Assignment 1 Part 2

Learner participant experiences in the Learning Community EFL Classroom 2.0

EFL Classroom 2.0- an introduction

At the time of writing the community membership included over 20,700 members, who according to the FAQ section are primarily ESL/EFL teachers or ESL/EFL students from around the globe. This community is an example of an informal learning environment. EFL Classroom 2.0’s main objective is to harness collaboration through participation and discussion around themes related to teaching and learning English as a second or foreign language, and particularly by means of the use of technology. The FAQ section of the site states that EFL Classroom 2.0 is a free community hosted at Ning communities at http://eflclassroom.ning.com. The community is managed quite effectively by David Deubelbeiss, a professor of TESOL at the Ewha Woman’s University in Canada. There are clear and simple guidelines in the directory, which can be accessed via the SITE MAP under HELP in the main menu and many affordances within this community promote the creation of subsets within the community and allows members to play various roles (e.g. sharer, reviewer, contributor, developer, etc). Thus the community demonstrates six of seven of the basic steps in the development of an online community as set out by Palloff and Pratt as shown in Brook & Oliver (2003, p42)

How learning occurs

A. levels of learning

Due to the unevenness of participation of the community members compared to that of the moderator, this was thought to be an informative comparative overview for the subsequent sections of this work. Thus, in order to analyse the learning affordances within the community, learning has been divided into 3 levels:

A.1 at the user/member level

Learning is facilitated through free memberships that provide members with a page- henceforth referred to as member profile (Figure 1). Learning opportunities at this level depend to some extent on the member’s online and cognitive presence, adapted from Redmond & Lock (2006 p269).

Online presence, here, refers to the member’s ability to set up a member profile and use it to alert other members of their presence and/or interests in this community and to build social capital in order to, for example, enhance their learning experience.
Cognitive presence has to do with a member’s awareness of the issues involving ESL/EFL and Web 2.0 technologies, their expertise, their type of professional practice and future goals since these will inform their participation and degree of collaboration in such community.

![Figure 1- member profile in EFL Classroom 2.0](image)

This profile can be personalised and has a number of learning affordances, mainly in the realm of how to use Web 2.0 and social networking technologies:

- blog creation and maintenance;
- asynchronous participation in the many fora and discussions happening at the community or generated through the member’s blog;
- connectivity with other social networking sites such as twitter, Facebook, Yahoo, Myspace and LinkedIn;
A.2. moderator to user level:
The learning at this level occurs by means of:

- a collection of tutorials, videos, screencasts, podcasts, PowerPoint slides and slideshows on:
  1. how to use the community affordances;
  2. teaching issues and topics within EFL/ESL;
  3. professional development;
- modelling the use of Web 2.0 tools for managing e-learning communities and
- a monthly newsletter with opportunities for learning.

The learning and collaboration also happens by following the moderator on Facebook and twitter as he posts links to his own or to other teaching-related resources in these social networking sites.

A.3. community to user level

The learning events occurring at community level are:

- interaction with other community members by visiting their blogs or through blog postings within a member’s profile;
- commentary on postings in the form of photos, videos, questions, lessons, etc;
- joining learning communities (called classrooms) within EFL classroom 2.0;
- an assychronous tool for short posts called ‘your shout’.

Below is a screenshot of the directory with the three levels highlighted (Figure 2). The focus here is on the prevailing learning level(s) and the activities that are of most interest to my own community design development, which would initially involve teachers. Thus, the sections designed for learning English have not been investigated.
My role as a participant

My participation started with the creation of a profile (see Figure 1) and by designing my blog and working through the very comprehensive privacy settings. Subsequently, it assumed three different guises: lurker, networker and inquirer.

As a lurker I have looked at:

- community blogs, delicious lists, videos, forum discussions, classroom activities;
- Web 2.0 tools used by others and those used to manage the community;
- tutorials and ‘how-to videos’ for participating in the community and
- comments spread throughout the community since all the areas offer a commentary option.

As a networker I have engaged in:

- asking questions in ‘quick shout’ (Figure 3);
- using/ experimenting with recommended websites and web 2.0 tools;
• creating a personal blog and posting in it;
• having discussions with other community members and the moderator;
• placed myself in a map for members so others can see me and
• joining the Brazilian community within EFL classroom 2.0 and the community on Facebook.

![Quick Shout Image]

Figure 3: The asynchronous tool ‘Quick Shout’

As an *inquirer* I have:

• played Devil’s advocate while investigating most of the affordances in the community;
• checked the review site within the community and
• questioned the affordances, shortcomings and successes of the community against the theory.

**Structure that helps and structure that hinders learning**

The factors contributing to learning:

✓ The dedication, inspiration and constant supervision of the moderator as the main provider of input, feedback and resources;
✓ There is as discussed by Bacon (2009 p5) a built-in *sense of belonging*, a community concerned with teaching/learning English;
✓ As put forward by Bacon (2009 p66) the community is bound by communication and there are plenty of opportunities for such within it;
✓ The community seems to be imbued with good *communication channels* as defined by Bacon (2009 p67) as one of the main attributes for a successful community;
✓ The affordances for building social presence provided by the site (blogs, member profile, fora, etc.) are user-friendly and abundant (Redmond & Lock 2006 p270);
✓ There is diversity as members come from different backgrounds with varied experience and potential capacity, expressed by the membership though the latter is somewhat harder to ascertain. Both of which are key for community development (Bacon 2009 p39);

The barriers are:

✗ The fora sometimes fail to generate any sort of contribution or discussion which points either to a possible lack of cognitive exploration by members (Redmond & Lock 2006 p272). or to the absence of standard curricula across the ESL/EFL scenario;
✗ Lack of clear roles and functions in order to maintain teacher presence apart from that of the moderator (Redmond & Lock 2006, p271).
✗ It is hard to ascertain that participants see themselves as both individuals and active participants due to the infrequent participation and lack of higher level thinking collaboration noticed across the community, which does not help sustain the community (Redmond & Lock 2006, p271)
✗ The absence of standard curricula across ESL/EFL scenario does not facilitate the creation of higher level learning nor does it naturally enable the development of critical discourse (Redmond & Lock 2006, p272).
✗ The design of activities aimed at learner’s needs and educational outcomes becomes somewhat unattainable due to curricular inconsistencies across the ESL/EFL world (Redmond & Lock 2006, p272).
✗ Although the community tries to encompass all different EFL/ESL practice in all its diversity there do not seem to be roles or functions except for that of the community manager to harness social and cognitive presence to sustain a learning environment (Redmond & Lock 2006, p271);
✗ Bacon (2009 p26) and Redmond & Lock (2006, p272) point to the need of partnerships for collaborative effort in learning environments. However, there is a noted absence of collaborative partnering to gauge activities and learner’s experience which are tools aimed at verifying learner’s needs and educational goals;
✗ An informal learning community will struggle to achieve scaffolding to the extent described by Redmond & Lock (2006, p271) due to the curricular inconsistency problems.
How others might experience the community

To summarise, despite the many affordances to foster learning about EFL/ESL with the application of Web 2.0 and social networking tools, a new member’s belonging will only be sustained if synergies occur and teams and leaders come forward in order to reduce the structural barriers to sustained learning. However, as the community stand the points mentioned as potential barriers will come into play when a member attempts to further any newly gained knowledge. There needs to be a very strong desire on the member’s part to explore cognitive presence and develop social presence seeing that the level of critical discourse necessary to create meaningful learning experiences could be somewhat unattainable. As implied by Redmond & Lock (2009, p274) context and planning are at play as well. Contexts across the community are diverse to harness the required stakeholder support which is also required when planning is concerned. Thus, the community as it is works well as a repository and as a base for learning new technologies individually rather than collaborative, but it needs more collaborative effort to sustain its learning community status.

Bibliography

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