

## **THEME: EDUCATIVE INNOVATION**

### **LEARNING COMMUNITIES: IDENTITY AND PARTICIPATION**

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#### INTRODUCTION

This is a brief summary of the research that I am conducting on Learning Communities, in collaboration with the CESU of the National Autonomous University of Mexico, the Aula Mentor program which has generously shared its field experiences, the UNED of Spain, and of course, the Virtual University of the University of Guadalajara. In the analysis of the relevance of educational systems, one concern is absolutely fundamental: the certainty that up to now the problems of coverage have not been solved, not to mention the problems of quality, and the fact that significant sectors of the population have been left without any possibility of continuing their education<sup>1</sup>. Institutions have drawn education away from its social purpose; those who enter the classroom are forced to check their culture and lifestyle at the door; the actors are faced with a very limited array of options. These shortcomings have effectively relegated a significant percentage of the population from both public and private education, and thus a considerable sector of society finds itself staring at closed doors. This in turn has isolated universities from society at large and from their social purpose.

For a long time it was thought that the only valid way to develop individuals and society was through institutionalized education. But why did it take us so long to realize that we could come up with alternatives that would restore education's social purpose and focus its aim once again on human development, and therefore, on society's development? Giddens has said, "Because certain social

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<sup>1</sup> Second chance schools. Oportunity Program, Italy 2006

forces appear unalterable, and thus inevitable, and since the actors have very few options open to them, on the assumption that they will behave rationally, this implying an alignment with the reigning ideology or the system of interests, the result has been a fundamentally flawed design: only responses arising from the system itself are defined as valid.... whether they are relevant for the inclusive development of society or not.

### **A NEW PARADIGM:**

Recalling Ivan Illich<sup>2</sup>, we remember that it was in the 1970's when society's role as an educational agent came to the fore. And it was precisely in this framework that Distance Education managed to position itself as one of the most vigorous educational modes, offering methodology, strategies, diversified learning settings, student participation in their own learning process: the interactions that emerge from the new kind of social relationship are leading to a new paradigm in the form of a unifying social process, new lifestyles that are more participatory and democratic and that through this educational mode have opened a space for a re-encounter with society<sup>3</sup>. It is for this reason that the Virtual University System, in this research study presents evidence on: The social factors and institutional elements that come together to build learning communities; the conditions under which the educational process unfolds with the inclusion of TIC's; the influence of subject-centered education as a generator of personal development, and therefore, the recovery by communities of their processes of education and development; the new role that universities must take on in order to offer strategies that support educational processes that are more relevant and equitable to the needs of

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<sup>2</sup> Illich, I. (1988) *Alternativas II* Joaquín Mortiz / Planeta, México/Barcelona; and Illich, Ivan (1978) *Toward a history of needs* Random House, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Bueno, L. La exclusión de la esperanza: un sistema educativo desertor. University of Guadalajara. 2004

different sectors of society; This is the role that learning communities play toward the knowledge society.

**LEARNING COMMUNITIES:** Community, a life space<sup>4</sup>

I look at communities as the social nucleus of learning, by way of: strategies for horizontal participation, communication in dialogue, mutual practice and commitment, elements for the creation of both individual and community learning. Whether these communities form inside formal institutions or not, whether they occur in classrooms or virtual spaces, is immaterial. It merely gives them different modes of being and expressing themselves; it is a diversity that, from the perspective of this analysis, is nothing more than variations on the same process.

Learning communities do not form around a work method imposed from outside; they grow out of a transformation that the community desires and builds because the community members believe in it.<sup>5</sup> A learning community, when it fulfills its purpose, gets people involved in the detection and assessment of their needs: they discover their own interests and aspirations to acquire new knowledge, skills and abilities; they develop healthy interpersonal relations, as well as new and better roles in their community and in society at large. A learning community provokes people and gets them to face their needs and to undertake their own development through individual and group cooperation, by identifying and applying existing educational resources<sup>6</sup>.

**RESEARCH PRINCIPLES:**

- The individual and the community should reclaim their role as subjects of their own development.

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<sup>4</sup> Nogueiras, L. La práctica y la teoría del desarrollo comunitario. Narcea. Madrid. 1996

<sup>5</sup> Rosa Lafranca Lerín and Patricia Andrés Fernández. Las comunidades de aprendizaje, ¿qué son?

<sup>6</sup> Nogueiras, L. La práctica y la teoría del desarrollo comunitario. Narcea. Madrid. 1996

- The subject of cultural development is neither individual nor collective. It is both, inextricably linked<sup>7</sup>.
- Learning is a source of social structure; it does not, however, exist in and for itself, and thus cannot be separated from the process that gives rise to it. In this sense, learning communities constitute an emerging social structure.
- When it takes place within a community, learning gains potential both cognitively and socially.
- Learning, when considered this way, implies a close interaction between order and chaos<sup>8</sup>. It has the capacity to continually create and destroy its own structure; for this reason, it is especially favorable to creativity, which brings us to the hypothesis that it is precisely on that boundary—between order and chaos—where the most meaningful learning takes place and where the life of learning communities plays out.
- Learning communities are born of the individual's need to link learning and social construction in order to build a new kind of identity.

## IDENTITY

Seen as an experience of identity, learning has to do with a process of knowledge transformation, as well as a context where an identity of participation is defined.

When reference is made to identity, participation or non-participation, as well as exclusion, become crucial. Non-participation can take on a number of forms; it can even become an identity in itself: an identity of non-participation<sup>9</sup>. Identity demands an ongoing negotiation of meanings, which gives way to the whole range of participation/non-participation games that then combine to form a chain, generating

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<sup>7</sup> Gerber, D. El Malestar en la cultura. Este país. November, 2005

<sup>8</sup> Organización caórdica de Dee Hock 1995

<sup>9</sup> Bueno, L. La exclusión de la esperanza: un sistema educativo desertor. Universidad de Guadalajara. 2004

a particular way of being in the world: Each thought, decoding and practice, each decision to participate or not, is an act of identity. In other words, the way in which each individual or collective relates when it participates or declines to participate, is the result of the identity of that individual and/or collective. Offering support for learning in communities involves not only supporting the process of knowledge acquisition, but also contributing to the creation of new spaces and forms of identity. This leads us to affirm that in order to revitalize learning, in any kind of educational experience, students should be offered *alternative forms of participation* that can be sources of identity.

## **DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITIES**

The community is an exact place without location, that links us and integrates us, that inserts us into the individual and collective construction of common objectives. It is an organic whole, offering individual privilege, continually growing, in which each individual has a specific role to play in reaching the community's goals and in building her own knowledge, as well as that of all the members and of the community itself; participation in reaching the common objectives, those the community itself is committed to and that hold the community together. Community implies a 'we', and therefore establishes solid intergrupal relations. The community is the implementation of meanings, of identity and of negotiation through commitment to a common task.

According to Gastón Mialaret<sup>10</sup> (2003), learning communities represent a particularly innovative and revolutionary framework, when the theoretical, technical and political foundations of education are considered. The concept of community is not a learning «*model*», but a «*sociopedagogical model*». A set of interactions,

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<sup>10</sup> Mialaret, G. L'éducation actuelle. Presses Universitaires de France. Paris. 2003

human behaviors that have a sense and expectations among their elements. They are not just actions, but actions based on meanings that are shared among people and in community.

## **INTERACTIONS**

Interactions can be of two types: those that can be controlled by the community members and those that are beyond their control. All of them, however, have an impact on the community, to a greater or lesser degree. Thus it is necessary to analyze: the inner dynamics<sup>11</sup> of learning communities; their position within a larger system; the influence of the overarching institution; the interactions created with other communities that form part of the evolution of their social learning. Learning that takes place in everyday life, learning from school, professional learning, learning that is inherent to citizenship and civic life, all come together to form a network of interactions that occur between the subject and the different spheres where he participates. But learning is not just the result of the subject's interactions with these settings, but of these very interactions in cooperation<sup>12</sup>.

## **ELEMENTS AND CONSTITUTION OF A LEARNING COMMUNITY**

Among the most important benefits of learning communities are the contributions of each participant, the knowledge and skills, notions and concepts that enrich the practice and the development of learning. In this way, the setting is enriched by contributions and interactions from each and every one of the members of that particular learning community. For a community to form, the following elements must be present: a common objective; a shared repertory ( i.e., a set of common conceptual tools) vision of the future; joint action; and a mutual commitment.

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<sup>11</sup> Flanders, N. E. (1977): *Análisis de la interacción didáctica*. Salamanca. Ediciones Anaya.

<sup>12</sup> It is important to distinguish between cooperation and collaboration.

Mutual commitment is the core value that sustains a community; it creates ties among the members, connects the participants in ways that can become much more profound than the similarities, a bit more abstract, expressed in terms of function of personal traits or social categories<sup>13</sup>. Mutual commitment can overcome personal and even social differences through egalitarian dialogue, which assesses the participants' different contributions with no reference to personal status, strictly on the basis of their argumentation. Arguments, knowledge, experiences and insights are contributed, on the premise that everyone who participates in an egalitarian dialogue has the same opportunities and capacities to participate. It can then become a nucleus for interpersonal relationships. But these interrelationships grow out of the commitment to the common task, not a modeled image of what a community should be. It is in commitment that constructive co-existence takes place, mutual support and another element that in Wenger's theory is fundamental: *interpersonal loyalty*. Mutual commitment is based on constructive participation and the negotiation of collective meanings; it presupposes a common language and common conceptual tools; it posits egalitarian dialogue as a necessary condition<sup>14</sup>; it is nourished by the successes and failures of the common undertaking; it is strengthened by the analysis made of the overall project by each and every one of its members<sup>15</sup>. The ongoing analysis of learning communities shows that the communities that have a life of their own and become consolidated, are the ones that have: internal unity, and therefore, these elements: legitimacy, peripherality

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<sup>13</sup> Wenger, E. Comunidades de Práctica. Paidós. Barcelona 2001

<sup>14</sup> Comunidades de aprendizaje: participación, calidad y transformación social. Journal "Educar" Number 29, 2002. Fòrum IDEA Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. 2002

<sup>15</sup> Castañeda, M., Figueroa, M. (1994): "Contexto de enseñanza: interacción y cooperatividad en el aprendizaje". Tecnología y Comunicación, no. 23

and participation (LPP)<sup>16</sup>. It is important to point out that participation is not the same as collaboration, because participation involves all kinds of relationships: conflictive, harmonious, intimate, political, competitive or collaborative. Thus, participation is not something that can be “turned on and off”. In a community, learning projects transformations onto its members and they find that they have become more complete and integrated persons. This learning, and its effect on each of the participants and on the community itself, gives rise to an identity<sup>17</sup>, a learning identity that produces personal and social energy for individual and collective construction. We could say that learning communities: negotiate their own objectives and set their own limits, which may or may not coincide with the institution.

### **REAL COMMUNITIES IN VIRTUAL SETTINGS**

A Virtual Community can be defined as a group of people united by all the elements mentioned above; its “virtual” quality comes from the medium used for its communication, tools provided by the Internet.<sup>18</sup> However, in order to be considered members of a learning community, people must: share interests; check in on the community with enough frequency to constitute mutual commitment; understand and participate in the interactions that form the community; have a sense of belonging to the community; recognize the other community-members on the basis of the identity acquired in this virtual space; construct, from the perspective of their active or passive, frequent or infrequent participation, their identity within the space<sup>19</sup> where the student’s experience is valued, and the

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<sup>16</sup> Kimble, C. Hildreth, P. & Wright, P. Communities of Practice: Going Virtual University of York, UK 2001

<sup>17</sup> Wenger, E. Comunidades de Práctica. Paidós. Barcelona 2001

<sup>18</sup> Ma. Florencia Morado . UNDERGRADUATE THESIS University of Buenos Aires 2000

<sup>19</sup> Ma. Florencia Morado . UNDERGRADUATE THESIS, University of Buenos Aires 2000

relationship goes from vertical to horizontal. And in this new approach, the pursuit of knowledge is distributed over the entire learning community in virtual settings.

Castells (2000)<sup>20</sup> says: "there is a leap: from organized social movements to networked social movements based on coalitions that form around common values and projects (...): *Learning communities are social entities and make up a whole. They are't isolated, but rather interact with other communities*<sup>21</sup>, forming a network

## **NETWORKS**

This would be the case of the constellation learning communities<sup>22</sup>, which: have shared roots; present related, perhaps even complementary undertakings, tasks or objectives; belong to the same institution or related institutions; face similar conditions; have members in common, i.e., that can participate in two or more of these communities; share artifacts; maintain relationships of proximity. In this way, we can state that Learning Communities have life cycles and can evolve, regress, grow, be strengthened or dispersed depending on their particular dynamics. Their evolution has its own particular limits, logic, and social and learning energy. Communities, like social movements<sup>23</sup> have a high level of reflexive self-regulation; they are 'collective undertakings of the individual to establish a new life order'. And they can be self-generated from the needs of particular groups, or else nurtured in an institution to support and develop group learning settings. What determines the level of a community's dynamics is the quality and type of its interactions and its constituent bases; with interpersonal loyalty and loyalty to the other negotiation, the

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<sup>20</sup> Castells, M. *Internet y la sociedad red*. Inaugural lesson of the Ph.D. Program on the information and knowledge society. 2000 [On-line]. <http://www.uoc.es/web/cat/articles/castells/menu.html>

<sup>21</sup> SALINAS, J. (1995): "Organización escolar y redes: los nuevos escenarios de aprendizaje". In CABERO, J., MARTÍNEZ (Coord.): *Nuevos canales de comunicación en la enseñanza*. Madrid. Centro de estudios Ramon Areces,

<sup>22</sup> Wenger, E. *Comunidades de Práctica*. Paidós. Barcelona 2001

<sup>23</sup> Giddens, A. *La constitución de la sociedad*. Amorrortu editores. Argentina. 2003

one that takes place around the commitment to a joint and/or common task. And its analysis requires intense and serious interdisciplinary work.

### **BY WAY OF CONCLUSION**

There can be no doubt that forming learning communities is important, they allow alternative and more equity ways to enhance this new educational paradigm, where people and communities are subject in the construction of their own educational path. Therefore there are needs to be done:

- Interpret learning as a process of participation/non-participation;
- Encourage communities to commit themselves to designing their practice as a place of learning
- Give communities access to the resources they need to negotiate their connection with other practices, communities and their relations with the institution.
- Learning communities generate potential that makes it possible for institutions to learn.

Learning communities foster: the recovery by individuals and communities of their role as subjects of their development, and... the search for, and construction of new paths for education; consideration of distance education as the mode by which to offer educational services to the entire population; the inclusion of TIC's in the educational process; attention by the university to all sectors of society, then: the inclusion of the productive sectors in educational processes and the linking of the university to the community.

