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Facilitating Online Communities for Educators, Managers, and Leaders

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Abstract

This paper explores strategies for promoting social learning among adult peers in online classrooms and workspaces. It examines the challenges faced by facilitators and leaders in fostering social learning in an increasingly digital context and offers solutions for overcoming these challenges.

Keywords: Online, Social Learning, Community Building

Facilitating Online Communities for Educators, Managers, and Leaders

Educators and learners are adjusting to a remote and online environment. Social connections play a critical role in learning, but these traditional relationships have been disrupted and changed by the physical isolation of remote and hybrid environments. Remote educators must learn strategies to better build and strengthen connections virtually.

While there is nascent literature on how to create and supervise effective virtual teams, this knowledge does not identify ways of fostering one-on-one relationships. Despite the growing number of virtual educational settings, knowledge surrounding social learning in these spaces is still relatively sparse. Therefore, research is warranted to uncover best practices for educators to create developmental relationships in virtual environments.

In discussing how relationships can help us learn, we must look to the field of adult learning. “Andragogy” is the art and science of helping adults learn. In this field, it is assumed that adults are able to draw on their accumulated life experience when learning. Adults are thought to learn best by doing (Knowles, 1984). Some theorists take it as far as saying that knowledge is primarily generated while working in teams, and individual learning is merely a byproduct of innovative teams.

Developmental relationships are interdependent, generative connections that promote growth and learning among individuals. Many studies report the impact of developmental relationships on learning, performance, and career development, leaving no doubt that it is in any educator’s interest to facilitate these relationships (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023). However, these relationships, and the work environments in which they thrive, can be challenging to create in fully remote environments. It is anticipated that the knowledge generated from this inquiry will afford new insights to inform virtual managers and leaders of the need for, and how to foster community among remote workers.

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this literature review is based on the premise that the future of education is increasingly dispersed, and that, to facilitate social learning, educational techniques must evolve to keep up with a changing environment. The goal of this research is to determine how facilitators cultivate and foster relationships among virtual learners. It is the author’s hope that the recommendations from this study will serve as a guide on the best practices of virtual leadership and on how to build community remotely.

The significance of this research is in the potential positive impact it could have for those responsible for forming and maintaining virtual educational environments. The implications from this review can be used to develop and support systems and best practices for fostering an environment better focused on relationship building in a virtual context. All research questions look to determine the practical ways in which developmental relationships can be facilitated by team leaders in remote environments.

Methodology

An integrative literature review was selected by the author as the method of choice to consolidate existing literature on the topic and to create a foundation for further research. The author conducted a preliminary review of empirical academic articles, books, and other publications. Some of these articles were found using keyword searches in Google Scholar, while others were found organically through assigned readings in classes. Additional resources were found through citations within source material. This review of literature seeks to examine current research on three major topics: developmental relationships and networks, virtual and remote work, and practical strategies and tools that can be used in the workplace.

Developmental Relationships Explained

Developmental relationships are mutual bonds focused on learning and growth that provide constructive challenge and support (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023). A strong developmental relationship can be characterized by “increasing amounts of intimacy, vulnerability, and authenticity” in both work and personal domains (Higgins & Kram, 2001). Encounters defined by these characteristics provide frequent opportunities for understanding, exchange, and growth. These relationships can include any dyadic relationship in which there is mutual learning. Much of adult learning is informal, or incidental. We learn informally through our interactions with others. Learning in relationship with peers creates opportunities for mutual learning, laying a foundation for nurturing developmental relationships (Marsick & Watkins, 1990).

Developmental relationships are both spontaneously and purposefully formed. Individual-level factors influencing the formation of developmental relationships include personality, education, self-esteem, gender, age, race or ethnicity, socioeconomic background, relational skills, adult developmental stage, and careers. Relational factors that have a similar influence may include empathy, shared goals, mutual respect and trust, reciprocal learning, and shared commitment to a common purpose, or the relationship itself. All of these factors are growth-enhancing, satisfying, and productive (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023).

By focusing on tasks or goals, relationships may be formed around a shared objective rather than shared personal characteristics (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023). Those with closely aligned future goals are more likely to spontaneously initiate and sustain developmental relationships. Cultural context can influence one’s goals, as values such as productivity and work life balance are culturally formed. A shared understanding of values, like incorporating diversity and inclusion, respect for experience and expertise, and expectation of growth and development (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023), can also foster relationships.

Barriers to Creation of Developmental Relationships

The formation of remote developmental relationships encounters considerable barriers. Virtual environments are deeply vulnerable to the likelihood of social error. Additionally, less interpersonal exposure leads to lower engagement (Germain & McGuire, 2014). Challenges are exacerbated by difficulties with using technology, and the minimization of nonverbal, social, and environmental cues important to communication (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023).

Challenges at the macro level could arise from the absence of a culture that nurtures trust building, or lack of practices that allow people to develop and maintain connections. Lack of relevant, accessible support policies and practices hamper relationship building efforts, and undermine the motivation for social interaction (Shen et al., 2015). Classroom context may impose constraints or provide opportunities for individuals to build and maintain relationships. Asynchronous interactions such as emails and discussion boards are less conducive to effective online work as they allow individuals to be more passive (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023).

Classroom diversity or cultural differences may affect performance and effectiveness—especially the case if one student is struggling with the language of communication, or does not identify with the dominant culture. Cross-cultural training could serve to enlighten students while improving communication and ultimately, relationships (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023).

Individual-level challenges can be the hardest for leaders to tackle, as personal factors may lie entirely outside of a facilitator's ability to address. For example, family support. Some people may have trouble developing relationships due to lack of self-awareness and adaptability. Self-awareness is the ability to observe the self accurately and objectively. Also, personality factors such as extraversion can affect employee behavior. Developmental relationships require mutual input and effort. If one party is not internally motivated, the relationship may lag.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

As technology changes, new skills are needed to cultivate relationships and resilience. The research conclusively found several practices that leaders can implement, proven to create a developmental culture and help facilitate relationship building. It is crucial to note that there is no one-size-fits-all method, and that policies and practices must be customized based on individual needs.

Be Intentional with Online Presence

Communication often occurs via nonverbal gestures. These are called “paralinguistic” aspects of communication, and encompass emotions, gestures, voice levels, and body language (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023). Those who have a strong in-person presence may not manifest it online. Social presence refers to the degree to which a person feels a sense of social connection or closeness with others, specifically in a virtual environment. It is the sense of "being there" with others and feeling like you are part of a social community or group, even though the communication is happening virtually. Social presence is crucial, as it has been linked to a range of outcomes, including increased engagement, more positive attitudes towards technology, and greater feelings of social support and connection (Delello & McWhorter, 2014). To increase your social presence, keep your head and shoulders in the frame, with a non-distracting background. Ensure your focus is on the call, not on other tasks. Pay attention to social cues such as body language and ensure that your technology is working. Use of video calls as opposed to solely asynchronous communication like emails can mitigate some communication barriers. Overall, the most important thing one can do to ensure connection is to prioritize the relationship over the technology (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023).

Create Shared Goals and Values

It requires more effort to build a friendship from a virtual environment than from an in-person one (Schinoff et al., 2020). Creating a “community of practice” with shared goals and values can help facilitate bonding. A community of practice is a group of people who share knowledge, expertise, and understandings of problems and solutions, and come together to fulfill both individual and group goals (Wenger, 1998). Common goals can be created through group projects, where students need to work collaboratively in order to accomplish a task.

Bonding Activities

Retreats and games can be effective tools for cross-cultural relating and connecting. According to Dekoven (2006), deeply played games can reveal culturally embedded themes fundamental to collective identities, allowing participants to gain insights while having fun. Individuals who participate in these activities are likely to enhance their interpersonal relationships and mutual understanding, while also gaining self awareness and a broader understanding of culture (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023).

Use Digital Tools Carefully

Virtual interactions are only as good as the technology used to mediate them. One on one communication is the richest, with in-person as the strongest, followed by video, audio, and text-based media, in order. Educators should select communication modalities that appropriately match the context. It is critical that technology is easy to use – a user friendly interface may enhance employee confidence and trust (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

As globalization increases, understanding intercultural dynamics becomes more critical (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023). Cultural competencies can be learned through study, experiential learning, and cultural immersion (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012). By developing and refining their cultural competencies, educators can facilitate a more inclusive, respectful, and supportive learning environment that acknowledges and values the diversity of the participants involved. Creating a nondiscriminatory climate can enable individuals from a stigmatized group to form networks with similar others (Power & Maltbia, 2008). Strategies for leveraging diversity include establishing a compelling rationale for leveraging diversity and accepting that the process of leveraging diversity is emergent, ongoing, and adaptive (Power & Maltbia, 2008).

Open Communication

Effective communication is an irreplaceable tool for building strong relationships. Communication is best supported by clear timing and modes of communication, and clear goals that help focus interactions (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023). In word and deed, leaders must encourage learners to be open and cultivate a climate of transparency. Building communication among virtual participants at the beginning of a project can reduce feelings of isolation, as well as reduce uncertainty and enhance cohesiveness and commitment (Germain & McGuire, 2014).

Important as it is, encouraging open communication is only one part of the puzzle. In listening to – and heeding – the needs of virtual learners, leaders must follow through with flexibility and openness to making changes. An example of this could be including time for feedback – this aids team learning and cohesion, and creates shared cognition (Ghosh and Hutchins, 2023). One tool to encourage employee participation and communication is Stephen Brookfield’s (2005) “Circle of Voices.” Using this method, every student is given time to speak and be heard. All are treated as equals, eliminating hierarchical intrusion and inefficiency.

Limitations

This paper has limitations. Much of the work reviewed is conceptual in nature and more empirical work is required. Variables such as emergent technologies require longitudinal studies to determine interactional dynamics and impacts on learning and relationships. The use of digital resources offers new ways for learning and development, but we are unable to predict how future inventions may impact the future of relationships. It is clear that developmental relationships remain an important area of study, and continued research is warranted.

Conclusion

Technology is radically and rapidly transforming the ways that learning organizations operate worldwide. This paper shed light on the barriers of forming relationships in a learning environment, identified addressable issues, and offered solutions for leaders to facilitate and, as best as can be anticipated, to future-proof relationships with and among employees. If history is any guide, the nature of collaboration and its challenges will continue to evolve. The undeniable collaborative benefits of communications technology are vulnerable to countervailing phenomena that stymie collaboration. We've learned from online cultures that cognitive biases, tribalism, factionalism, siloing and othering are not only possible, but profoundly unhelpful. Awareness of not just technological, but cultural trends is vital for any responsible educator. Developmental relationships, their proper care and feeding, demands adroit and holistic management of classes and the individuals of which they are composed. Developmental relationships are the glue that can hold an enterprise together with the most powerful bonds of our better nature: personal respect, dignity, professional pride, and the joy of productive cooperation.

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