Student Communities for the Advancement of Knowledge

Knowledge building—the creation of knowledge as a social product—is something that scientists, scholars and employees of highly innovative companies do for a living. It could also be a significant activity of schools, though it is rarely seen there.

The central purpose of computer-supported intentional learning environments (CSILE) is to make such knowledge building an integral part of schooling. In order for this to occur, the character of classroom discourse needs to undergo radical change. CSILE has been designed as a computer-supported environment in which collaborative discourse is the primary medium for knowledge advancement. Students identify and pursue issues of understanding and engage in the kinds of dialogue used by workers in the sciences and in other dynamic, knowledge-advancing organizations.

Knowledge building, as thus conceived, can be distinguished from most of school learning which is focused on individual assignments and various other individual displays of knowledgeability. In CSILE, the focus is on collective responsibility and continual advancement of ideas in a student-generated database. In this context, students’ conflicting views and contradictory methods can be rethought for their potential to complement and expand shared knowledge. The goals of the enterprise are emergent, with consensus representing but a provisional synthesis—an advance, but more importantly, a new starting point.

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