

The Digital Learning Network: CoPs, Technology and Learning Outcomes

Amanda Cannada

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Professor Michelle Herrera

Introduction

Colleges and Universities are complex institutions with organizations, hierarchy, systems and procedures. Each department has a director or department head and an administrator and/or support staff. They are ones who keep these intuitions functioning behind the scenes. At most higher education institutions, support staff do not always have the opportunity to meet, discuss triumphs, failures, efficiencies and best practices. This paper will discuss using a digital learning network to collaborate with other professionals in regards to academic travel. Collaboration and communication within departments and the Travel office will promote efficiency with each academic department. Learning Management Systems such as Blackboard will be used for this learning activity. Theoretical framework, technology, outcomes and assessment of the digital learning activity will also be expounded upon within this paper.

Theoretical Framework

This learning activity finds its basis in Experiential Learning Theory and concept of Communities of Practice. Kolb describes Experiential Learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Kolb also breaks the theory down into six parameters:

- Learning is a process, not just a result.
- Learning is circular. We are learning and relearning.
- Learning requires solving conflicts between opposing views.
- Learning is holistic.
- Learning derives from interactions between the person and their environment.
- Learning is the process of creating knowledge (p. 194).

ELT is appropriate for the digital learning network learning activity due to its reliance on experience, interaction with others and the environment and the holistic approach it takes to

learning. Human beings are constantly receiving and giving stimulus that provides learning experiences each day. This is no different in the workplace. The digital learning network would provide a formal arena for the transformation of experience to create knowledge (p. 194).

Communities of Practice are groups of people that have the same educational goal and trade ideas and methods in order to reach that goal. CoPs also provide supportive and committed learning relationship among those that are in the group (Adams, 2009). The digital learning network is essentially a Community of Practice among college administrators and staff where collaboration is key for the success of the network.

Technology

Each year the NMC releases their Horizon report on academic trends in Higher Education. One of the fastest trends they discuss is the rise of Online Learning. Online Learning has the ability to provide a personalized experience for the learner (Johnson, et al., 2014) and has the ability to create sense of community for learners in spite of their lack of proximity. Learning Management Systems (LMS) like Moodle or Blackboard provides comprehensive technology to use to implement this network. Many colleges and universities use LMS for learning and training so many administrators are familiar with the tool. For this learning activity, Blackboard will be exclusively used, as the designer of the learning activity is most familiar with its use.

Blackboard's platform and ease of use will provide a gateway for peer teaching and learning among professionals. It enables to learners to engage in discussions and share ideas through discussion posts. Audio, video and hyperlinks are also at the learner's disposal thus expanding the opportunities of learning, sharing ideas and best practices with other professionals. As Blackboard being the hub of different multimedia channels, it can provide additional reinforcement and retention of information to assist the learner in the activity (Krippell, McKee,

& Moody, 2010). Due to Blackboard's relative ease of use, those who are slow or reluctant to learn new technology can find solace that although everyone is not starting at the same technological level, peer teaching and learning while gaining technological skills is one of the educational goals (Gunawardena, Hermans, Sanchez, Richmond, Bohley, & Tuttle, 2009). In the workplace, there is often a mix of formal and informal learning. As education continues to progress, learners are becoming the creators of information instead of simply the consumers. Including tools such as Google or Facebook groups, wikis or blogs broadens the opportunity for learners to create connections from others in similar lines of work (Brown, 2009).

Learning Activity Proposal

Learners in the DLN would consist of college administrators, coordinators, associates and assistants. The DLN would target employees that perform logistics, budgets, programming and other education related work. The network would serve a learning hub for learners to gain more skills in their position, cultivate professional development with their peers and acquire camaraderie with fellow professionals that they may have not come in contact with previously. As there are many scenarios that college professionals can learn from each other, academic travel is a large one.

The learning activity would be executed in learning the material and applying what they have learned after reading or viewing media on different scenarios. Often in training, only literature is provided. A multimedia approach would be presented in DLN, which would consist of images, presentation slides and videos on how execute travel procedures such advances, reimbursements, booking tickets, and determining approximate per diem rates. Students can view the material as much as they need to. Supplying this information on Blackboard would replace

going to a classroom –type training and watching the instructor perform these tasks on a screen while the student passively watches. After, the student absorbs the material and feels comfortable that they have retained what they learned; they have the opportunity to take a hands-on approach to the travel procedures themselves. This is called “Practice Session”. The student will be given a number of scenarios to try and complete the travel transactions that by applying what they have learned to the scenario. Below is an example of a scenario that a learner may read.

“ The History Department’s program administrator has a graduate student that is interested in going Cuba for their dissertation research. The faculty advisor would also be attending this trip. They are planning to leave Spring 2015. The trip will last for 2 weeks. According to your experience and the materials on provided to you on the network, please describe what would be the best and/or efficient way to make the workflow for this trip run smoothly.”

After the answer is submitted, the LMS will provide a standard answer according to the literature uploaded to the system. However, there will also be a discussion board on where college professionals can discuss other ways or better ways to make sure the faculty advisor and the graduate student make it to Cuba. The discussion areas on Blackboard would serve as the peer-learning portion of the network. Students can learn from professionals that have worked in the college and or university for a significant period of time. They can provide experience on situations they have dealt with in the past and provide relative solutions. Professionals that are newer to the field can also contribute by providing their knowledge, experience or contribute anything new they have learned. Discussion board can also be used to submit actual situations that may arise for administrators on a typical workday. The discussions do not have to consist of just travel but can discuss other administrative procedures like course scheduling, student

advising and program outreach.

The DLN main objectives are these learning outcomes:

1. The network will provide a “go to” place for work practices. This will help new employees feel more confidence in their position. As employees learn through the network, it is expected that they will be eager to pass new information along to the others on the network.
2. The digital learning network will designed to create a cycle of learning. Learners can use their previous knowledge and experience and apply their knowledge to the new methods they learn from their peers.

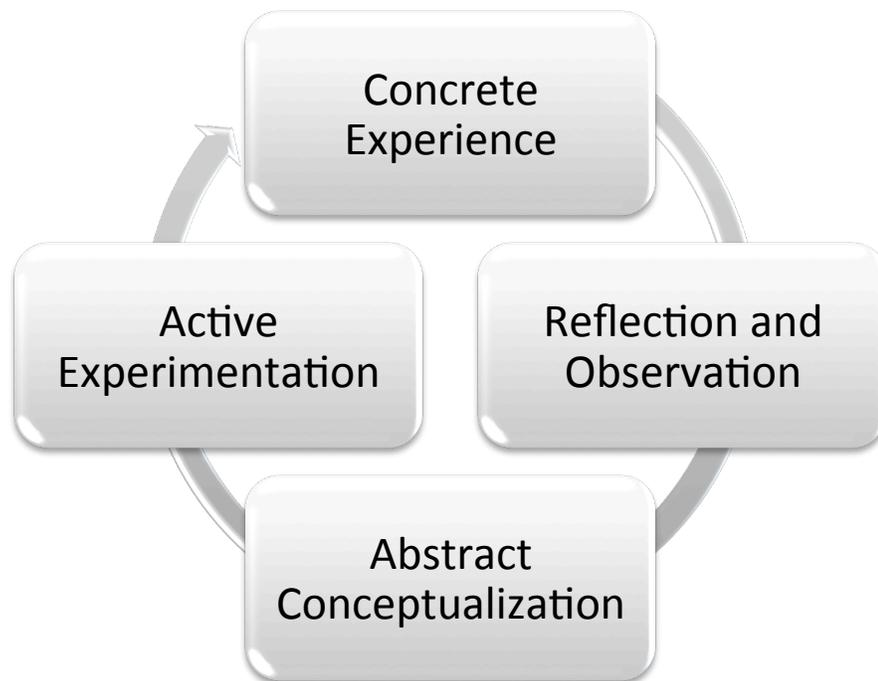


Figure 1: Experiential Learning Model from Kolb, 1984

3. As the learners begin to execute what they acquired from the learning network, their development and improvement in their position will display competency to their immediate supervisor. This may be helpful when employees are assessed for

yearly evaluations.

This learning activity is intended to be primarily online. Employees can learn in their offices and begin applying the material in their everyday duties. This works especially for large campus employees who cannot always leave the office for training or departments with very small staff where the office needs to be covered during business hours. The option to a hybrid component to the network is accepted as long as the information shared is also shared with others online.

Student motivation is supported by the sense of community. Members of the network support each other as they learn new methods and practices in their positions. The CoP online can serve as a “cheering section” for your and their professional development. Students will want to learn more, begin analyzing the work that they are doing and perhaps create a new procedure or practice that will benefit college administrators in the work they do.

The instructional designers of the DLN on Blackboard would consist of a committee that would design the network with to provide user-friendly navigation, quick links, a quick guide to navigate the DLN and areas to post news and announcements.

Assessment and Evaluation

To properly assess the learning activity, assessment and evaluation will be two fold process. Learners will complete a self-assessment as well as a peer assessment from the Travel department. Learners will be requested to complete a self-assessment survey. The survey will determine if they believe that they retained the knowledge given, learned new material or believe that the activity improved on their job performance. This assessment would take place on a semi annual basis. This will give time to put the skills they learned into work and it will give enough time to determine any improvements in work performance. The self-assessment will be online

through the Blackboard Learning Management Software. Questions from the survey would include:

1. How often do you refer back to Travel Services lesson to complete routine travel procedures?
 - a. Often
 - b. Sometimes
 - c. Every once in a while
 - d. Never
2. Do you find the entire process of completing a travel request (Approval, booking travel, calculating advances, reimbursements, and documentation) an easier process due to the learning activity you participated in?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
3. If you answered yes to the question above please explain.
4. Did this learning activity help you increase your knowledge about the travel department, its rules and procedures? Please explain.
5. Is there anything about this learning activity that could be added to further improve your work performance?

Although self-assessment may be frowned on in the workplace, as many would assume that employees would over estimate their work performance but for this learning activity has great benefits for the learner. Self-assessment enhances short and long-term learning, learning autonomy and engagement (Leach, 2012). Smither (2012) cites that self-assessment can “enhance self-raters' sense of dignity and self-respect.” The survey will determine if engagement and aforementioned learning outcomes has taken place or what can be improved. The employee’s supervisor may also consider these assessments during the annual evaluation period.

The travel department would also be asked to complete assessment to help the designer of the learning activity determine if it has helped the travel department deal with less issues and errors in the academic travel process. The goal of this assessment determines if the learning activity has helped the learner and the staff travel department work together in a more cohesive

manner. Often in travel, rules and procedures change. What was true a year ago may not apply the next.

Students of the learning activity would also be asked to evaluate the design and the technology used to execute the learning activity. Learners will be asked about the comfort level with technology and if whether the technology used hindered or enhanced their learning within the learning activity. The evaluation would ask learners to consider if the learning outcomes would be the same if the learning activity were executed in a traditional “face to face” setting. The survey will also inquire about the DLN and the CoP component in Blackboard.

The responses to the survey will determine if using Blackboard was good for the learning activity, and creating an online CoP. Blackboard’s analytics feature can help determine how often learners are communicating on the network and if learning outcomes are achieved through Learning Management software.

Conclusion

The digital learning network has the ability expand a college professional’s learning experience. The learner would have an opportunity to participate in a more formal, technology-advanced method of learning and receiving information from their peers. Professional employees also have the opportunity to share what methods work for them, divulge tips and tricks of university logistics and develop relationships within the learning community. The digital learning network also has the potential to create a venue for quick and accessible professional development opportunities. The assessment and evaluation of the network of the learning activity can help the university determine if the this measure is this will help university support staff develop professionally and benefit the universities operations.

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