



BUILDING ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR SELF-TAUGHT LEARNERS

Guangming Li (author)
National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA), China

Haidong Wang (author and presenter)
National Education Examinations Authority, China

Xinzheng Lu (author)
National Education Examinations Authority, China

Summary

As an open and distance education system with Chinese characteristics, the Self-taught Higher Education Examinations (STE) has contributed greatly for the social and economic fast development by cultivating millions of educated laborers since established in 1981. However, due to its weakness in learning guide and support service, STE confronts the problems of poor learning effect, low pass rate in course exams, and high drop-out rate. For fundamentally changing this situation, National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA) has explored ways to enhance the learning support for the self-taught learners. Taking use of modern information technology and building online learning community is one of these endeavors. The online learning community provides a possibility for improving learning environment, building support system and promoting learning effectiveness.

Beginning from an introduction of the background and issues that STE faced in the new century, this paper explains the importance of learning support for STE system. A review of the literature on the concepts, theoretical framework and establishment of online learning community is then presented. This paper also summarizes some initiatives on building online supports for self-taught learners by NEEA in recent years. A series of suggestions on constructing online communities are suggested as a conclusion.

I. Introduction & Background

Chinese higher education is undergoing an unprecedented reform and rapid development, leaping over from elite education to mass education. The gross rate of higher education reaches 23%. The student population in tertiary education is about 27 millions in 2007 (Department of Education, 2008), surpassing that of the U.S. and ranking top one in the world. Open, flexible and distance education plays a vital role in the development of higher education. Three main forms dominate this field: TV and Radio University system (TVRU),

Self-taught Higher Education Examinations system (STE), and continuing and distance education provided by conventional universities.

As an open and distance education system with Chinese characteristics, STE has contributed significantly to the social and economic development by educating millions of laborers since established in 1981. Combining individual flexible learning, various institutions providing training and instruction, and national academic exams, STE is open to all people who want to learn, open to various learning styles, and open to all the education providers. By the end of 2007, a total of 8 million people had graduated from this system, and there are about 13 million self-taught learners registered (NEEA, 2008).

However, due to its weakness in learning guide and support service, STE is faced with many problems including poor learning effect, low pass rate in course exams, and high drop-out rate. According to the annual report of 2007, there were totally 9.65 millions people taking part in the national exams, however, only about 7 hundred thousands graduated. The drop-out from the exams reaches 20%, that is, a total of 2 million students quit from the scheduled exams (NEEA, 2008). Learners still use the print curriculum and textbooks as the main resource, and most study individually. In this kind of self-taught learning, students have sufficient freedom but lack strong support; most of them study the courses alone without any partners. They can't get answers in a timely fashion when meeting problems. They have almost no channel to share good or bad experience.

Seeking fundamental changes in this situation, NEEA has explored ways to enhance support for the self-taught learners in recent years. Utilizing modern information technology and building online learning community are part of the many endeavors. Online community provides a venue for improving learning environment, building support system, and promoting learning effectiveness. This paper discusses the possibility and issues of using online learning community as a stepping stone for reform of STE learning support.

II. The Promise of Online Learning Community

Online learning community is also called virtual learning community, electronic learning community, web-based learning community, online classroom, or virtual campus, etc. Research shows that a learning community not only increases persistence of students in online programs, but also enhances information exchanges, learning supports, group commitment, collaboration, and learning satisfaction. Based on a study conducted by Western Governors University, virtual learning community is found to raise the retention rate of online instruction to 80% (Santovec , 2004) , while high drop off rate is always a headache for distance and flexible learning. Palloff and Pratt (1999) assert that, "the learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs online. Members depend on each other to achieve learning outcomes for the courses online.....without the support and participation of a learning community, there is no online course" (p. 29).

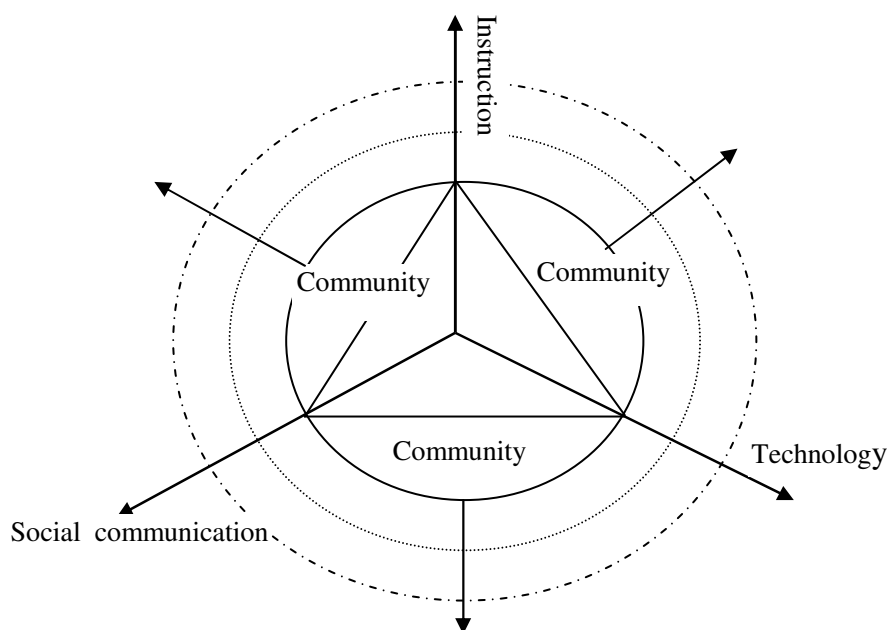
An online learning community is comprised of a technical platform, learning tasks, and social interaction (Carabajal, Lapointe & Gunawardena, 2003; Tu & Corry, 2002). According to Carabajal, Lapointe and Gunawardena, there are three dimensions for an online community: technological dimension, task dimension, and social dimension. Technology provides a gathering place and communication tools necessary for enhancing the effectiveness of interaction. Tasks are the learning content, materials, resources and activities used by the courses. The social dimension infers that participants maintain some degree of mutual caring and understanding through frequent interaction. Students develop a sense of belonging, social-emotional bonds and good group relationships during the online learning process. Tu and Corry (2002) suggested a similar theoretical framework, including the instruction, social interaction, and technology as the three major dimensions of eLearning community. See

figure 1.

Using multiple tools such as the Bulletin Board System (BBS), chat-room, HorizonLive, listserv or email, the online communication consists of speech-related communication and social communication. The social communications, either related to learning tasks or to casual chatting, can provide the members with supportiveness and keep the group together, and can thereby contribute to their learning outcomes. Thus the social aspect is crucial for an effective learning community. Harrisim, Hiltz, Teles and Turoff (1995) explained that, "computer-mediated communication is capable of supporting socio-emotional communication as well as task-oriented communication; in fact, without personal communication, the group will not be nurtured" (p. 77). Regarding the amount of the social communication, some studies (e.g., Huang & Wei, 2000) found that only 40% of the face-to-face group process is spent on task-focused interaction, implying that more than half of a group's communication is off task. Oren, Mioduser and Nachmias (2002) conducted a series of five studies on the development of the social climate of virtual learning discussion groups in online learning. These studies echoed the findings of other researchers. In each of the discussion group in their research, a social activity layer gradually emerged, fulfilling an important role in supporting the learning group's work, as evidenced in the contents of more than one third of the messages in an asynchronous environment.

As to how to build an online learning community, scholars proposed a series of steps and strategies. For example, Pallof and Praff (1999) reviewed relevant literature and proposed a five-step approach: creating a place for group gathering, selecting effective managers from it, defining the standard and specifying the rules, allowing a social role, sub-group as well as student self-solving conflicts. Maor (2003) advanced four strategies to make a community alive, which include facilitating subject and personal communication, creating a safe and trust environment, students supporting each other, and allowing sufficient prepare time for students and instructor.

There are relatively few studies on the effects of online community. Lee (2006) and his colleagues found that there is no direct correlation between students active communication and their learning achievement. While Zhong and Liang (2006) from China found only the interaction of three factors of instruction, technology and social communication has a significant correlation with students' scores, while any one of the factors did not have a correlation with students' learning achievements.



rry, 2002)

From a brief review of the literature, it can be seen that studies in the West focus on the process of online learning and instruction, and particularly on the online communication. While domestic studies mainly focus on the aspects of technology and instructional design. As online courses become popular in the colleges and universities, domestic scholars show increasingly greater interests in the online learning community. Some researchers proposed theoretical models based on their teaching experience. For example, Zhu (2000) outlined a seven unit model, while Wang (2004) presented a three tiers construct system of online community. However, there are very few studies on online learning support for STE learners. Actually, for those self-taught learners who lack the classroom and campus atmosphere, they need a virtual community and online support system even urgently than the regular students from conventional schools.

III Online Learning Support for STE : Some Initiatives

To adapt to the new social development and employ the modern ICT, National Education Examinations Authority has launched a series of initiatives on the online learning support for the self-taught learners in recent years. For instance, establishing Q & A Network, collaborating with distance education Companies, carrying out international research project jointly with foreign institutions, and so on. These initiatives have accumulated experience and built a foundation for the further practices.

Q & A Network

In April 1999, NEEA established a Question & Answer Network for STE learners, especially targeting those students from rural areas. According to the plan, the network includes a central website, provincial websites and local websites. A Learning Support Center was setup to be responsible for design and regular management of the network. The main function of the Q & A Network was to provide consulting and training for self-taught learners, and with goals towards implementing online test. Due to the lack of technology, learning resource, and marketing experience, the network was closed after one year of experiment. But as an early initiative for online support, it points a right direction and accumulates some experience as well as lessons.

Collaboration with DE companies

One lesson learned from the Q & A Network is that NEEA does not have the capability of accomplishing this huge and massive task by itself under the conditions of scarce resource and insufficient technology. As an alternative, it seems more practical to collaborate with distance education companies in providing various services for STE learners. In 2001, NEEA signed a collaborative contract with Beijing Huaxia Dadi Distance Learning Services Co., and authorized the company to provide online learning services for the system. Huaxia also set up a fund for awarding the outstanding learners annually. There has been eighteen hundred thousands learners registered their online courses by the end of 2007 and eighty thousands are still participating in their system. Besides Huaxia company, there are several DE companies offering online instruction for the self-taught learners such as Zhengbao Distance Education Co., Xinzhitang, and so on.

Sino-Europe E-learning project

In order to introduce valuable experience from other countries, NEEA initiated an international project jointly with Open University of Catalonia (UOC) from Spain through the coordination of the ICDE. This project (named with Developing EU-China e-Learning Model and Capacities) started in June 2001 with a goal to introduce the electronic learning model and online

instructional approaches, and to build the online learning support system for STE (NEEA, 2006). Through a three year joint study, a serial of academic visits, seminars and personnel training was organized, the UOC platform and relevant materials was translated into Chinese. A STE course of International Economics was selected and 122 volunteer students participated in the online instruction experiment in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. Through the three month experiment, this study turned out to be successful one and was terminated in May 2004. The reflections from the self-taught learners were quite positive. They felt that the online instruction was attractive and stimulating, arousing the learning interests, enhancing the communication among students. This joint project introduced new philosophy, model of platform, and best practices to China. It contributed significantly to the establishment of online service for self-taught learners.

STE Websites and Networks

In recent years, NEEA and provincial STE offices has set up institutional websites or even special STE websites to publish STE policies and regulations, to answer questions about learning and testing, as well as to offer other information services. The intranet in these institutions has become an indispensable part of daily work. From the student side, young people use the Internet in their work, study and daily life. According to the Internet World Statistic, there are about 2.98 billion Internet users in Mainland China by the end of 2008, and most of them are young people. Therefore, technical and practical conditions have matured to carrying out large scale online learning for self-taught learners.

IV. Suggestions for Further Practices

Building online learning communities for the self-taught learners is an essential part of learning support for STE. Although there are some studies in this area, it is still a relatively new task and new field for NEEA and provincial STE offices. This task, in essence, is related to the reform and transformation of traditional STE system. There is no "how to do" right answer to this question, and all the possible solutions could come only from the practices. Some suggestions are presented at the following.

Firstly, building online communities should consider the characteristics of STE system and should not adopt the model of virtual university. STE is a student-centered open learning system which emphasizes learners' choices on the learning content, approach, time and place, as well as exam schedule. This is different from online instruction organized by schools. In these courses, teacher is still the manager and all the online activities are based on the instruction. The teacher use the homework, discussion, quiz widely as daily assessment methods. But for self-taught learners, all these activities are controlled by themselves. So, in stead of a virtual university or online college model, the online community for STE should be a highly comprehensive and inclusive learning support center.

Secondly, the online communities should be able to satisfy learners' diverse needs and to enhance the learning quality and effect. To meet different needs of the students, the online community builders need to know what kind of problems and difficulties students may confront with, and how to help them work out. It is important to provide support by the part-time advisors, but an even better way is to let the students help each other. Thus they can communicate frequently, answer others' questions, share good experience, and remind each other a possible pitfall. The students' needs should always be the overriding concern for online community builders.

Thirdly, the design of STE online community should consider three dimensions including technology, instruction and social communication. This is a common conclusion from many

studies and practices. Some lessons learned indicate that community builders often start from constructing website and software, and then they find that instructional resource is insufficient. After they have designed and developed learning materials with efforts, but to find that students have no will and interest to use. So, it is important to consider the three dimensions from the very beginning.

Fourthly, the STE online communities could be in various modes, there is no need to have one unified model. STE is a huge system involving government offices, thousands of educational institutions, and millions of self-taught learners. The national platform, the institutional websites, and autonomy learning group, could be built into different learning communities. The community is also shaped by the technology, learning content, and the construct of membership. To build an online community of STE, it is inappropriate to adopt a unified model. Instead, participation and creativity should be encouraged to find successful practices.

Last but no the least, the selection of technology should consider the condition of self-taught learners. The most advanced technology may not be the most appropriate one. To build a sound online community, multiple communication tools and approaches should be provided for the learners, such as synchronous and asynchronous ones, etc. The most popular technology including BBS, MSN, chat-room, listserv or personal Blog, all could become good tools for online support. When evaluating an online community, people should not make a judgment based on the sophistication of its technology but on how it meets the needs of self-taught learners.

References

- Department of Education, September 2008, The annual report of national education development. Available at: http://www.edu.cn/jiao_yu_fa_zhan_498/20080901/t20080901_321919.shtml
- NEEA, 2007 Statistic Report for Self-taught Higher Education Examinations. March 2008.
- Santovec, M. L. (2004). Virtual learning communities lead to 80 percent Retention at WGU. Distance Education Report, 2004-4-15.
- Palloff, & R. Pratt, K. (1999) Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom. Jossey-Bass Publishers: San Francisco.
- Carabajal, K. Lapointe, D. & Gunawardena, (2003). Group development in online learning communities. In Moore, M. & Anderson (Eds), *Handbook of Distance Education*(pp. 217-234), W. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers: New Jersey.
- Tu, C. & Corry, M. (2002) eLearning Communities. The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 3(2):207-218.
- Harrisim, L. Hiltz, S. R., Teles, L. and Turoff, M.(1995). Learning networks: A Field Guide to Teaching and Learning Online. MIT press.
- Oren, A., Mioduser, D. & Nachmias, R. (2002) The Development of Social Climate in Virtually Learning Discussion Groups. International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 2002, 3(1): 1-19.
- Lee, J., Carter-Wells, J. Glaeser, B. Ivers, K. & Street, C. (2006). Facilitating the development of a learning community in an online graduate program. The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 7(1): 13-33.

- Zhong, K.D. & Liang, Y.J. (2006) , The research on the relation structure character of Web-based community and learning performance , Open Education Research , 2006 (6) : 69-73.
- Zhu, Z.T. (2000), Online Education Application. Beijing : Beijing Normal University press.
- Wang, L. (2004) , The theory and application of virtual learning community. Higher Education Press.
- NEEA, Internal report of Sino-Europe E-learning project, August 2004.
- World Internet Stats, March 2009, available at <http://www.internetworldstats.com/>