

Levels of Discourse within a Web-based Collaborative Learning Environment

Stephen C. Bronack,
University of Virginia

This paper attempts to discriminate among online learning environments in terms of their capacities to foster varying levels of discourse within communities. The author speculates about the practical and empirical implications of stimulating and sustaining varying levels of discourse within online learning communities. Several key constructs that form the foundation for a discussion of the differential use of Web-based technologies to foster the creation and maintenance of online learning communities emanate from the work of John Dewey -- specifically, *The Public and Its Problems*, in which concepts such as: the associative being, public and private communications, and community are defined.

Computer-supported collaboration via the World-wide Web provides an excellent metaphor and venue for conjoint action toward mutually beneficial goals, satiating the need of humans to join in associations, and providing a mode for individuals to learn via the participatory activities that occur as a result of various partnerships. Designers, instructors and students must examine the scope and intentions of the communications they wish to foster when choosing which communication method to utilize. The attributes of each level of discourse play a considerable role in what implications and consequences arise from the communications of those engaged within the environment. Those who recognize these attributes and utilize them to enhance the collaborative effort are more likely to ensure that the web-based endeavor is a successful one.