Building Global Learning Communities: Issues and Challenges in the UP Open University Context

Melinda dP. Bandalaria

University Registrar ◆ UPOU, Philippines ◆ mbandalaria@upou.edu.ph

ABSTRACT

While learning communities trace their roots to the residential mode of instruction, their purpose and the context by which they are established run parallel to the learner-centred and constructivist paradigms that most open universities, like the University of the Philippines Open University (UPOU), subscribe to. Specific to UPOU, with the instructional content delivery already in place, the support mechanisms to help achieve learning and learners' goals should not only be in place but strengthened as well, taking into consideration the learning and academic traditions of the university. This paper aims to describe the UPOU model of global learning communities; document the process followed by UPOU in establishing these global learning communities; present the issues and challenges identified to be crucial to these learning communities; and provide a guide/blueprint to other open universities that are planning or are in the process of establishing learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

Since UPOU started integrating online components into its delivery of instructional content and support services in 2001, it began attracting students outside the country's physical and geographical boundaries of operations. From just a few students located in different parts of the world where most overseas Filipino workers go, the university has now reached 58 other countries and has 275 offshore students in its current roster of enrollees located in these areas (Office of the University Registrar, UPOU, July 2009). From the ad hoc arrangements of providing for the specific needs of these offshore students, the UPOU has seen the inevitability of establishing global learning communities that will serve the learning needs of all UPOU students.

This paper aims to: a) describe the UPOU model of global learning communities; b) document the process followed by UPOU in establishing these global learning communities; c) present the issues and challenges identified to be crucial to these learning communities; and d) provide a guide/blueprint to other open universities that are planning or are in the process of establishing learning communities.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES: WHAT ARE THEY?

The literature provides many definitions of what a learning community is. One definition states that:

> *"Learning communities bring people together for shared learning, discovery, and the generation of knowledge. Within a learning community (LC), all participants take responsibility for achieving the learning goals. Importantly, learning communities are the process by which individuals come together to achieve learning goals. These learning goals can be specific to individual courses and activities, or can be those that guide an entire teaching and learning enterprise."* http://www.cirtl.net/pillars_LC.html

Shapiro and Levine (1999 as cited by Laufgraben and Shapiro, 2004) enumerated the basic characteristics shared by different learning communities' initiatives. These basic characteristics are in terms of what learning communities can do:

1.   *Organize students and faculty into smaller groups*

2.   *Encourage integration of the curriculum*

3.   *Help students establish academic and social support networks*

4.   *Provide a setting for students to be socialized to the expectations of the college*

5.   *Bring faculty together in more meaningful ways*

6.   *Focus faculty and students on learning outcomes*

It should be noted that the origin of learning communities are in residential campuses and directed towards helping new entrants in college cope with the demands of higher education. However, educators can also rightfully say that at various stages of the life cycle of a student, there are learning outcomes that must be accomplished and adjustments that must be made which can be addressed easier if the learner is part of a learning community.

Why learning communities?

Residential universities see it fit to have learning communities in order to *"increase student retention and academic achievement, increase student involvement and motivation, improve students time to degree completion, and enhance student intellectual development"* (Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, n.d.). These goals of the universities with regard to students are true and relevant for all academic institutions which should make the establishment of learning communities a major concern among education providers whatever is the mode of delivering instructional content.

It was also observed that *"students involved in learning communities become more intellectually mature and responsible for their own learning and develop the capacity to care about the learning of their peers"* (Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, n.d.). Training the students to become more intellectually mature and independent learners is at the core of open university operations. With the physical separation between the mentors and the students, learners have to take on more responsibility for their own learning. An added dimension though of being a part of

a learning community is the inculcation of important values such as sense of responsibility in learners through collaborative learning.

Learning community programmes can also be made to *"address a variety of societal issues such as the increasing fragmentation of information and student alienation towards participation and engagement* (Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education, n.d.). In an online or distance education setting, this alienation towards participation and engagement can happen so easily given the most usual scenario of students studying on their own. Learning communities, however, encourage interpersonal dialogues in the process even within the context of the diversity of the learners.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES: THE UPOU MODEL

While learning communities trace their roots to the residential mode of instruction, their purpose and the context by which they are established run parallel to the learner-centred and constructivist paradigms that most open universities, like UPOU , subscribe to. Specific to the UPOU, with the instructional content delivery already in place, the support mechanisms to help achieve learning and learners' goals should not only be in place but strengthened as well, taking into consideration the learning and academic traditions of the university.

The Features of UPOU Learning Communities

1. Global in coverage. As previously mentioned, UPOU's learners are in almost 60 countries (Table 1 below). Learners from these areas are enrolled in the same courses, in some cases, the same set of courses as one cohort. They interact with one another and do collaborative learning to achieve learning goals.

Afghanistan	*Indonesia*	*Qatar*
Australia	*Ireland*	*Rwanda*
Austria	*Italy*	*Saipan*
Bahrain	*Japan*	*Saudi Arabia*
Bhutan	*Jordan*	*Singapore*
Brunei	*Kenya*	*South Korea*
Cambodia	*Kuwait*	*Spain*
Canada	*Lao PDR*	*Sudan*
Cayman Islands	*Macau*	*Switzerland*
China	*Malaysia*	*Taiwan*
Cuba	*Marshall Islands*	*Tajikistan*
Eritrea	*Micronesia*	*Thailand*
Ethiopia	*Morocco*	*The Netherlands*
France	*Myanmar*	*Timor-Leste*
Germany	*Namibia*	*United Arab Emirates*
Ghana	*New Zealand*	*United Kingdom*
Guam	*North Korea*	*Mainland USA*
Hawaii	*Oman*	*Vietnam*
Hong Kong	*Palau*	*Zambia*
India	***Philippines***	

2. A convergence of the virtual and physical spaces.
   UPOU's learning communities occupy both the virtual and physical spaces for learning-related activities and which will facilitate achievement of learning and learners' goals.

   Collaborative learning takes place in the virtual learning environment through a learning management system. UPOU uses the open source Moodle to organize learning activities in a teacher-supervised learning environment. In this virtual space, members of the UPOU learning communities work together to achieve the learning goals set for the course by the professor. The social construction of knowledge takes place with each member bringing in his/her own context which further enriches the learning environment. Online collaborations to work on group projects have become a common component of course implementation.

   This virtual space for collaborative learning is supplemented by personal journaling or blogs which are blended with social networking to create an environment for reflection.

   A specific example is an online collaboration among the students of one course being handled by the author wherein students plan, implement and evaluate a social marketing programme. Two of the students are based in the Philippines (one in Manila and the other in the south) while the third is in Thailand and the fourth is based in New York, In the implementation of their programme, advanced information and communication technology was used extensively.

   The UPOU learning communities also occupy a physical space where the groups of learners are together geographically. These physical spaces are the testing centres accredited by the university where the students go to sit for exams administered by the university proctor. This process of taking exams at the testing centre, even if most of the components of teaching and learning are online, is part of the university's system of ensuring the integrity of the degrees conferred by the university. This integrity translates into good reputation for the learning communities. This, in turn, has implications for people wanting to be a part of the learning communities.

3. Members of the learning communities are either cohorts by course enrolled in or by term of admission to the programme they are taking or by their geographical location. In most cases, groups of students who start the program at the same time form cohorts as they continue to enrol in the same sets of courses every school term. As such, communication, cooperation and collaboration often extend beyond academic concerns to include personal and professional concerns as well. It is a natural tendency, on the other hand, for learners in one geographical location to come together and discuss common concerns.The learning communities are officially recognized and managed by the university. The virtual space where the online communities connect and where collaborative learning takes place are managed by the university and the academic (professors and tutors) and technical staff while the physical spaces are managed by institutions which are official partners of the university. These include the embassies and the consular offices of the Philippines, academic institutions, public libraries and accredited individuals in areas where UPOU has students.

4. With official recognition at the UPOU, the learning communities are not just an ad hoc group of students coming together. They are enrolled in UPOU courses, learn together in the virtual space, and are assessed based on agreed upon and acceptable mechanisms like sitting for their exams with university appointed/ accredited proctors.

UPOU strategies to building global learning communities

Learners are the basic elements for whom a learning community is built. Other elements include the different components of the learning environment essential to achieve the learning goals and the goals of the learners. As mentioned earlier, the environment of the learning community is constructed virtually and physically for the members of the community to survive and achieve their shared goals. The virtual environment provides for various learning communities to be connected to one another while the physical environment provides members of a learning community to be physically together through the university testing centre and supported by university accredited proctors. However, learning communities are not developed simply because of the space they occupy. Specific to UPOU, its learning communities followed the same processes or strategies as that of other learning communities. These are:

1. **Collaborative and cooperative learning** where learners collaborate in the virtual and physical spaces to create new knowledge. This implies active participation in the learning process.

2. **Self Reflection.** Professors design the online learning environment that promotes self reflection on the part of the learners; for them to examine the relevance and application to their own context of the different concepts and lessons being discussed in their course and how can they relate the same to their previous learnings and construct new knowledge from there taking into consideration also the insights that their fellow learners are bringing in the learning environment.

    It should also be noted that the process of self reflection does not happen on the part of the learners alone but also among the mentors/professors as reflective practitioners and who are consciously drawing upon all learning events to develop new insights.

    The technical and non-academic staff of the university who are included in the delivery of instructional content and who can also be considered members of the university's global learning communities also draw on their own experiences to develop new approaches in their own realm of responsibilities.

3. **Self-evaluation**. The process of self-evaluation contributes to the learning process as learners can objectively see what worked and what did not. Self-evaluation activities can be as simple as writing down the tasks and classifying them as to which ones worked and which ones should be revised to achieve the shared goals of the community. This self evaluation also calls for the alignment of personal goals with that of the shared goals as far as a learner is concerned.

4. **Maximized use of the potentials of technologies**. Given the physical and geographical separation of the various members of the learning communities, there has to be full use of information and communication technologies to support

learning activities; connect with one another and simulate the academic tradition of academic discussions and debates.

Issues and Challenges in Building Global Learning Communities

UPOU has faced several issues and challenges in the process of building these global learning communities.

Issues

1. The issue of online learning and quality of education and the integrity of the physical space. The question of quality in online delivery of education has been an issue and still is an issue today. While there have been efforts to show that quality of education does not rest on the mode of delivery but on other aspects like content of instruction and the process of social construction of knowledge, the issue still persists particularly for those who are not familiar with how the university implements its online programmes.

2. A community has to have members. The growth of the community is dependent on the membership. An individual would want to be a member of a learning community which is recognized and with goals which when achieved would be recognized also by other communities. This implies the need for international accreditation and recognition of the programmes and degrees conferred by the university.

3. Cultural constraints to participate in some activities which are integral to the achievement of the shared goals. For example, female university students are unable to travel alone to sit for their exams in the accredited testing centres. This requires long-term arrangements and scheduling not only with their own jobs but also that of a spouse/husband who should be free as well on the scheduled date of the exams.

4. Synchronizing learning activities for learners from different time zones like sitting for exams. Some areas have different off days from work or different days for weekends. This poses a problem since as much as possible exams need to be scheduled on the same day.

5. Cohorting of learners in the physical space due to cost implications. Some learners do not indicate right from the start of their academic programme their exact whereabouts outside the country to avoid having to pay more. This makes it difficult to start them at the same time or organize their physical space.

6. UPOU may have established global learning communities but the professional fees for those who are supporting/supervising the communities, like the proctors, are not at par with the global standards/rates.

7. Copyright vs open access to learning materials which the learners need to achieve learning goals.

8. More pressing concerns of the members of the learning community which may affect learning activities essential for the attainment of the shared goals. Work environment, for instance, is not conducive to studying; students cannot just take a day off from work and in most cases may be required to work during weekends when students are supposed to be taking exams. Work supervisors are not inclined to understand learners' desire to study. For economic reasons, the

learners have to prioritize work over education which somehow affects scheduling of collaborative activities in the physical space.

9. Laws and policies governing transnational education have to be observed. The online education has blurred the physical and geographical boundaries where an academic institution can operate. Although the general policies circulated by the United Nations are parallel to the foundations of the university's operations as an academic institution, there may still be laws and policies specific to a country where the physical space of the learning community is present.

Challenges

1. The challenge of keeping the learning community growing in terms of membership and reputation.

2. The integrity of the physical space (testing centre) and the proctors who will ensure the integrity of all the activities involved to achieve the shared goals of the learning community.

3. A community has to be supported both at the side of the university and that of the cooperating institution where the learners are.

4. Inclusion of all players/actors in the global learning communities. The learning communities consist of academic staff; support staff; and technical staff who should understand and perform tasks in the context of global operations for the shared goals to be achieved. Materials must reach students on time. It is also important that the virtual space be fully utilized for the shared learning or social construction of knowledge among the members/players of the teaching/learning environment to happen.

5. Professionalizing the services of the supervisors/university staff involved in the learning communities outside monetary compensation.

6. Content of instruction should be global in orientation but have enough flexibility for local application and contextualization.

7. Make available all learning resources (whether copyrighted or open access) to the learners where they are and at the time that they need them.

8. The challenge of making the learning communities the "gateways and bridges" towards university life at UPOU. The learning communities should also serve as mechanism to attract more students to enrol to the programs of the university. These communities should also be looked at in terms of fulfilling that gap of "social interaction" which traditional academics consider as absent in a distance education/online learning system.

9. Sustaining the online learning communities through the major components of communication, cooperation and collaboration. University personnel should always ensure that these major elements and processes of learning communities are present. This calls for the creative use of appropriate technologies and continuous innovations on the part of the university personnel.

10. Construction of knowledge through the learning communities processes. The continuous process of communication, cooperation and collaboration shall, by itself, generate new knowledge and practice if the experience and information that can be gleaned from them can be processed properly.

CONCLUSIONS

Learning communities in residential universities can serve the same purpose in open universities in terms of helping online students achieve their learning goals. There is an additional challenge however in building online learning communities as the essential elements to a community which include communication, cooperation and collaboration among members should happen in the virtual space and through the creative use of modern communication technologies and this, by itself, brings about issues and challenges not only to the learners but to the university personnel as well who should be members or part of these learning communities. Other concerns should also be recognized when these learning communities become global in coverage as the operations already transcends geographical boundaries where different sets of rules and policies are or may be enforced.

REFERENCES

Center for the Integration of Research, Teaching and Learning. (2006). *Basic learning community principles and guidelines.* The Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System, W Johnson St., Madison, WI. Retrieved July 10, 2009 from http://www.cirtl.net/pillars_LC.html

Laufgraben, J. L., & Shapiro, N. S. (2004). *Sustaining and improving learning communities.* San Francisco, Ca., USA: John Wiley and Sons.

Misanchuk, M., & Anderson, T. (n. d.). *Building community in an online learning environment: communication, cooperation and collaboration.* Retrieved July 21, 2009, from http://frank.mtsu.edu/~itconf/proceed01/19.html

Moisseeva, M. (2007). *Online learning communities and collaborative learning* . Institute of International Education, New York, USA. Retrieved July 21, 2009 from http://www.iienetwork.org/?p=41543.

Sullivan, S., & Glanz, J. (2006). *Building effective learning communities: Strategies for leadership, learning and collaboration.* California: Sage Publication.

Washington Center for Improving the Quality of Undergraduate Education. (no date). *Learning communities.* Retrieved July 7, 2009 from http://www.evergreen.edu/washcenter/lcFaq.htm#21.