

Online Learning Communities: A challenge for communication and learning in companies

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Changes and challenges in the organisational context demand new ways for the construction of a sustained and continue ongoing learning process. IT-based Online Learning Communities provides new opportunities for creation of learning processes but also challenging our traditional view of teaching and education.

This paper will give a brief outline of our approach concerning the research and development of Online Learning Communities and, based on research results, suggest some areas of interest of development for the future.

From Content to Context providers

The education and learning have for long time been characterized by, what have been called, the “transmission model”. The model has influenced the IT and learning productions and typically outcomes, especially for business corporations grounded in the traditional model, has been e-learning productions, ready-made traditional learning materials, to be practiced in a one-way mode – the user vis-à-vis the computer.

The transmission model is now being replaced by new models for learning, with very different labels, as for example the “participatory” model. The new models, or perhaps the paradigm of education, fit well to the use of IT and the Internet. Once, when the telephone was invented, many believed that it would be used as a content providing technology and the some actually thought that users was going to listen to different information and music productions. The telephone turned up to be, by the users use of the technology, a horizontal, not hierarchical, “peer to peer” technology, today unquestioned in its use.

The same development can be seen in the use of modern IT - the technology itself supports a development of peer-to-peer communication. One reason is of course that IT in the form of Internet provides a simple technology for the single user to spread information to an unlimited population of people and users.

The creation of communities could be seen as a part of this development — the “take over” of the Internet by the users. A community is simply a meeting point for people on the Net where participants in one way or another shares common interests. The technology could be fairly simple, as for example mailing lists, or it could be advanced technology providing possibility’s for users to create web publications, include brainstorming facility and have forums within which questions can be asked, responses posted and suggestions made.

The learning in learning in learning communities

The learning process created by learners with appropriate management, in a community could be seen as an ongoing continual process. Visser (2001) states that learning could be defined, as “disposition to dialogue...with [our] human, social, biological

and physical environment” and that learning is a disposition, which leads to a process, rather than that process itself.” that the process itself leads to a dialogic process; that it transcends the individual and includes the social; and that it is related to a conscious effort to engage constructively with one’s ever changing environment”.

As well as Visser, Malley (1995) points out that within collaborative learning settings there is a need to ”focus more on the processes involved in successful peer interaction, rather than just on learning outcomes”. The change in focus from the result to the process itself is also readable in the ongoing debate in different EU units, where representatives express their shift from ”content” providers i.e. for example as producer’s of readymade learning materials to ”context” providers offering IT as a tool for the learners process.

It is evident that young people, using the Internet to an ever-increasing extent, participate in different forms of communities where the process, created by the users themselves, is the only focus. Providers of communities for youngsters see themselves as providers of context, delivering tools for communication. Jean Johnson, at the British Institute Ultralab, and Director for the ”Notshcool community” (for children with special needs) has an expression saying, ”Community is King - not content”. The participants create the content themselves with the support of the community rather than being provided with ready-made study materials.

One precondition, focusing on the process, is that the learners provide opportunities to understand why and what they are doing, and understand the result of the process. Understanding comes through one’s own discovery of phenomena and their relations. The learner achieves understanding when he or she takes part in defining the problems as well as trying to find a problem-solving method. The organisation of learner’s in communities is therefore a part of learners’ learning how to function in a team, and how teams can co-operate.

Taking into account numerous societal changes one objective for learning and education programs is the increase in the learner’s self-confidence, communication skills and creativity. Our approach is that the learner will learn how to learn through

1. an ability to work with others to, including people from different cultures, discuss and implement new ideas and forms of organisations,
2. emphasised integrated problem-solving, through an ability for problematisation and creative capacity for complex problem-solving,
3. an ability to solve complex problems that require integration of social, economical, environmental, legal, and technical factors.

We believe, or perhaps its a vision, that a well-developed online learning community makes it possible to combine this criteria’s and achieve more within a subject, introduce combinations of various subjects, have a higher progress rate in their studies, with a better understanding and motivation, and to be more flexible and adaptable to the development in the society.

The sustained learning process

The online learning community is defined as a learning atmosphere, a context providing a supportive system from which sustainable learning processes are gained through dialog and collaborative construction of knowledge by acquiring, generating, analysing and structuring information.

We have a learner-centred interaction point-of-view. Learning activity is not only a computation or manipulation of representations, it should rather be seen as con-

structuring meaning from information based on a human capacity to make sense, and a collaborative sharing of meaning with someone else.

In gaining the Sustainable Learning process we are interested in whether technology-mediated synchronous and asynchronous communication and collaboration between learners and tutors can facilitate the process of learning to learn. We consider the interface between networked co-learners as one central issue.

By sustainable learning processes we thus mean an ongoing constant activity in the community that inspires and stimulates a continually ongoing learning. A practical example of a sustained learning community are the e-mail lists between different kinds of programmers where participants gain knowledge simply by raising and answering e-mailed questions. The sustainability is achieved in this activity probably because of the tightness between the programmer's work and their demand for instant answers to their questions.

Community proficiency and level of skills

For the community to be effective the members must be able to communicate effectively with each other, to debate and to reflect. Collaborative learning in communities involves collaborative skills. The skills that are especially important for co-operation are communication skills, particularly those in building and maintaining trust, and controversy skills". (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). Very often these skills are practised without explicit reference. Learners are often unaware of what is required of them in a collaborative activity even when they are quite able to cope with the situation. Collaboration is not technologically based in our culture and community participants need to identify the different social skills that are being activated.

Since 1994 I have been involved in different projects concerning the development of learning communities.

Most of the projects have been carried out in different educational settings, some of which have been in co-operation with local industries. One of our results is that the learners gain certain skills or proficiency during the studying or, rather, the work process. These skills could be lined up in several stages as shown below. Despite my being a little bit sceptical towards describing the learning process as the metaphor "brick to brick", there is no doubt that community participants gain these skills in a certain order. As could be seen, the first step, "Take part of information" is what we all do ourselves with the Internet, but do we all take part in chatrooms and Forums with own contributions?

Level of skills:

1. Take part of information.
2. Participate in online dialogs with own contributions.
3. Take part of and discuss others online contributions.
4. Obtain (mutual) agreement.
5. Produce and bring, publish, own material to the community.
6. Make comments, and review others material.
7. Bring together others contributions to collaborative solutions and results.

As examples from our projects, we have the following tentative results:

A. The better proficiency, on levels 6 and 7, the better the participants experience that they learn. In each survey, carried out so far, participants normally emphasis that the learning mainly occurs when they adapted and practised skills on level 6 and 7.

B. The better proficiency, the better sustained the learning process will be received. We have several occasions when we have finished our work as facilitators for the group, trained to reach level 6 and 7, when afterwards the community members take over and continue the learning process on their own.

We have also had results to the contrary – if we simply present a homepage with an opportunity for discussions, but in most cases the group reaches level 2 or 3 but not more. And, if any, the discussion will not last long, and there will be no sustained learning process.

Key areas of interest

Computer supported collaboration in communities could be a sensitive action. Unawareness can be very costly in terms of lost of process, and in collaboration. Landmarks are needed to appreciate whether communication is taking place or not. Typing is not a spontaneous or easy way to communicate for most people, for it slows down the exchanges, obliges to a structuring of the information and provides little feedback. In striving for development of online learning communities, areas such as the following are of interest.

Community Training

Collaborative learning does not happen immediately. It must be practised. It is necessary for the co-learners to spend considerable time familiarising themselves with the tool and communicating with each other at a distance. In turn this requires developing a "social protocol" and knowledge how to co-ordinate their activities before any collaborative learning can take place. This implies that collaborative learning needs to take place over a long period of time before any significant benefits can be materialised.

Community Management

The online learning community is a living space, at least if the aim is to provide a sustained learning atmosphere and inspiring context. We have considerable knowledge concerning business administration and management, we know the area education management, but the area of how to manage learning communities remains to be fulfilled. In our projects we have, to a large extent, made the same results as Schofield wrote about 1995, namely that in computer-mediated educational settings the role of the teachers moves towards facilitator and tutor. Areas of interest are then, for example, the role of the teacher or facilitator in the community and, of course, different structures and learning approaches for the development of the participant's skills and knowledge.

Community Measurement

The last proposed area of interest is the measurement of learning in the community. It raises a great demand of knowledge as for example: How and what do the participants learn? Forms of examination for a peer-to-peer learning process? How could we improve forms of measurement for knowledge visualisation in the groups? How does feedback affect the activity and the learning process?

The research and development of online learning communities is an inspiring field. The areas mentioned above are limited examples of areas of interest. Ongoing development about the meaning of learning, the demand for new ways of teaching in modern society, and of course, the development of technology are other examples of

issues that will have an impact and effect on the development of the online learning communities. Even though the focus on online learning communities is limited today, we are sure that it will be one of the main agendas in the lifelong learning debate of tomorrow.

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