



Democratizing digital learning: theorizing the fully online learning community model

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Abstract

The integration of digital technologies at institutions of higher education are profoundly influencing formal learning on a global scale. Social-constructivist models of *fully* online learning are well-positioned to address the demands of government, and economic and social-development organizations for civically-engaged individuals with strong problem-solving, critical-thinking and collaboration competencies. With an established record of performance at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), Canada, the *Fully Online Learning Community* (FOLC) is one such model.

This paper theorizes FOLC as a response to several problematics, including (a) the aforementioned demand for greater educational focus on higher-order competency development, (b) the deficiencies of distance education and MOOCs as *learning* models, and (c) a quest for new learning models that strengthen deliberation skills and deepen democratic experience. As a divergent fork of the Community of Inquiry model, FOLC describes collaborative learning as a symbiosis of social and cognitive interactions amplified through effective use of synchronous and asynchronous digital affordances. Furthermore, it models democratized learning communities that reduce transactional distance between learners and educators, incorporates authentic assessment, and encourages negotiated technology affordances and cognitive outcomes while distributing responsibility for constructive criticality.

Having positioned FOLC conceptually, and addressed current limitations, a research agenda for extending its empirical foundations, and leveraging UOIT's EILAB affordances, is presented. The underlying argument is that self-regulating and transformative learning communities can be established and sustained in fully online environments, and that such communities (a) produce a diversity of beneficial learning outcomes, and (b) deepen the democratic functioning of learners and their social contexts.

Keywords: Online learning, E-learning, Collaborative learning, Fully online learning community model, Problem-based learning, Learning and democracy, Social constructivist learning, Community of inquiry, Digital learning model

Introduction

There were more than 40 million higher-education students in the world taking one or more of their classes online in 2013 (Atkins, 2013). Allen and Seaman (2016) indicate that over 28% of students enrolled in degree-granting institutions in the U.S. took at least one online course in 2014. In Canada, over 20,000 online courses are available through colleges and universities in the province of Ontario alone (Contact North, 2016). Looking beyond these well-cited numbers, digital learning represents a diverse phenomenon shaped by context, social values, learning models and level of digital integration (Aparicio, Bacao,

& Oliveira, 2016; Siemens, Gašević, & Dawson, 2015). For example, *blended* or *hybrid* models ask participants to complete some tasks using online tools in addition to attending in-class lectures or tutorials. *Fully* online programs do not require participants to be on campus for course-related purposes, except by choice to use extra-curricular resources. In these programs, individuals engage in learning activities in a shared “digital space” using a mix of synchronous and asynchronous affordances. Among fully online programs and models, some focus on supporting highly individualized modes of learning with optional forms of cooperation (Dalsgaard & Paulsen, 2009; Paulsen, 2003, 2008). Others emphasize transactional learning in which social interaction and collaboration is essential for reducing confirmation bias and building socially meaningful knowledge (Garrison, 2016).

The *Fully Online Learning Community* (FOLC) model (vanOostveen et al., 2016) was developed in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ontario Institute of Technology (UOIT), a mid-sized, Canadian technology-oriented university. This transactional model was conceived as an offshoot of the *Community of Inquiry* (CoI) model (Garrison, 2011; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). However, as described below, through extensive praxis and ongoing empirical study, FOLC is evolving conceptually as a distinct alternative to the CoI by foregrounding democratized and emancipatory learning processes that are adaptable to the socio-cultural context of institutions and learners.

Context

FOLC responds to four problems related to the transformation of higher education in an increasingly globalized and digitalized knowledge society. Firstly, it responds to the limitations of distance learning and MOOCs (e.g., student isolation, low completion rates, etc.), and their accompanying assumptions about learning as the “delivery” of expert information to the masses (Miller, 2014). Challenging the tacit epistemology of distance learning, FOLC embraces the constructivist notion that all efforts to understand “reality,” including virtual reality, involves the social creation of knowledge and not just individual “ingestion” of information (Johnson & Liber, 2008).

Secondly, FOLC responds to the call for greater development of 21st century competencies desired by influential organizations such as the World Economic Forum (2016) and the Conference Board of Canada (2016). These competencies are characterized as (a) traversal, or foundational to the development of other key competencies across domains; (b) multidimensional, including knowledge, skills and attitudes; and (c) related to higher-order abilities that support complex problem-solving (Voogt & Roblin, 2012), and collaborative thinking (Garrison, 2016).

Thirdly, FOLC’s activity, control, and community orientations respond to the needs of transformative and emancipatory learning as conceptualized by Human Rights Education (Tibbitts, 2005; Tibbitts & Kirchsclaeger, 2010) and Social Justice Education (Grant & Gibson, 2013). Several specific conditions fostering transformative learning identified by Taylor (2007, 2008, 2016), and strongly supported by FOLC-based learning environments, include:

- An environment that promotes a sense of safety, openness, and trust, encouraging the sharing of emotions as preparation for critical reflection.
- Activities that facilitate the exploration of divergent perspectives, problem solving, and critical thinking.