In order to answer the question “how to generate and manage VLC” based on the theoretical assumptions enunciated from relevant theory and on the observation conducted, we have enunciated some assumptions about VLC creation and management:

1. VLC result from the mutual interaction of both technological and social dimension

2. VLC develop in virtual settlements while supported by contextual, global and content specialized relationships

3. In VLC relationships are based on shared interests, developing in a culture that promotes the social and shared construction of collaborative and negotiated activities.

4. Knowledge and learning are distributed in the communities where individuals encounter, being mediated by the used tools and gaining meaning through boundary objects

5. VLC characteristic by the existence of a collective project, a shared understanding of rules and by the presence of a sense of belonging

III. Guidelines for the management of learning communities as learning contexts

Learning in virtual settings requires more flexible and facilitating practices that recognize the importance of context to learning, our previous experience allowed us to find clues that we believe could positively inspire the strategic management of VLC:

A. How to do VLC emerge?

The generation of a community is a collective exercise of imagination; it is from the relationships and transactions generated with, and in the context of this collective exercise that the community emerges. And it emerges from the combination of two fundamental principles:

• Principle of collective construction

Takes as crucial the role of social construction of artifacts (as mediators of community enculturation), among which we frame identity and knowledge the generation of VLC is translated by the existence of processes under collective action, with the emergence of community, as the core both the cognitive and of knowledge) through which the collective inscribes dominant modes of belonging.

• Principle of collective interaction

Refers to the reciprocal nature of influence between actors and contexts. The generation of VLC reflects the collective influence of reciprocal, transformative interactions, within which all the interactions are modes of collective action.

B. How to manage VLC?

The question this section seems to point to the development and maintenance of connection and sharing between people. Managing the learning context seems to involve the not so easy task of resolving the complex link between needs, activities and outcomes, either by reinforcing or breaking the patterns of collective understanding that emerge with the community. Thus, it involves the management of 3 different context dimensions:

• Technological: resorting to an ill-structured platform that promotes the construction of shared networks of knowledge through the intertwining of different conceptual plans

• Rational: implementing procedures that could facilitate the transactional process intrinsic to the generation of VLC, such as socioecological analysis and community evolution assessment.

• Pedagogical: implementing integrative and heuristic models, where teachers are boundary objects and activities are shared enterprises.

CONCLUSIONS

Though recognizing the importance of the technological component of virtual learning contexts, its effectiveness, in our perspective, is intrinsically linked to the social and didactic aspects of the teaching-learning process.

The strategic management of learning contexts, here understood as virtual learning communities, is a collective exercise of imagination based on the principles of collective construction and of collective transaction, thus involving the management of the technological, relational and pedagogical contexts of the non-place where the community develops.

Furthermore, we consider that managing the hegemonic context of VLC requires an integrative model in which learning is conceived as a participatory process that has learning at its core through negotiation and resource sharing, involving all stakeholders in the community.

REFERENCES

1. Afonso, A. P. (2009). The answer to this question seems to point to the development and maintenance of connection and sharing between needs, activities and outcomes, either by reinforcing or breaking the patterns of collective understanding that emerge with the community. Thus, it involves the management of 3 different context dimensions: the used tools and gaining meaning through boundary objects


15. Afonso, A. P. (2009). “Knowledge and learning are distributed in the communities where individuals encounter, being mediated by the used tools and gaining meaning through boundary objects


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