The Diamond Model of College English Learning Community in the Context of Smart Learning Environment

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Abstract. This paper, as part of the achievements in a teaching reform program in college English teaching, is devoted to exploring how to build a learning community in order to support learners in college English learning. Based on the elements of a learning community, a diamond model of College English learning community has been developed in the context of smart learning environment.

1 Introduction

The term “Learning Community” has been derived from the sociological concept “Community”. At present, it is still difficult to reach an agreement on the understanding of community in different contexts and discourse systems [1]. Regarding the definition and constructive elements of the learning community, there hasn’t been a consensus among scholars yet. Richard Dufour proposes the widely influential concept of “professional learning community” which suggests that the community should strive for supporting students’ autonomous learning, maintaining harmonious cooperative atmosphere and focusing on the learning results [2]. In light of the mainstream definitions in China, Xue [3] proposes that learning community mainly refers to a community composed of learners and facilitators (including teachers, experts, tutors and parents, etc.), who have common goals, often learn together in a certain supporting environment, share various learning resources, carry out mutual dialogue, exchange and communication, share mutual emotions and goals, complete certain learning tasks together, strive for mutual influence and mutual promotion of interpersonal relations through common activities, and have a strong sense of identity and belonging to the community. At present, however, it has been generally agreed that social constructivism forms the theoretical basis of learning community.

In the late 1980s and 1990s, learning communities became popular in American universities. Since 2000, learning community has been drawing increasing attention from Chinese scholars, especially after the introduction of the school learning community reform initiated by Manabu Sato, a famous Japanese education reformer. In the 21st century, with the rapid development of the Internet and the development of online learning platform, learning community has gained new impetus [4].

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2 Core concepts

Learning Community: Scholars have defined the elements of a learning community from multiple perspectives. According to Xue [3], there were six elements involved in a learning community, including the main bodies, characteristics of the main bodies, the learning environments, types of activities, interpersonal relations, as well as the scope of the community. This definition has provided a fundamental framework for the construction of learning community in this paper.
Learning: Learning community takes constructivism as its theoretical foundation [3]. According to constructivism, students acquire knowledge not through teachers’ teaching, but through the construction of meaning in the learning process with the help of teachers and other learning facilitators, through using necessary learning materials and means under a certain social and cultural background. Therefore, the theory regards “situation”, “cooperation”, “conversation” and “meaning construction” as the four elements or attributes of learning environment.

Smart Learning Environment: IBM believes that the learner-centered smart education system should provide adaptive learning projects and learning portfolio for students; Intelligent education advocates the creation of a learning space-time environment with certain wisdom (such as perception, reasoning, auxiliary decision-making) by virtue of the power of information technology, aiming to promote the comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development of learners’ wisdom, and ultimately achieve the common good for human beings (including individuals, others, the society) through the adaptation, shaping and selection of learning and living environment. Intelligent education fully embodies the “learner-centered” concept [5].

3 The Diamond Model of College English Learning Community in the Context of Smart Learning Environment

On the above mentioned theoretical basis, a learning community, as part of a teaching reform program in Xijing University, a private University in China, has been built in an attempt to provide an integrated solution to approach non-English speakers’ low learning motives and poor self-efficacy in learning College English, a compulsory course for the first-year and second-year college students. Based on Xue’s six elements of a learning community, a diamond model of College English learning community has been developed in the context of smart learning environment (See Figure 1). The following will illustrate how the model works in practice.

![Diamond Model of College English Learning Community](image)

Figure 1. The diamond model of College English learning community.
Main bodies: Learners and learning facilitators make the main bodies of the learning community [3]. Seen from Figure 1, in the diamond model, they stand at the heart of the diamond shape, with learners being in the inner circle and learning facilitators in the outer circle. Worth mentioning, learning facilitators have been put in the model rather than teachers, to convey that it means more than teachers to help learners to learn, and to foster learning to happen. The facilitators could be anyone who is capable of serving the purpose. In practice, they can be teachers, peers, experts, professionals, or anyone with expertise or knowledge necessary for the results of learning. This is a prominent demonstration of the learner-centered concept.

Characteristics: Characteristics of the main bodies mean that there are common goals among them [3]. In the diamond model, shared goals among the main bodies are crucially important in that they provide inner motivations for all parties involved to make joint efforts. In other words, one’s hard work is a ready source of encouragement for the rest to contribute his own. It is also worth mentioning that the common goals can be very elastic. In practice, they can range widely from quite ambitious and long-term goals like standing out in English competitions, passing national College English proficiency tests, to very practical and immediate goals like passing a quiz or completing the questions following a reading article. In practice, such elastic goals have actually given rise to sub-communities within the College English learning community, giving rise to a network of sub-communities which work together to promote the achievement of common big or small goals.

Environment: Environment of the learning community refers to the supporting environment for learning [3]. In the diamond model, the supporting environment includes not only the physical smart learning environment, but also the assessment mechanism matching with teaching. First of all, the smart learning environment is made available by modern information technology in education, including: (1) multimedia classrooms for daily classroom teaching; (2) a QQ group for instant and regular communication, exchange, information sharing and file storage of learners after class; (3) Rain classroom, a We-chat-based light program developed by Tsinghua University as a solution to instant classroom interaction tool, for preview before class, attendance check and instant interaction in class; (4) iTest, an intelligence cloud-based test platform, for on-line simulated examination of students after class; (5) Smart tools for each learning module, such as Baicizhan APP for vocabulary learning. Such technical support have contributed to the realization of a smart “learner-centered” learning environment, which is not only able to provide adaptive learning projects and learning portfolio for students, but also capable of promoting the comprehensive, coordinated and sustainable development of learners’ wisdom. Secondly, the learning portfolio-based assessment mechanism is also made possible by information technology, including: (1) the formative assessment, which includes attendance module, interactive module, test module, homework module, three monthly online examinations for each semester; (2) the summative assessment, which mainly refers to the final examination. Through the integration of smart learning resources, a closed loop has been formed before class, during class and after class to provide learners with as much learning support as possible. The integration of formative assessment and summative assessment, to provide regular and constant feedback for learners to make adjustments for the occurrence of learning.

Relationships: Relationships of the learning community refer to the interpersonal relationship in the community [3]. In the diamond model, the most obvious interpersonal relationship among learners is represented by competition and cooperation. According to the amount of specific tasks, it is normal to complete small tasks through cooperation with partners and medium and large tasks with teams of three or four members. The effect and quality of task completion are normally tested through peer review and competition between teams, and the results are filed in standard forms and recognized in due course. The sense of formality and ceremony are also used to strengthen the sense of competition and cooperation.

Activities: The activities of the learning community refer to the dialogue, communication and sharing acts in the community [3]. In the project, the smart learning environment has provided technical support for these activities to take place without the bounders of space or time. Besides,
the combo of competitive-cooperative interpersonal relationships has made dialogues, communication and sharing quite normal and spontaneous behaviors. Simultaneously, they have contributed to fostering the consciousness of co-building, sharing and all-winning awareness and behaviors, as well as the sense of belonging and identity within the community.

**Networks:** Networks of the learning community refer to the scale of influence exerted by a community [3]. In the learning community concerned in this paper, they involve all the interaction between and among the sub-communities and them with the overall community. As mentioned earlier, College English learning community, as the larger course-based community, in operation can give rise to more than one task-based or goal-based sub-communities. As a result, the smaller sub-communities and the larger course community work together to promote positive changes in learners’ learning motivation and self-efficacy, thus positively affecting learning achievements and improving teaching effects.

**4 Conclusion**

This paper, based on the basic elements of the learning community, a diamond model of College English learning community under the support of smart learning environment, has been explored in this paper. To its core, it strives for creating a learner-centered supportive learning community experience, which is conducive to the improvement of overall academic performance and their inner learning drive and self-efficacy through the constant practice of co-construction, sharing and all-winning in the community and strengthened sense of belonging and community. Further research, however, is well recommended to explore its short-term and long-term impact on learners and their learning.

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