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Online Community Learning: Why Does (Language) Learning without Classroom Interest Students of All Disciplines? A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study explores the language learners' growing interest to express their shared interest in online-course-providing platforms. This study also inquiries into the language learners' new forum called "online community" and its great influence on smart way teaching-learning process and classroom dynamics, technology enabled lifelong self-study mode of learning, subject knowledge, learning centered curriculum, experience centered approach to the learning process, course material and soft/life skills delivered along the course as a value added package. This paper examines the way MOOCs have opened the gate way of learning to all sections of society free of cost with specific language skills focus – writing that interests students from all disciplines. This study suggests that the rising generation shows a growing, academic interest in online collaboration on the basis of any subject specific shared interest and this collective interest also addresses the concern about personal experiences with emotive foundation that will not have space in online teaching learning process.

Keywords: *online community, shared interest, experience centered approach, indigenous knowledge*

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Introduction

Hours together learners sit in classrooms and spend around 5 or 6 hours a day and formally get educated by trained teachers and professors. But how many of them apply all the teachings they received during formal education years in real-world situations? How many students go to schools or colleges with purpose driven goals to learn certain skills in designed hours and validate the outcome of their learning in real-life experiences? Many a time, fresh graduates from high schools joining colleges or universities have not been challenged by practical effects in the technology driven world. Students in colleges and universities are too busy to submit their guided assignments, get ready for end semester examinations, prepare for placements, and clear all the papers and to pass out with high GPA. In contrast to this learning within classroom, students today enrolled in formal settings and lifetime learners can learn and gain many valuable experiences without classroom when they become part of online community. My case study will explore the involvement of learners, teaching-learning process and its impact on formal classroom setting in terms of rising online community at Christ University, Bangalore – 560030.

Literature Review

As for Wenger, A community and its behavioral pattern is determined when “a group of people who share an interest in a domain of human endeavor and engage in a process of collective learning that creates bonds between” (as cited in Gray, 2004, para. 8).

As a community with people from different areas of interest comes together and concentrates on a specific area of 'shared interest', engage in similar interactions, involve in 'joint activities', build a rapport to form a community with oneness in the same area of interest, and develop a framework that tells about its shared collective consciousness of one domain and its impact on future challenges as well (Gray, 2004). It is very evident that shared interest collectively derived from multiple dialogues under specific domain based knowledge makes any community so vibrant to push the existing knowledge to the next level.

Stephen (1970) in "The Concept of community in Human Ecology" defines the significance of "social organization," "community structure," or "the community" in terms of fine relations between animals and their surroundings." According to Clark (1974), Community which refers to 'locality, social activity, social structure and sentiment' builds a strong sense of "solidarity and significance." Shuster (1970) emphasizes on varied life style and structural frame a society holds determines 'a particular locality'. In fact one's socio-political, cultural, spiritual and institutional interactions and communication become a shared interest or experience on the basis of a locality, space, place, environment one has adopted to live in and get engaged with for livelihood continually and consistently. Moreover territorial occupation and its subsequent activities reflect the values and beliefs the inhabitants practiced on the basis of shared experiences. It is not likeminded people coming together to formulate something and translate their idea in to act but people with varied ideas and outlook and distinguished life style living together in "a particular locality" (Shuster, 1970) and forging their diachronistic participations and encounters into a common and collective shared interest to advance the production of knowledge to yet another level. On the contrary, the advent of MOOCs has changed the mode of learning among the 21st century learners. These younger and older learners cut across the borders and learn whatever they want to hone their skills without any physical classroom effect. They prefer to be part of online community.

The term "Online Community" has given a new identity for the participants who take the learning crossing the borders of nations and learn informally the required and essential skills unmindful of geographical locations. Nothing stops this online community from learning problem based skills to solve current problems that exist in their context. Gray affirms that "online environment paves the way to learn new skills and work practices, a means of social and professional connection to colleagues, and a mechanism to reduce the isolation that was inherent in the job function and geographical location" (2004, p. 23). Students across the world have started acquiring job specific skills through Massive Open Online Courses at their own pace from wherever they live at free of cost or at lowest price. Here the best package of learning at affordable price, they are able to receive from best colleges and universities in the world. Massive Open Online Courses have broken the barriers of lack of fund to travel abroad and pursue higher education and inaccessibility because learners live in the remotest part of the world. It is possible today to work hard, earn money and to earn a management degree such as iMBA from University of Illinois that enhances your leadership skills at reasonable fee structure ("Online courses from top universities. Join for free," n.d.).

Method of Discussion

My interest to improve my professional skills in mechanics and functional grammar motivated me to enroll for a writing course on www.coursesra.org. Learning different techniques, approaches, methods of learning parts of speech, and sentence structure from a native speaker's point of view informed me to contextualize this learning into my classrooms with the students of Arts and Management Studies on main campus at Christ University. Varied factors such as subject knowledge, learning centered curriculum, self-study skills/method, experience centered approach, course material and soft/life skills and their influence on the students of 1 BBA A, 1 BCA & 1 BA (CEP & HEP) of 2014 became evident when I observed the learners' performance in the writing session. This online course (Crafting an Effective Writer: Tools of the Trade (Fundamental English Writing) was introduced with courses or programs such as Additional English (AEN 131), Creative English (BCA 131) and Developing Fluency and Clarity in English (ENGL 1600) in the academic year 2014-15 at Christ University main campus, Bangalore – 560029.

What I seriously observed in students is their constant engagement with language skills and online communication with students of their interest from other nations. And language learners from many countries gathered on one platform to share their knowledge and learned something new from other culture. My students along with other students in the world met regularly and discussed the subject of interest and shared their common interests on the basis of fundamental English writing. Here, I could register some of my students' opinions in the form of interview to examine the impact of the prescribed online course and the space it created for them in common. E. Jose, a student from Management Studies, Christ University, Bangalore recollects the importance of online community and her participation in open forum:

MOOCs are very useful tools that help you to add on to your knowledge. Learning English and perfecting in the subject comes through lot of reading and practice. MOOCs, I feel, do aid you on that. They teach us ample opportunity to learn through participation. The group discussion forums give a better understanding because students from around the world participate. This gives an upper hand keeping in mind the exposure you receive. Above all MOOCs makes learning convenient in case of timings and you can always go back to learn more (personal communication, January 2, 2014).

Language learners of Christ University from three different disciplines had not only an opportunity to learn language skills outside the classroom but also made an online community in the form of open forum for subject specific discussion around the world. This forum created a unique platform for the all the learners to build a specific community to share their common interest and express their indigenous reasoning to strengthen their language learning. It is also evident that they were able to contextualize their learning through this platform.

S. Nair, a post graduate student of English Studies, Christ University stresses the importance of simultaneity of knowledge production and mutual enrichment of language and literature skills:

The information and knowledge that I have gained by doing these courses may not be directly applicable in the degree that I pursue, but the varied perspectives and ideas that I have received from the MOOC experience has enriched me to engage with studies differently. The group discussions, an important part of MOOC courses, have given me a platform to express my views and receive criticism, which has helped me learn better ways to construct arguments, understand other's perspectives and draw my own inferences and opinions from what I encounter. This is the most important lesson that I have learnt by doing MOOC courses and it has helped me immensely while engaging with Language, Literature and English Studies (personal communication, January 2, 2014).

Evidence of Social Interactions and Engagement

This online course throws some light on the learners' social interactions in the form of academic engagement through fundamental English writing. Students in my classes had been a part of discussion forum and exchanged their ideas in terms of style of writing. This linguistic engagement paved the way for gathering ideas online from one another, exchanging indigenous knowledge with each other, transferring voice and learning better grammar, mechanics, and sentence structure. And this online

common sharing revealed the fact that the online community involved in Crafting an Effective Writer: Tools of the Trade (Fundamental English Writing) used their indigenous knowledge as a substructure to share their ideas and outlook in open forum. This 'learning-without-classroom model' taught the language learners not only the subject they were interested in but also brought new knowledge through their shared interest and kindled the spirit of online-community-interactive education.

Conclusion and Further Recommendations

Teaching learning process in the 21st century has taken a huge paradigm shift or transition from dissemination of knowledge from within four walls to open platform or open forum where learners of a particular area of interest come together, share their experiences and try to gain interdisciplinary knowledge rather than mono-culture driven solution to the pressing needs in one's own locality. This entire study reveals the fact that learning without classroom cuts across the border, gathers the learners of the shared interest with the unified purpose and engages them in the same direction without losing any emotive touch. It is indeed a collective initiative to learn something online that connects all the imagined nations and surmounts all kinds of limitation in the world. In addition, it is important to bear it in mind that the teaching learning process in days to come may not suffer from classroom mode of knowledge transfer or lack a strong sense of personal experiences with emotive foundation. For, this online-community-learning practice will impact not only the language learners' thinking of language learning but also connect their background knowledge with new knowledge they receive from their peers across the world. Therefore, the rising interest of the online community is on the move depending on new knowledge added in this world on a daily basis and effective mode of exchange of shared interests, ideas and outlook. It's truly a technological disruption in the spider-web of classroom teaching-learning process and pedagogical practices.

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