

TNP2 Workshop on New Learning Environments

‘On-line’ and ‘off-line’ learning communities : creating the continuum

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Although practice in virtual education has often been driven more by the technologies and economics of electronic delivery than by the ideal of social learning, there is a growing body of work which focuses on community as a significant element in the pedagogical design of virtual learning environments. Much of the studies, though, are concerned with the relation of social interaction on individual learning outcomes (e.g. language performance, motivation, communication skills) rather than on the development of the learning community itself.

Starting from a working definition of learning communities as social constructs, this presentation described some of the features of an online professional group and analysed the extent to which they can be defined as a particular type of community, a community of practice and the extent to which by creating, within the new environment, a continuum between their off-line and on-line professional worlds, new professional practices develop. The group under study is constituted by language teachers/advisers who are following an online professional programme. The presentation also showed another application of online learning community through a course in Dutch for beginners, Lagelands.

This presentation addressed the specific question of how to prepare learners, developers and tutors in the creation of online learning communities. It looked at how certain activities, tasks are conducive to notions of formality or togetherness and informality, how specific features can contribute to create cohesion, to maintain or destroy a sense of community.

It concluded by providing a few suggestions for staff involved in e-tutoring. Useful links were provided at the end of the presentation.

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The social issues of interaction, collaboration and communication which constitute a key component of learning in general and language learning in particular were at length debated following this and John Petitt's presentation.