

Exemplars of on-line peer support—are we looking in the right places?



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Abstract: *Peer support is a powerful force in collaborative on-line learning environments that aids student motivation, learning and satisfaction. Clanning, the feeling that one belongs to a group is a social phenomenon than can be observed wherever people gather, either physically or virtually, to discuss and promote common feelings, causes or ideals, and has existed for centuries. Clanning is most obvious when the reason for gathering together is focussed on such strongly held ideals as race, culture, family affiliation, religious belief or team sports. Examples of clanning abound in contact Universities. The promotion of clanning at a macro level in distance education offers the potential to attract new students and retain alumni through open access, virtual communities on the home page of the University. This clanning or feeling of belonging would also be present at the micro level when the students commenced study and would allow more rapid progress in the distance course itself due to the fact that social presence would already be established. Team sports offer an opportunity to examine issues around clanning and techniques for the promotion of clanning. Team sport websites are examined for examples of ways to promote clanning and compared to academic websites. The applicability of Internet based clanning techniques to distance education are examined.*

Keywords: *clanning, peer support, academic websites*

Introduction

Clanning is a trend observed by futurist Popcorn (2001) and defined as "belonging to a group that represents common feelings, causes or ideals; validating one's own belief system". A search for clanning in peer reviewed academic literature produces no references indicating that there has been no serious study of this phenomenon or its application within education. Popcorn sees the trend as a response to the increasingly impersonal nature of modern life, no more impersonal than on the Internet while Lesperance (2001) believes clanning was born amongst Internet gamers and is a short-term grouping lasting from a few months to a year, in line with many teenage fads. However many more groups than teenagers have clanned using the Internet. Roderick (2001) explains that superannuitants form clans. Bond (2001) describes clanning opportunities for the female clients of a travel agent. There are likely to be many more sites on the Internet where clanning is promoted, whether knowingly or unknowingly. People will seek out a clan that matches with their own belief system. The centuries old New Zealand Maori social structure (Britannica 2001) of iwi (tribe), hapu (sub-tribe and landowner) and whanau (extended family) and the clans of ancient Scotland are examples of

clans based on familial affiliation. Rather than being a new phenomenon I would like to suggest that clanning is an ancient phenomenon and more an innate response to gather with those of like mind than an effort to respond to the loneliness of the Internet.

Clanning and motivation in the contact University

Hunt (2000) gives an example of how clanning can aid motivation.

Every night Mary Ann Woirhaye does the unthinkable. She sets her alarm for 4:30 a.m. because every morning she gets up and walks three miles while the rest of the world sleeps. How has Mary Ann managed to stick with this early morning fitness routine for more than three years? Simple. She knows that someone is waiting for her. Two people have made a commitment to show up. The secret of Mary Ann's success is that she chooses to be accountable, not only to herself but to another person who shares her desire to become physically fit. And how is this working out? Extremely well, she reports. The faster she and her buddy walk the louder they talk. And laugh. They even argue from time to time. They share their lives and brainstorm their dreams. They get so involved they don't notice the miles clicking away. The deep friendship that has resulted from this daily event not only makes the task possible, it makes it enjoyable.

It does not require much imagination to transpose this to an educational scenario where two students are studying together for their mutual benefit. In an article on study buddies in "Connections" the official newsletter for students of The Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (2001) students are quoted:

"We just clicked", says Leigh-Ann. "We both had a goal that we wanted and were prepared to put our heads down and get on with the job."

In both examples it is the common goal that binds the two people together. These examples suggest that clanning is really these same feelings extrapolated into a group scenario. However I suggest that there is an amplification of these feelings in a group context such as can be seen in the frenzied excitement of a football match and the devotion of the fans to "their" team or at a religious convention or massed service.

Dehne (2000) in an article on the future of private colleges makes the following observation:

Many colleges are noticing the increased interest in theme houses — facilities where students choose to live together to speak a language, talk about science and technology, or provide community service. A college itself can be a "clanning" experience. Small colleges devoted to the environment, great books or a conservative Christian viewpoint are essentially "clanning." Of course, a reputation for serving a certain "clan" can be risky for a college that is already homogenous. If the concept of affinity groups continues and grows, it is possible that only students with similar interests will attend some small college.

Can we extend this principle to the larger University? Oxford and Cambridge University, two of the oldest Universities in the world are organised as a series of colleges, within a larger entity, with different colleges specialising in specific subjects or leisure interests. American fraternities also provide excellent examples of clanning, where new members are invited to join fraternity houses with particular interests or allegiances within the larger University community. Clanning can therefore be found within the larger contact Universities and seems to have been around for many centuries.

Clanning in the distance institution

Most contact and distance educational establishments now have websites. Increasing numbers of those Universities have courses using electronic delivery systems such as Blackboard (2001). The latest version of this product Blackboard 5.0 has facilities for the creation of on-line components for clubs and other organizations. This allows the club members to discuss issues both synchronously and asynchronously and organise community events via the Internet. This allows for peer support, the development of community groups within courses and consequently helps promote clanning in much the same way as the student union. Chou (2002) notes that there are a higher percentage of social-emotional interactions in synchronous mode, whereas more time is spent in task-orientated mode in asynchronous discussions. This suggests that clanning would best occur within a synchronous chat, since clanning is an socio-emotional phenomenon.

So clanning could be promoted in a distance education context offering the potential to exploit the motivational properties of peer support and belonging to a group later in the classroom. Simply providing an electronic discussion board or chat room does not however guarantee that students will experience or develop this feeling of belonging to the group. The literature abounds with examples of lecturers striving to promote aspects of belonging to a group or interacting in a group. Fulford and Zhang (1993) indicate that interaction is essential if the learner is to feel satisfied with their experience of distance study. Thompson (1990) cites interaction as contributing to the creation of a positive attitude towards working by distance. Hartman, Neuwirth, Cochran, Palmquist and Zubrow (1995), Lenning and Ebbers (1999), and Niebuhr and Niebuhr (1999) point to the importance of interaction for motivating the members of a group. Tu (2001) provides an excellent summary of online social presence and indicates its importance in improving educational effectiveness. These different aspects of the online experience are all potential contributory factors to the broader, more holistic experience of clanning, that feeling that you “belong” to or identify with a study group.

Where might be a good place to look for best practice in promoting clanning on the Internet? Are there social arenas where clanning might have a much stronger influence?

Clanning in team sports

Sport, in particular teams sports, stands out as one of the greatest examples of clanning in action. Football and rugby are two of the oldest and most popular team sports supported and played by men and women alike. So perhaps football and rugby websites may offer some suggestions promoting peer support or clanning. Two portals allow the comparison of some of the features of team sport websites (Football on the Net 2001) and Universities (College and University Home Pages 2001). A comparison of the home pages of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team (2001) and UK Liverpool Football Club (2001), two teams with fanatical world wide team support, with those of Cambridge University (2001), the University of Liverpool (2001) in the UK and the University of Otago (2001) in New Zealand, show remarkable similarities but some distinct differences between the two types of site. During the writing of this paper the Cambridge University site has undergone remarkable changes in line with many of the recommendations in this paper, many University societies now have a home page accessible from the main University home page.

Item	Football site (AB, LFC)	University site (CU,UL,UO)
Colours	Yes, Yes	Yes, Yes, Yes
Insignia	Yes, Yes	Yes, Yes, Yes
Team song	Yes, Yes	Yes, Yes, Yes
Profiles of players / faculty	Yes, Yes	Yes, Yes, Yes
On line purchase Memorabilia	Yes, Yes	External supplier, Yes, Yes
Registration for prospective students or fans	Yes, Yes	No, No, No
Registration for alumni	Not applicable	Yes, Yes, Yes
Email for life	No, Yes	Yes, No, No
Synchronous communication between fans / non-students	No, Yes	No, No, No
Discussion board for fans / non-students	Yes, Yes	No, No, No
Synchronous communication with players / team / faculty	Yes, Yes	No, No, No
Discussion board for fans / non-students and players / team / faculty	Yes, Yes	No, No, No
General online news	Yes, Yes	Yes, Yes, Yes
Bulletin board	Yes, Yes	No, No, No
Email newsletters	Yes, Yes	No, No, No
Future events news online	Yes, Yes	Yes, Yes, Yes
Statistics	Yes, Yes	Yes, Yes, Yes
Publications on demand	Yes, Yes	No, Yes, Yes
History	Yes, Yes	Yes, Yes, Yes
Tests of skill	Yes, Yes	No, No, No
Video recordings on demand	Yes, Yes	No, Virtual tour, No
Audio recordings on demand	Yes, Yes	No, No, No
Text recording of past events	No, Yes	No, No, No
Text messaging	No, Yes	No, No, No
WAP	No, Yes	No, No, No

Figure 1: Comparison of Sport and University website for evidence of clanning promotion

It is noteworthy that no Universities provided either synchronous or asynchronous communication for prospective students to clan prior joining the University. Mechitov et al (2001) noted that students rated the entertainment value of the website and its colour coordination more highly than the site's ability to provide information. It is recommended therefore that greater consideration be given to these aspects of web site design particularly with respect to promoting clanning at an early stage.

Clanning in academia

Universities that rely upon face-to-face interaction often place much of the burden for clanning on the Student Union. Their support for the organization is often merely financial. Should they also be so shortsighted that they ignore the increasing opportunities for clanning in cyberspace? Clanning is as important for prospective students as for Alumni. Distance

institutions in particular must have special regard for the clanning needs of their students and prospective students, over and above the provision of summer schools. An examination of the website of the Open University (2001) of the UK demonstrates that importance is given to this aspect of academic life by placing it centre page and providing a student virtual common room using the First Class delivery system within the Open University Students Association site, but not within the main site. There is however no, what could be termed "play before you pay" facility that might encourage prospective students to visit the site and form relationships with those already studying, access only being given to currently enrolled students.

American Universities often support and feature team sports prominently on the University website. The University of Miami (2001), Florida State University (2001) and Washington University in St. Louis (2001) all give prominence to the University team. Miami University (2001) has a prominent Redhawks link, perhaps expressing the greater importance they place upon this association with sports or the importance placed upon the sport by the local population. UCLA (2001) includes information about UCLA Bruins on their main site rather than linking to a separate site. However no sites offered the same opportunities for students to clan as those found on the Open University site. No University offered the opportunity for non-students to clan with students in relation to a common interest. By supporting a team of heroes that young people can identify with, the Universities bring town and gown together through a sporting connection. Young people may already feel connected to the University before they enrol and continue that association later through the sports team itself or the Alumni associations. Some Universities and commercial companies already offer the possibility of keeping track of the lives of their alumni via websites (Harvard Gateways 2001), offering discussion forums to maintain and promote the continuance of the bonds established at University. However none of the Universities offered the opportunity to develop relationships before students join the University and therefore miss a prime opportunity to bring students to their doors.

Where to from here?

The social phenomenon of clanning or peer support offers the opportunity of attracting new students to on-line or contact courses by changing the University's website from a dull, closed, information source, into a portal with a strong community element open to all (Looney 2000) accessible from the University's home page. By supporting groups of people currently not enrolled on University courses, who have similar interests in computing, rugby, classical music or any other interest and allowing them to discuss their special interests in the University's on-line communities, educational establishments could attract potential students on the basis of the quality of the community support they provide. At first glance, this might appear to be gross commercialisation of education, or perhaps a spider's web or fishing net, but there is little difference between such virtual community groups and the rowing and rugby clubs of Cambridge and Oxford, or of the commercial sponsorship seen at many team sport events. Should this method of attracting students be widely adopted, competition between institutions to offer better communities would be fierce. To differentiate themselves from the other institutions offering the same sort of communities, Universities might invite prestigious visitors or sporting heroes to participate in the discussions in the various on-line communities. There is little difference between this and the University subsidised visits of stars such as Michael Jackson to the Oxford Union. Competitions between similar virtual communities at different Universities reminiscent of the rowing contests of Oxford and Cambridge could

develop. Just as the sports teams draw young people to the contact University, so the on-line communities could help connect potential students to the distance institution. Some institutions such as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2002) have gone some way towards enticing students to their sites by offering free courses. People are often drawn to distance education because of the anonymity it affords and are likely to be less wary of on-line communities unrelated to academic study. A friendly supportive community is just the sort of place to establish confidence and provide the necessary peer support for later study. As with the clubs in schools and colleges around the world it is the participation of friendly experts in these communities that allows students to acquire the skills to move to the next level. There is no reason to suppose that reasoning and discussion skills should be any more difficult skills to acquire through an on-line community than through a contact group.

Tagged for life?

The University of Wales (2001) offers the opportunity for students and alumni alike to identify with the institutional clan in all future on-line communication, by means of an academic e-mail address for life. Harvard Gateways (2001) and Cambridge University (2001) also provide e-mail forwarding and in addition extensive communication facilities. The power of such signs of affiliation should not be underestimated. What more powerful a clan insignia than John.Smith@harvardMBA.com as a permanent electronic badge of status and affiliation when other connections have faded?

Conclusions

Future educational portals should consider offering free and open Internet community building opportunities, perhaps linked to team sports initially, but diversifying to a wide range of other special interest communities later. By offering opportunities to form relationships on the site, institutions are likely to gain a growing number of potential students with specific interests that can be targeted with courses of interest to them, in a medium that they are already familiar with. Opportunities exist to allow potential students to gather at the doors of the distance institution, to sustain them with strong supportive relationships throughout their University career and maintain those relationships, both with fellow students and the University throughout their working life. Exemplars of techniques that could be used to promote clanning can be found on any team sport website. The author encourages academics and registrars visit the sports field and know that clanning is a means of attracting a new population who might never have considered tertiary study because of the lack of clanning opportunities offered.

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