Virtual Student Club Start Up:
Learning Together in Virtual Learning Community

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ABSTRACT

The authors of this paper explore the evolution of a virtual student club from an online university into a virtual learning community and as an innovation relevant to the future of higher education. The student club is considered as a means for development and sustainability of academic organizational culture wherein learning, multi-directional mentoring, and ongoing social network development provide a foundation for contributing to student success and alumni engagement The challenges of creating such a club in a virtual environment are examined from faculty, student, and alumni perspectives. Various aspects of learning in a virtual community including, but not limited to whole person learning (Palmer, 1976; Hoover, et al, 2010, 2013), deep smarts (Leonard & Swap, 2004), grit (Pappano, 2013; Kundu, 2014; Kelly, et al, 2014), and knowledge sharing (Allen, et al, 2006; Gibson, 2011; Senge, 2007) are delineated as pertinent to club sustainability Multi-directional mentoring and the development of sustainable social networks are considered as relevant to student success (Kram, 2014). Community development is investigated as an end unto itself using Peck's (1989) community building model. These community building models are inspected for their relevance to the club as it is and in future developmental stages, as well as related to successful student career development and alumni engagement.

INTRODUCTION

In mid-2014, three faculty members of an online university created a virtual HRM club. The concept of the club came from the desire to create a network of HR students, professionals and faculty in a virtual learning environment. The club's purpose was two-fold in that: 1) it was intended to provide an arena to discuss relevant HR concepts, theories and ideas, and; 2)the club was to serve the purpose of creating a sense of belonging among online students, alumni, and faculty with common interests. Although student clubs have long been an aspect of higher education, virtual student clubs as learning communities are a relatively new innovation and as such, are relevant to the future of higher education.

The theory of student involvement (Astin, 1984) confirms that student's devotion and energy to activities of an educational nature, may lead them to make cognitive and affective gains in their college careers. Club and organization membership are forms of involvement associated with such learning and developmental gains (as cited in Case, 2011). The virtual HRM club's focus is to assist students in the development of higher cognitive skills and to further enhance their educational experience. Additionally, as mentioned, the club's second goal is to provide a sense of belonging in creating a meaningful social network for the online students. As studies have shown, fostering a sense of personal connection and belonging in educational learning environments may lend to improving the overall learning experience and add in the retention of students (Thomas, Herbert& Teras. 2014). With these goals in mind the formation of a virtual HRM club was developed.

The three faculty members embarked on the club mission knowing the challenges of such an endeavor and with the previously mentioned goals in mind. At present the club meets once a month. The day and times have been altered a few times in order to reach a larger student audience. The format of the majority of club meetings is introductions, guest speaker and then a short question and answer period. Guest speakers present of host of topics, though all are centered on HRM issues and concerns such as HR challenge of workplace generational differences and performance assessment, to name a few topics.

The major hurdle which the founders struggle to overcome is low student attendance. As the long-term goal is to relinquish ownership of the club to students, this hurdle is a fundamental issue within the club at present. While the ideas and goals of this project remain intact, overcoming the attendance issue is of paramount importance if the club is going to endure as a meaningful student led learning community

BACKGROUND

The virtual HRM club was first created in mid-2014. The club was founded by three faculty members of an online university with the goal of creating an HR learning and networking environment for students and alumni. After establishment of an online presence, the club has met once a month over the last year with varied degrees of participation.

The founding members of the club have adjusted the day and time of the virtual meetings in a quest to increase student participation.

Each meeting thus far has featured a presentation by a guest speaker, usually a faculty member of the online university, and a question and answer session. One of the goals of the club is to eventually have students and other stakeholders present or engage the group in conversation during club meetings and facilitate all aspects of the virtual organization, as well as to take responsibility for club leadership. Another long-term goal of the club is to create a student SHRM organization with the club members.

CHALLENGES OF
A VIRTUAL STUDENT CLUB

Wu and Zhange (2014, p. 231) cited Reingold (2006) "Virtual community is a group of people who communicate with one another through the computer network, know one another to a certain extent, share a certain degree of knowledge and information and care for one another like friends". For adult learners in a virtual environment, the benefits of a virtual student club could include enhanced learning experiences and ensuing academic performance, as well as the creation of valuable social networks wherein multi-directional mentoring might afford the learner with opportunities for development of valuable personal and professional relationships with peers, alumni, faculty, and interested others. However, the challenges inherent in involvement in a virtual student club are greater than geographic boundaries and technological mastery for students, as well as others invested in such an endeavor. There are two primary forms of virtual learning community in which students attending an online university may belong, formal and informal. An example of a formal learning community is a structured classroom, whereas, an informal learning community may be a student club (Chunngam, Chanchalor, & Murphy, 2014) wherein learning is both tacit and implicit, as well as casually multi-directional in nature. The following sections examine some student, alumni, and faculty perspectives of learning in informal virtual community.

STUDENT

Members of an informal virtual community participate regularly when presented with the ability to gain access to expert knowledge, such as a database (Chunngam et al., 2014) or a guest presenter. Students' time and energy are limited. They are not as interested in the greater good of a community unless they perceive such a goal as consistent with achieving other goals that will benefit them and their families. An informal club must provide benefit to the student (Glazer et al., 2013). It must add value to the students' educational experience. Interest in a topic serves as a positive foundation for membership, participation, and knowledge building in an informal virtual learning community. In addition, if the group's members stand to gain access to experts and/or expert knowledge that also promotes membership in the informal group, that can also be a plus. In a more formal learning environment, a student's motivation for participation is often extrinsic reward of credit towards completion of a course, degree, or certificate. Compare this to informal learning community, the intrinsic reward is in the form of access to expert knowledge (Chunngam et al., 2014) and possibly a sense of belonging to a community of practitioners and/or alumni. Students that frequency engaged in a virtual community

demonstrated greater learning outcomes when compared to subjects that did not use the resource regularly and theycan benefit from using a virtual community regardless of learning style (Fogg, Carlson-Sabelli, Carlson, & Giddens, 2013).

Alumni

The current literature does not reveal any information about alumni and continued membership beyond school in a virtual student club. This is an area in need of further research as it represents a gap in the literature.

Faculty

The institution and the full time faculty focus attention on developing a culture of a community of learners. However, they are not always successful in making adjunct faculty feel included in the process. Virtual adjunct faculty often feel like outsiders in the organization (Glazer, Breslin, & Wanstreet, 2013), possibly even more so than traditional face to face adjunct faculty in higher education.. Inclusion in an informal virtual student club could increase the adjunct faculty's feeling of belonging, allowing them an opportunity to share their expertise within an informal environment. An effort to include adjunct faculty could increase their sense of belonging, and thus commitment to the institution providing benefit to the institution, the faculty, the programs with which a virtual learning community, as well as to students and future alumni.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:
ASPECTS OF LEARNING

The majority of learners engaged in online learning in higher education are adults returning to school to earn unfulfilled credential, as well as to achieve unattained dreams. For the virtual HRM club, this has serious implications, as has been discussed above. However, in addition to the student club requiring a commitment of precious time from learners, it might add value to their lives by enhancing the students' learning experience, helping them gain a sense of belonging at the university, and aiding students in development of social networks that might add value to their lives as students, graduates, and prospective employees in a challenging global job market.

Palmer (1976, p. 2) asserted that "meeting for learning" is literally "a genuine encounter between persons". Meeting for learning, either face to face or virtually, entails building relationships between learners, whether teacher, student,alum, or other stakeholder in the community. When meeting for learning, "knowledge emerges in dialogue" (Palmer, 1976, p. 2). This means "learning happens between persons"[and] "knowledge emerges in dialogue" (Palmer, 1976, p. 2), rather than it being a passive activity as is demonstrated in the image of learner as vessel to be filled with knowledge from a traditional "sage on the stage" (Reed & Swanson, 2014, p. 1).

Both Palmer (1976) and Hoover, et al (2010) concur that learners, regardless of status or educational level, bring the entirety of their experience, as well as their actualization when meeting for learning. The experience of meeting for learning, either formally or informally, can "allow experiential learning to alter [learners'] current thinking processes, their current affect state, and [to] hone their behavioral skiills (Robinson, et al, 2013, p. 1).

Yorks and Kasl's (1997, p. 177) groundbreaking work in whole person learning introduced "*learning-within-*

relationship" as especially important for adult learners in groups that bring "highly diverse (and potentially divisive) lived experience to the learning setting". An important consideration for individuals, regardless of stakeholder role, engaged in the virtual student club is that they may gain knowledge about, and potentially understanding of, diverse peers from regular engagement in the student club.

In an informal meeting for learning, individuals can share deep smarts (Leonard & Swap, 2004), or tacit knowledge, as well as explicit knowledge and experience with peers and others whose perspectives might broaden their own. Notably, sharing deep smarts in a virtual student club allows knowledge sharing to transcend more traditional barriers such as geographic dispersion, organizational boundaries, as well as individuals' predispositions about others. The predispositions might be attitudes or stereotypes such as those related to age, gender, generational assumptions, race, or other physical characteristic that might otherwise inhibit conversation in a face to face environment.

Smith (2001) asserts that tacit knowledge has often been passed in the form of storytelling related to work experience, thoughts, and impressions of work groups, assignments and other aspects of employment. It can represent as much as 90% of an organization's knowledge and is typically embedded and synthesized in the heads of individuals (Smith, 2001). Such knowledge sharing in a virtual student club setting can prove to be of great benefit to students who currently reside in small towns, but are hoping to relocate for employment if possible.

Further, for the adult learner who may feel somewhat geographically or otherwise isolated without the support of peers on campus or family/friends at home, real time stories of the grit and agency that were essential for other learners to achieve their current status in higher education, be they peers, alumni, faculty, or guest presenters such as prospective employers, might be inspiring and confidence building. Grit may be more important for academic success than innate intelligence. Grit consists of traits including "resilience, self-control, and persistence" (Pappano, 2013, p. 4). "It doesn't depend just on what's inside of us but on being in the right circumstance with people we trust" (Pappano, 2013, p. 6).

Perhaps, the explicit and tacit knowledge sharing that occurs among members of a virtual student club could demonstrate to learners who are geographically dispersed that they are not alone in their quest to achieve goals such as degrees, career development, and other benefits of engagement with the institution of higher education in which they are matriculating. It is clear that adding value for these students is essential on many levels, but determining how to add value for them through a virtual student club may be difficult as getting and holding their attention, can be complicated at best. In addition, gaining student commitment and follow through is imperative to inspire faculty and alumni engagement in attempting to add value for current students. These issues are part and parcel of the development of multi-directional mentoring and sustainable social networks in such a virtual student club.

MULTI-DIRECTIONAL MENTORING & DEVELOPMENT OF SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL NETWORKS

In a virtual student club, mentoring can be a reciprocal process. For example, adult learners often return to higher education to earn a credential that will help them to further their career path while they are already working in their desired occupational field. Thus, the practical work experience they have accumulated can be used in the classroom to enhance discussion and the theory they gain in the classroom can be used to enhance workplace application. Higgins and Kram (2001) formulated a typology for mentoring that was more reciprocal in nature than more traditional and one-directional mentor-protégé relationships. Thus, social networks that are shaped through venues such as the virtual student club may be even more beneficial to students, alumni, and other stakeholders due to their geographic dispersion and diverse reasons for choosing to engage in online learning.

COMMUNITY/TEAM DEVELOPMENT

It has been reported throughout this paper that students choose online learning as a means of engaging in higher education for a variety of reasons. According to Top Degrees Online (2015), student retention rates can vary as much as 10-20 percent between online and face to face courses. Using data from 2009, Burnsed (2010) asserted that while it is true that first-time student retention rates are low for online schools, first-time students typically make up less than 1% of online degree seeking students at online universities. Retention is "indicative of a school's ability to engage students at the onset of their college education and keep them from dropping out" (Burnsed, 2010). Might learning be enhanced, as well as other stakeholder goals previously mentioned, be more realistic for students engaged in the virtual club as community thus offering them an additional level of engagement and support? Is not the virtual student club an innovation in higher education that is likely here to stay for a while amidst unprecedented technological advances in both higher education and the global workforce? Mightn't such organizations benefit students, alumni, and institutions of higher education during times when community is both increasingly important and difficult for many students to find? These are the types of questions that need to be considered as such organizations are considered for all stakeholders and for society at large.

Peck (1987) proposed a model for community building that sometimes occurs when meeting for learning. In the first phase, individuals meet in pseudocommunity, a stage wherein communication is superficial. At some point, the next stage/phase of chaos occurs when the individuals disagree, possibly clash or engage in conflict. Problem solving, reflection and thoughtful consideration ensue as parts of stage/phase three which is called emptiness. After emptiness, the individuals make choices to either press on toward a more meaningful relationship, such as authentic community, or they choose to return to pseudocommunity and focus on trivialities, if they remain engaged at all. When one applies such a model to a virtual student club, pseudocommunity might be the stage where the student is not required to make any commitment rather than listen to a professor or other guest presenter. However, at the chaos stage, students and interested others might examine their reasons for engaging in the club and, possibly, areas where their expectations are not aligned, Emptiness could be a time for assessment, evaluation of where, if, and how the club needs to proceed in order to add value for the students, alumni, and university stakeholders, At this point, authentic community might be achieved through students engaging in club leadership and governance.

CONCLUSION

As the virtual HRM Club heads toward the beginning of its third year of development, the faculty advisors continue to explore ways of adding value, engaging students and alumni, and sustaining a virtual learning community wherein multi-directional mentoring can add value for students and alumni as lifelong learners. The next steps in that process include conducting research to determine if and how students' overall learning experience will be enhanced by employing some of the tactics discussed here as part of a grand strategy for the HRM Club. In addition, assessment of what learners desire from such a club and evaluation of whether what they say they desire works in development of the club will be examined. Hopefully, this will result in a study that not only adds value for current learners and alumni at this institution, but for other learners in other virtual clubs as well.

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