10.   Symposium: Diversity and Common Ground in Online Learning Community Research

OVERVIEW OF SYMPOSIUM

This symposium will present different perspectives on research in the field of online learning communities. As well as providing an overview of the influence of differing theoretical frameworks on research methodologies, the symposium will highlight key issues that need to be addressed to enable research in this area to move forward. While emphasizing the value of diversity in approaches, theoretical influences and methodologies, the need for some common ground will be explored.

Online learning communities have become a popular focus for research. The symposium will start with a paper that provides a brief overview of some of the research approaches used in this area, noting the significance of socialisation and learning, and highlighting the theoretical frameworks that have informed the choice of methodologies in previous work.

The second paper draws from Activity Theory and Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance to provide a framework for the development of "conceptual anchors" (representations of potentially critical context measures), which may facilitate research from particular perspectives, or common research across different settings. To substantiate the arguments for such a framework, a demonstration of its application for two studies into online course activity will be made at the conference. The first looks at task development and conceptual change, the second for possible influences of gender.

Research should look to investigate whether in setting boundaries some learners are excluded, or if the pressure to conform results in the devaluation of differences. Research itself clearly therefore needs to reflect on issues of inclusion and alienation, and on the nature of electronic communication practices as social action in the wider cultural and critical sense. The third paper will thus draw on a perspective from New Literacy Studies, picking up on the need to ensure appropriate triangulation of methodologies, so that they do not inadvertently conspire to silence individuals by only using methods such as transcript analysis, which by definition only takes account of people who contribute to discussion.

The symposium relates to the conference themes of e-learning and distributed communities, but particularly to methodologies for researching NL.

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