

In (palooff and pratt,
2007, p. 26). building

Education



In today's scholastic landscape, educators recognize the value of technology and online collaboration for educational enhancement and have all the means and tools to make optimal use of this technology. The emergence of modern communications and the advent of the internet are changing the way education is conceived of, managed, and conducted (Shrivastava, 1999). These new learning technologies create opportunities for new educational experiences, including distance learning and online synchronous and asynchronous communication and networking. The potential of these technologies for education is immense. Therefore, integrating these new advancements into our educational institutions is important to enhance the educational process.

Advancements in technology and with the internet have brought to the surface social networking and virtual communities (Chen, 2004; Ke & Hoadley, 2009). As a result, online learning has achieved prominence in higher educational institutions and is currently gaining popularity in K-12 education as well due to the availability afforded by technological advances (Palooff & Pratt, 2007). Online environments add more value to the process of learning by offering students an ongoing learning platform. They also provide other means for students to easily access information and increase their knowledge base. In addition, such environments are "space and time independent" as they are free from the constraints of the traditional classroom (Shrivastava, 1999, p. 699). This is, obviously, positive for educational institutions and teachers alike because it allows learning to take place anywhere and at any time (Shrivastava, 1999). Much research has

been conducted recently with regards to the importance and significance of the sense of community in online learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p.

4). Outcomes of these studies, as explained by Palloff and Pratt (2007), give further support to previously held notions that “ the key to successful online learning is the formation of an effective learning community as the vehicle through which learning occurs online” (p. 4). Creating an online learning community “ allows for mutual exploration of ideas, a safe place to reflect on and develop those ideas, and a collaborative, supportive approach to academic work” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 26). Building a community of learners in an online course transforms key features inherent in traditional learning environments.

Some of the radical changes brought to traditional educational settings by online learning include “ greater availability and accessibility of information, engagement of different learning styles, and promotion of increased responsibility for teaching and learning” (Adams & Sperling, 2003, as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 4). Such changes make it imperative for educational institutions and teaching staff to address the need to “ encompass the development of new skill sets for teaching and the need to rethink pedagogy, redefine learning objectives, re-evaluate assessment, and redefine staffwork roles and culture” (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 4). Learning communities and collaborative activities have long been acknowledged for their advantages and opportunities, including the value they provide in enhancing the learning process (Oliver, Herrington, Herrington, & Reeves, 2007).

Dialogue and discussion stemming from such contexts are important for the

learning process, and the inherent collaboration in such communities provides tangible and continuous support to students (Oliver et al.

, 2007). Certain features of online learning help some students become more successful learners (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 4). For example, introverted students find ample space in virtual classrooms to express themselves and participate constructively in online discussions where they will not experience the social pressure associated with face-to-face interaction in actual classrooms. Often, teachers can create and sustain collaboration in their classrooms through group-based activities (Oliver et al.

, 2007). However, this process might not be straightforward in a virtual learning environment. Therefore, it is crucial to design a learning environment and activities that can help students flourish in a virtual learning environment. However, the design of such an environment requires careful planning and understanding of how this environment is created and sustained as an ongoing learning platform. This article aims to look carefully at online learning communities; how they are conceived and defined, the theoretical assumptions implicit in this learning environment, how they can be created and sustained, the changed role of the teacher, and the emerging issues that might affect students' engagement in online learning communities.