

A Study on Internet-based Learning Community of English Majors

—Based on the experimental research of English majors

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Abstract—Learning community provides learners and teachers a new type to organize their learning and teaching. For English majors, it is feasible and applicable to form a learning community, especially with the Internet as the assisted base. In the author's course, 52 students majoring in English take part in the practice of building and running the learning communities. Some problems and advantages are analyzed, with the suggestions given in the conclusion.

Keywords—learning community, Internet-based, English majors

I. INTRODUCTION

Learning community is a new type of organization in which teachers and learners can communicate and cooperate more than that in the traditional class. Members of the community join in the learning process, together with the realization of the self-respect, self-reflection, the social self-being.

In the field of English learning and teaching, to build and manage the learning community in and after class for English majors in college is a new trial in practice which is expected to promote the learning effects and efficiency. In the information age with the boom of the new media, Internet provides a supported platform for on-line activities and information collection.

II. LEARNING COMMUNITY

Dewey firstly introduced “community” to the field of learning and teaching. He assumed that the society is a community of thoughts and emotions which are based on the interpersonal communication[1]. The concept of community is used in education to emphasize the social interaction among learners. Through the social interaction and the power of peer models, the aim is to help learners understand the knowledge system, its structure and the development. In this way, learners can acquire some effective cognitive strategies and develop better ability of learning. The concept of “community” in the field of education evolves into a new concept, that is, “learning community”.

Learning community consists of learners (students) and learning assistants (teachers). All of them have the same learning task to finish, with the same aim to make progresses altogether. In the learning community, to

influence and to be influenced among the members is emphasized through the approaches of inter-personal communication, sharing the learning resources etc. [2]

According to the constructivism, acquiring knowledge is not a simple process of receiving or copying, but a constructing process. One has a unique way to understand the world and to construct his own sense[3]. The problem is that the sense constructed by oneself is not ensured to be exactly and totally correct and reasonable. In this sense, it is urgently necessary to share and communicate in a community. That is why the reasonable knowledge needs negotiation. Thus, one's independent thinking and dealing with knowledge is not enough. It is a complicated and long-term process to construct a sensible knowledge system.

Two types of learning community are included, they are, Internet-based virtual type and blended type with virtual and practical features.

To build and manage a learning community, two functions are satisfied.

The first is to consolidate the sense of social being. Constructing the learning community is an important way to satisfy the need of building learners' self-respect and belongingness[4]. In the inner structure of the learning community, members can have a strong sense that they belong to the same group, take the same tasks, obey the same rule and have the same sense of value. This kind of belongingness and the respect gained from other members can attract members to join more and be more active. In this way, members have more interests and supports in learning which is not a personal affair any more.

The second is to share the knowledge resources. Learners can communicate with both learners and assistants (teachers). In the way of constructing and sharing, learners can get touch with new information as well as different perspectives to deal with problems[5]. They are motivated to have more self-reflection and reorganize one's own knowledge system.

III. CONSTRUCTING A LEARNING COMMUNITY

How to build a learning community is another important problem concerned by the educators. It is proved that it is a gradual procedure to satisfy some certain regular conditions. Furthermore, it can also be allowed to be adjusted for the common benefits of all the members.

Firstly, to possess a common purpose is the basic condition to ensure the running of the learning community. The common purpose is the starting point and also the final

aim to build a community.[6] The individuals should firstly get it clear why they want to study together so that it is possible to organize activities and manage the community. It is this common purpose to unite all the separated individuals to be a unity. It is also this common purpose to make individual learning behavior be a team work.

Secondly, the teacher plays an important role in building and running the learning community. As learners are individuals in the learning process, it is necessary for the teacher to organize a certain amount of learners with common purpose and share features together to form a community. This is the starting step to build a community. With the participation of the teacher, the community can be organized routinely, formally and harmoniously.[8] What's more, the teacher can also assist learners to solve problems, orient directions, accelerate and advance the course. With the confidence and understanding system built among members, the community can be mature and developed.

Thirdly, to gain the sense of "social being" is the most important value in running the learning community. In the learning community, the learning process is based on the cooperation and communication within the community among members. Learning is never a separated and individual process. Each member should share the resources, express the ideas and listen to each other. All the members should respect each other and admit the being of each other as well. The social being identity is magnified to be big enough to achieve self-respect and realize self-value. In this way, the efficiency and effect of learning is promoted.

Fourthly, learners devote one's emotion and sensation into the community and accept the counterparts from other members. This is an invisible clue, like a backbone, going through and sustaining the whole community. Learners understand, accept and admit the perspective, expression and emotion of other members. The sense of belongingness is built gradually with the trust on and from the community. Without it, the community can not develop itself with inner motivation.

IV. INTERNET-BASED LEARNING COMMUNITY OF ENGLISH MAJORS

Learning community provides a new type of organization to teach and learn. In the field of English education in China, more researches focus on the theory but fewer are about the practice. This paper makes an effort to explore the application of the relevant theory of learning community. It is expected that a new model of teaching and learning in English education in college can be established and some enlightenments in practice can be provided.

A. Features of English Majors

English majors have some unique features which enable building and running the learning community to be readily feasible and applicable.

On one hand, English majors take small-scale class as the unit of learning and teaching, usually with about 20-25 students. It enables the teacher to communicate with each of the students and get to know about them in order to predict the structure and organization of the community.

On the other hand, the course taken by the English majors, taking the author's "Integrated Skills of English" course as the example, consists of various aspects of language skills and knowledge, not just focusing on one single aspect which may constrain the variety of activities. In each unit of the course, one certain topic is highlighted, with the relevant knowledge of speaking, listening, reading, writing as well as culture, history, economy and so on. Students are provided with various topics and tasks to develop their community activities.

B. Methodology

Based on the features of English majors, the author chose two classes in Grade one majoring in English from a college in Tianjin, with altogether 52 students to take an experimental study of building learning community with the Internet as the assisted platform. The building process is carried on as the figure 1 shows.(see figure1) It includes the start, organization, management and evaluation. The whole process is monitored by the teacher.

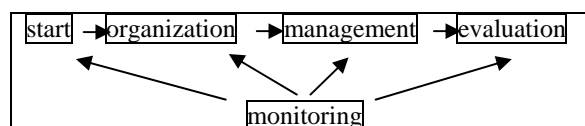


Figure 1. The flow chart of the application

Several aspects in the following are considered to ensure the experiment to be carried on.

Firstly, all the 52 students take part in the author's "Integrated Skills of English" course. Topics and tasks in this course are taken as the common purposes to achieve in the community. This provides a premise to build the community.

Secondly, 4-5 members are included in each learning community as they are willing to choose their partners. The amount of members is controlled so that the scale of learning community can be small enough. It is easy to make sure that each member is offered with equally large space to express himself.

Thirdly, Internet is the assisted platform for the learning community to communicate without any constraints of time and space. With QQ, blog, mini-blog, bbs and other web communication tools, on-line and off-line communication are both realized. Besides, Internet is used to collect and transfer information. Learners learn to make full and proper use of the Internet and develop the ability of self-study. Information collection is maximally realized and achieved with the assistance of Internet.

C. Activities Design

The learning community is part of the author's course "Integrated Skills of English". The topic and content in this course is taken as the reference or tasks of the activities of the learning community. Besides, some of the activities rely on the Internet.

The details of on-line activities are shown in table I.(see table I) Topics are proposed by members in the community. Any topics are accepted, for example, share of

cultural knowledge, discussion of grammar points, solution to questions, etc. All the members are required to visit and give the feedback to the topics. The frequency is recorded by the teacher. The quantity and quality of the on-line activities is the basis of the subsequent evaluation.

About the information collection, Internet is one of the most important and frequently-used resources for college students to get and collect information. To share the useful websites and evaluate the effectiveness of the website on giving information can promote the ability of information collection and improve the ability of self-study.

In details, the information collection is monitored and controlled. As the Internet is an important resource to collect the information in this information age with the new media developed, students learn to collect the information needed from the Internet effectively and efficiently. As they may collect the information required by one task, they can have a distribution of the assignment and share the resources at the same time when they share the information. Moreover, they are required to present whether the website where the information is collected is effective and helpful or not and how the information can be reached as soon as possible. The improvement of information collection ability can do good to students' self-study.

TABLE I. ON-LINE ACTIVITIES

On-line activities	
<i>location</i>	Internet: bbs, qq, blog, etc.
<i>Topics are about:</i>	English-relevant topic / course-relevant topic
	Questions and doubts
	Suggestions
<i>Members are required:</i>	To propose topics regularly
	To visit it regularly
	To give feedback in time
<i>Information is collected from:</i>	Name of resources
	Evaluation of resources

The details of off-line activities are shown in table II.(see table II)

It is flexible to arrange the off-line location. Mainly, the community members give the presentation or hold the discussion meeting in the classroom. Especially when the topic is related to the content of the author's course, the author, as the teacher, arranges the particular period of time for certain community to have a presentation. In this way, communities can learn from each other and share the advantages. The correlation of the activities in the learning community and the content in the course can motivate students to emphasize it more. And it is more convenient for teachers to guide the community.

Besides, other locations and time are available as well, as the community would like to arrange it. Another important aspect of off-line activities is the evaluation. All the members in each community give the evaluation at the end of the semester. In this way, students can get it clear whether he/she made good contribution to the community and

whether he/she achieved progresses as expected. The evaluation scale is designed by the teacher, complemented by the students.

TABLE II. OFF-LINE ACTIVITIES

Off-line activities	
<i>location</i>	Classroom/dorm/campus,etc.
<i>Topics are about:</i>	English-relevant topic / course-relevant topic
	Questions and doubts
	Suggestions
<i>Members are required:</i>	To present the topic report orally, regularly
	To hold and join in the discussion meeting regularly
	To give self-reflection report in written form in time
<i>Members evaluate :</i>	His/her frequency of joining activities
	His/her quality of the feedback/report/presentation
	His/her contribution to the community

D. Results Analysis

In the end of the semester, the author handed out 52 questionnaires to all the English majors, namely, the subjects, who have joined in the Internet-based learning community. An interview is attached to the survey as the complement.

According to the data collected, 95% of the students agree with the arrangement of the learning community. 90% declare that the communication ability, cooperation ability and information collection ability are improved greatly. Two thirds of the students reflect that the correlation of the learning community and the course can give students practical and clear motive to join in the community. Still,, 5% show that they do not make their voice heard.

From the interview, students point out that the activities of the community take up certain percentage of their spare time. They have to arrange their time schedule on purpose. The harvest is assured that the effects of learning in and after class are improved.

It is reflected from the final examination of this course taken by the author. The average score of these 52 students is 3% higher than that of the grade.

V. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The application of the learning community in the above enlightens the researchers to consider how an Internet-based learning community can be well constructed and managed in practice. Some suggestions are given in the following as the reference.

Firstly, how the teacher plays the role of guiding and monitoring decides whether the start of the learning community can be successful. Teacher is not a lecturer any more, but a bridge and one of the participants. After the guidance of the teacher for a period of time, the

management of community can be ensured formally and seriously. Furthermore, the teacher can help to develop the role of some key-men and allow more responsibilities to run the community done by students themselves.

Teachers understand and accept the concept of the learning community, overcoming the deficiency of the traditional education concept. Teachers should learn by themselves and be trained to be creative to apply new concepts in the class. Teachers are not the authorities in the class but the cooperative partners with the learners. Besides, teachers are responsible to the monitoring of the learning process. Whether an activity can achieve the expected effects depends on the teacher's rational management and organization, especially on the aspect of constructing a harmonious teacher-student relationship, construction the advantageous learning and teaching situation and carry on the activities step by step.

Secondly, students should possess stronger sense to cooperate with partners and to explore the new information. Students are not the blind followers and recipients. They are the controllers, as the core of the community. They decide whether the community can be sustained. The benefits of constructing a learning community should be presented to students. Based on it, students are expected to be motivated enough in the process of managing a learning community. Each member contributes to it and the role of each one is reflected and acknowledged. It is admitted that some of the students are "invisible" and can't make their voice heard. Teachers should pay equal attention to this part of students and exert their potential by creating more chances. All the members should respect each other and listen to each other. In this way, all can achieve equal chances of development

Thirdly, more activities, tasks and principles which accord with the need of community and unite all the members should be designed. On one hand, members can pay more attention to the community. On the other hand, the community can serve better for the students. Besides, a learning community should be distinguished from a group work. The former is more comprehensive, time-lasting and dynamic. Both students and teachers pay more attention and time into it. The harvest from joining in a learning community is far from a better learning effects. The ability of self-study, interpersonal communication and cooperation is the highlighted point when running a learning community.

VI. CONCLUSION

The research puts the conception of learning community in practice. It is proved that the Internet-based learning community of English majors influences the effects and improves the ability of learning from various aspects.

The correlation of the learning community and the course can make the purpose clearer and make the activities organized and oriented with course-directed goals. The teacher of the course can take more responsibilities to monitor the whole process of constructing and managing the learning community.

Internet plays an important role, as the supported platform in running the community. The on-line community

overcomes the constraints of time and space and provides abundant resources of information collection.

However, it is not avoided that some problems are revealed. It is expected to find better solution in the future research.

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