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**Assignment Two**

**Peer Ecologies in a Blended Learning Environment**

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Facing Big Questions in Education

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**Introduction**

**Peer Ecology Defined and the Impact of Negative Peer Ecologies**

Peer ecology can be defined as that part of a child’s microsystem that involves children interacting with, influencing, and socializing one another. ([Rodkin & Hodges, 2003](#_ENREF_11)). Those involved with teenagers, either parenting them or teaching them, know how central the peer group becomes during these developing years. Many have witnessed peer ecologies within schools that have negatively impacted on students, teachers and the learning environment. When power imbalances occur within peer ecologies, two possible consequences that occur are peer rejection and bullying ([Carroll-Lind & Raskauskas, 2008](#_ENREF_5)). When this occurs within classroom environments, the learning environment is negatively impacted. According to McFarland (2001, as cited in [Rodkin & Hodges, 2003](#_ENREF_13)), many students with advantaged positions in the peer ecology undermine classroom affairs whenever possible. Children on the periphery of the peer ecology may also attempt to disrupt class activity as they try to fit into the dominant peer ecology.

Within school environments there exists teachers who do not have the skills and school management teams that do not have the systems in place to effectively deal the negative impact of peer ecologies. Rodkin and Hodges (2003) emphasize that “peer ecologies do not include adults, but can affect and be affected by them. Teachers lie just outside of the peer ecology and help shape, intentionally or unintentionally, the peer ecology” (p. 385). The little research that exists on the role of the teacher in bullying and victimization indicates that many teachers may not be realizing their potential in this area. Teachers often seem unaware of aggression among their students, or are overwhelmed by its prevalence ([Rodkin & Hodges, 2003](#_ENREF_11)).

**Purpose of this Review**

The purpose of this review is to examine how blended learning can meet needs of disenfranchised groups and can encourage positive peer ecologies. This review will, at the same time, address how online and blended environments can be used ineffectively and can actually further disadvantage members of peer groups. It is important to be aware of these issues in order to design effective blended learning environments. In conclusion, this review will briefly address the reality that online learning environments are continually evolving with advances in technology. Blended learning environments will also need to remain flexible and evolve.

There are varying definitions of blended learning and community. In this review blended learning is defined as “a hybrid of classroom and online learning that includes some of the conveniences of online courses without the complete loss of face-to-face contact” ([Rovai & Jordan, 2004, p. 1](#_ENREF_13)). Community is defined as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” ([McMillan and Chavis 1986, as cited in Rovai & Jordan, 2004, p. 3](#_ENREF_13)).

**Research Questions**

1. How can the needs of disenfranchised groups in classrooms be addressed by incorporating blended learning into classroom environments?
2. How can blended learning environments be designed to encourage positive peer ecologies?

**How can the needs of disenfranchised groups in classrooms be addressed by incorporating blended learning into classroom environments?**

**Giving All Students a Voice in a Democratic Classroom**

Disenfranchised students often feel disconnected from peer groups because they lack the confidence to participate educationally and socially within the learning environment. Ellis ([2000](#_ENREF_6)) regards online learning as being more egalitarian and democratic because students are often more comfortable in conversing with other students over the Internet rather than feeling intimidated in the classroom. In this instance, blended learning environments allow students to have a choice in the medium of conversation, discussion and interaction within a learning environment.

Loeding ([2002, as cited in Carroll-Lind & Raskauskas, 2008](#_ENREF_5)) maintains that leaving behind a portion of our society hurts us all. The nurturing and enhancing of self-esteem in order to promote learning needs to be a priority when dealing with disenfranchised groups of students. Gurney ([1988, as cited in Abbott, Austin, Mulkeen, & Metcalfe, 2004](#_ENREF_2)) advocates that “it is important to realize that self-esteem permeates a child’s whole life and potentially influences every single learning situation and action which he takes” (p. 343). This supports the idea that Abbott and Cribb ([1988, as cited in Abbott, et al., 2004](#_ENREF_2)) found that the use of ICT can bolster identity and reduce isolation. It then suggests that a blended learning environment constructed properly and scaffolded effectively, can be a safe and enriching place for all students to mature socially and academically. It can be a mutual place that will benefit both mainstream and disenfranchised groups.

The example which follows emphasizes the need for democracy to be situated in a classroom and that a blended learning environment can allow this to eventuate. In a Year 10 Mathematics class I taught there was one boy that continued to disrupt the lessons and refused to complete any work. I suspected that this boy could understand the mathematical concepts but stumbled on the written text and vocabulary. With further investigation I found that his refusal to attempt any work was because he could not read at a Year 10 level and, therefore, repeatedly stumbled over mathematical vocabulary. It was time intensive on my part as a teacher to assist this student, which could have been improved if this student had access to a virtual learning environment within the classroom. He could easily have had access to voice definitions, online peer discussion forums, and expert knowledge through video or videoconferencing that would have assisted him effectively. This would have allowed me as the teacher, the facilitator, to manage other academic learning and social issues with other students in the class. By accessing resources such as information, peers, and experts online, all students in this class would have experienced a more democratic learning environment. Students would be able to grow in confidence and avoid isolation which are two main factors resulting in negative peer ecologies. Building confidence among disenfranchised students and allowing inclusion through a selection of available peer groups is possible in a blended learning environment.

**Cultural Awareness and Living in a Multicultural Society**

Some studies have found that students are rejected or vicitimized by peers through being teased or called nasty names about their colour or race ([Abbott, et al., 2004](#_ENREF_2)). As well, studies have found that the ethnic make up within an educational institution could represent an imbalance of power, which is a context for peer victimization ([Abbott & Cribb, 2001](#_ENREF_1)). Face-to-face learning and online learning is becoming more multi-cultural as our world becomes more global. It is necessary that educational learning environments provide the needed support for such disenfranchised groups.

A recent experience in a Year 11 Mathematics class made up of a mixture of cultural groups provides a clear example. The 28 students included New Zealanders made up of Maori, Pakeha, and immigrants given full citizenship. It also included International students on long and short term stays representing Korea, France, Germany, and Japan. By impressing upon these students that learning together would allow all to succeed, groups were set up to utilize the mathematical knowledge that the International students had and could share with their New Zealand peers. The New Zealand students were in turn able to provide valuable language learning for these International students based in content understanding. This classroom was noisy because it was social but a lot of learning took place, both mathematically as well as culturally. It was perhaps fortuitous that such a collection of peers made up this group of learners. The access to blended learning would allow this type of learning to be available to all students in classrooms so that language and culture would not be a barrier but an enriching social and academic part of the learning environment.

Abbott and Cribb (2001) found that in multi-cultural classrooms students could go beyond the microcosm of their own classroom to the global classroom using various forms of ICT that suited them best. He found that isolation was reduced and the scope for developing self-identity increased. Personal experiences in international schools have proven that when students learn in multi-cultural groups they are more empathetic to diversity and differences in race and culture. Multi-cultural classrooms are often positive environments where social and academic learning prosper.

**Pitfalls of Computer Based Learning Which Could Disadvantage Disenfranchised Groups**

No discussion of computer learning networks and student empowerment would be complete without an examination of potential problems. Van der Linden & Renshaw ([2001, as cited in Carroll-Lind & Raskauskas, 2008](#_ENREF_5)) agree that there is ample empirical evidence that cognitive processes necessary for deep learning and information retention occur in dialogues. However, the assumption that social interaction will automatically occur because the environment permits it is not the case. Building social relationships and ultimately the development of a healthy community of learning is necessary to enable positive peer ecologies to exist within blended learning environments. ([Abbott, et al., 2004](#_ENREF_2)).

Hiltz ([1990, as cited in Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003](#_ENREF_10)) acknowledges that social and cultural inequalities that exist in the classroom can reproduce themselves on the computer network making those with more dominant personalities, those with more computer knowledge or those with better typing skills taking advantage of the power in network discussions. Susser ([1993, as cited in Warschauer, Turbee, & Roberts, 1996](#_ENREF_15)) acknowledges that cooperation might also be weakened if students ignore the comments or writings of others due to language difficulties or information overload. Information overload is one of the major difficulties in teaching and learning today. The reality is that as a student or as a teacher it is impossible to respond to every comment, read every post, and refer to all links highlighted.

In regards to multi-cultural learning groups, Susser ([1993, as cited in Warschauer, et al., 1996](#_ENREF_15)) highlights that language difficulties will continue to be a prevalent concern as our world continues to become more networked, cultures continue to interact and multi-cultural classrooms become more prevalent both in face-to-face and online learning. Word meanings vary among cultures, without even mentioning that an online culture is now in existence with it’s understanding of word choices and references.

**How can blended learning environments be designed to encourage positive peer ecologies?**

**Teacher Becomes a Facilitator**

New technologies provide the opportunity for teachers to make learning interactive and collaborative using a social constructivist approach to teaching and learning. This involves creating a student-centered approach where the teacher takes the role of the facilitator and the students engage in peer learning. Students learn to establish and nurture positive peer relationships and work within positive peer ecologies. It can be argued that by allowing school aged students to develop positive relationships in face-to-face and online learning environments will in turn prepare them successfully for entering the workforce. In a recent study among businesses, it was found that “69 percent of respondents report that their companies have gained measurable business benefits, including more innovative products and services, more effective marketing, better access to knowledge, lower cost of doing business, and higher revenues with the use of social media and web 2.0 technologies” ([Bughin, Chui, & Miller, 2009, p. 1](#_ENREF_4)). In a study done at Pepperdine University on retaining student involvement through the development of a community, many students found online learning was a positive and enriching experience. ([Fisher & Baird, 2005](#_ENREF_8)) It can be argued that the teacher as facilitator in a blended environment will be most beneficial in allowing positive peer groups to evolve and develop.

**Building a Community**

Garrison ([1993, as cited in Bughin, et al., 2009](#_ENREF_4)) acknowledges that social interaction appears to be the key to collaboration. If there is collaboration then social interaction can be found in it. If there is no social interaction then there is also no real collaboration. In a study done by Rovai ([1993, as cited in Fisher & Baird, 2005](#_ENREF_8)) it was shown that there is a relationship between having a sense of community and perceived cognitive learning. The study showed that when online learners have a stronger sense of community, they feel less isolated and have a greater satisfaction with their academic programs.

Students can effectively use participatory media tools to support their own learning, fuel their intrinsic motivation, support their peers, and form a community of practice. Group discussion is an important component within an online class. Rovai (2004) examined the effects that the discussion elements had in online learning in the development of community. Interestingly, Rovai (2004) found that when discussions were a graded component, there were significantly more discussions per student and that there was also a higher level of a sense of community. As a returning student to University and participating in full online courses, I can verify that the best learning environments are those where the most discussion occurs. As facilitators of learning, secondary teachers can value and award participation in discussions in blended learning environments to the benefit of the learning peer group.

**Online Environments Can Be De-Humanizing**

It is essential that we acknowledge the dehumanizing impact that online learning can result in so that effective measures are taken to ensure that negative peer ecologies are not encouraged but diminished within learning environments. Chatrooms, threaded discussions, e-mail, noticeboards are all effective communication devices if used as a relationship building tools. ([Fisher & Baird, 2005](#_ENREF_8)). A students experience with these online modes of communication should be as consistent as classroom contact tends to be. It is important that the building of community, both within the classroom and in the online environment, is given priority at the initial start of classroom learning. “Researchers strongly agree on the importance of engaged, collaborative learning in schools and business classroom settings. How instructional content is prepared to support engagement, how person-to-person interactions are arranged, and how the complete learning environment matches learner needs are now considered key issues in the creation of successful online instructional design.” ([Barclay, 2007, p. 77](#_ENREF_3)).

The absence of human contact can lead to a characterless and lonely learning environment. Weiss ([2002](#_ENREF_16)) argues that “the removal of the human element creates an environment that is not conducive to maintaining ethical behavior among students. If the student does not see the pain of a hurtful remark, then it must not exist” (p. 48). The isolation and victimization that disenfranchised groups experience in social peer ecologies can then easily extend to the online learning environment. In blended learning environments the negative power of peer ecologies can be addressed and a move towards positive experiences by the teacher, the facilitator, can occur within the blended environment.

Weiss ([2002](#_ENREF_16)) offers suggestions that facilitators of learning environments can incorporate to support positive peer relationships in online environments which in turn can be supported face-to-face in a blended learning environment. A dehumanizing act in peer groups is to mispronounce a person’s name, particularly within multi-cultural groups. Teachers when modeling and supporting appropriate participation should pay careful attention to details when communicating and emphasize the necessity to do this in a blended environment. Weiss and Morrison ([1998, as cited in Weiss, 2002](#_ENREF_16)) found that “one member of a discussion group in a course conducted using a listserv was offended by the repeated improper spelling of his name. This would be equivalent to mispronouncing a person’s name repeatedly in class, which is something no one would want to do. This kind of faux pas can be dehumanizing” (p.50).

**Student Mentoring and Peer-to-Peer Learning**

An important aspect of community building is for learners to have the means and opportunities to become engaged in both educational and social experiences. In research that Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman and Lee ([2002, as cited in Weiss, 2002](#_ENREF_16)) conducted, they found that volunteer mentoring programs have been advocated increasingly as a means of promoting the positive development of adolescents who might be at risk for behavioral, academic, and social problems.

A peer-mentoring program that I observed at a small rural school demonstrates the positive effect on peer ecologies in a secondary school through the development of a Reading Mentor Program. This New Zealand rural school had a high percentage of disengaged male youth that was possibly linked to the absence of male role models in the family unit, as there was a large number of single mothers raising children in the community. The school set up a program where older boys, many involved in school and community sport programs, would spend specific time each week reading to younger boys. This program not only increased the reading levels of the readers and the listeners but it provided opportunities for leadership for older males and encouraged the growth of positive peer ecologies to exist within the social structure of the community.

This type of peer-to-peer mentoring can be situated in blended learning environments. Peers working in small groups construct knowledge through a process of discussion and interaction that occurs amongst learning peers found in the classroom and peers found online that can be found online ([Rovai, 2004](#_ENREF_12)). Each member of the peer-mentoring group is responsible for learning what is taught and for helping others in the group to learn. Small group activities can also foster the development of trust and positive peer relationships among learners. ([Harasim, 1989](#_ENREF_9))

**Conclusion**

The characteristics and scope of negative peer groups is taking on new dimensions as our world becomes more global and more networked. With classrooms becoming more multi-cultural and the world tending towards more global interaction, it is important that diversity not be a dividing factor but an enriching element to the learning environment ([Fisher & Baird, 2005](#_ENREF_8)). There are new challenges today in this area. It is not a simple fix of adding technology to classrooms to allow more connectedness to the world and information. Learning environments and the design of instruction needs to incorporate the building and enhancing of social relationships within the content and context that is emphasized. Blended learning environments can provide many possibilities for the growth of positive peer relationships to develop within a learning environment.

I recently began online learning to complete further qualifications. I initially found the online classroom environment overwhelming and isolating as I felt that I was trying to learn so much on my own and had no face-to-face peers or instructors. I took the advice of course leaders and the suggestions given through the University to get involved in discussions and utilize the resources made available through course sites. This certainly had a positive impact a few months later on my confidence and enjoyment of the courses I was completing.

However, it must be noted that I consider myself a mature student in that I am self-driven and self-motivating so was able to initiate a lot of the learning myself. As a secondary school teacher, students are at varying maturity levels in their learning. Often times the best learning takes place in a social context. Priority needs to be given to the importance of building a community and this can be extended to blended learning environments. In the initial stages, group activities need not only be confined to study related tasks, but simple, fun games can help build and maintain the bond between students and open the lines of communication with teachers. Online students need this sense of ownership and belonging just as regular classroom students.

While online mentoring is thriving, little is known about the successes and unique challenges of this phenomenon ([Ensher, Heun, & Blanchard, 2003](#_ENREF_7)). Peer mentors do not need to exist within the four walls of a classroom but can exist anywhere. No longer do peer ecologies only exist amongst the students at a particular school or in a particular area, but peer ecologies can incorporate both online and face-to-face members. As teachers we can facilitate the positive involvement of these groups. I recently learned of a seventeen-year-old boy in Australia that has set up an online support group for young people that are bullied. Smaller task groups at schools offer face-to-face support to peers within their community that in turn reinforces the online support group.

In a paper by Lea (2002, [as cited in Fisher & Baird, 2005](#_ENREF_7)) it was shown that the quality of group output is improved when learning environments are designed to develop team players. In my experience of working with juvenile delinquents in lock up facilities, I was continually amazed at the impact team building had on young criminals dealing with an array of social and personal issues. I often would spend time watching the basketball coaches in the gym working with groups of boys within this framework. It was then applied to classroom environments where teachers were able to maximize learning through positive peer ecologies that developed. The concept of team building in online environments can be explored through emerging technology such as virtual worlds and gaming.

I would argue that New Zealand classrooms are not a representation of a bicultural society but of a multicultural collection of peoples. I agree with Carroll-Lind and Raskaskas (2008) that more New Zealand research is needed to examine the role that ethnicity and culture plays across different educational contexts, ages, and socioeconomic levels in the country. As negative peer ecologies can evolve in regards to racial and cultural issues, it is imperative that a student’s culture and language be given respect and nurturing. It is when young people learn to identify confidently with their own culture and language that they are able to acknowledge and accept the diversity that exists within the peer groups that they are situated. A blended learning environment ensures that this is possible in any learning community that now can include peer members from a variety of cultures.

Proponents of computer learning networks claim that they foster new social relations in the classroom, resulting in greater student empowerment. ([Ensher, et al., 2003](#_ENREF_7)). Online learning and social networks can allow disengaged youth a place to fit in. Positive online peer ecologies encourage a process whereby learners become motivated on an individual level as well as fostering a sense of accountability to the group to continue to participate ([Sinclair, 2003](#_ENREF_14)).

As previously stated, teachers are not part of peer ecologies but can help shape, offer role modeling, and encourage peer interaction in blended learning environments. Due to the rapid expansion of online learning possibilities educators need to re-evaluate traditional pedagogical strategies and find ways to integrate curriculum, technology, peer ecologies, and learning in a manner which supports student self-regulation ([Warschauer, et al., 1996](#_ENREF_15)) and fosters the growth of positive peer ecologies. Mobile technology is another example of an emerging technological tool that is already in prominent use among peer groups. Mobile usage will become a more affordable and effective means of communicating in the future. Research is required to identify the types of online constructivist activities incorporating mobile technology that can be used in blended learning environments in order to ensure the building of strong supportive communities of learners.

When teachers become facilitators and take advantage of the networked learning environments, great possibilities exist. A modern day classroom is not just four walls, but a home base from which the world beyond can be explored and can be involved in directly. The modern day teacher is the facilitator that ensures that positive peer ecologies flourish within learning environments by engaging young people in interest driven learning and supporting positive peer relationships with all available technological and face-to-face tools.

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