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Chapter 19: Reuse of Resources within Communities of Practice

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I first experienced the tremendous cost savings potential of virtual conferences when I organized what I believe was the first professional development conference held on distributed digital networks in 1992 (Anderson & Mason, 1993). This first conference used a variety of pre-Internet (FidoNet, BitNet and Usenet) and Internet mailing lists to distribute discussion related to the International Council for Distance Education Congress held in Bangkok. At the time I was a graduate student, with no travel funds and was able to organize this entire virtual conference (with the help of many volunteers) for the total cost of a few faxes to Bangkok. The key to the economic advantage of virtual conferences is the capacity to allow access to professional gatherings without travel or other restrictions of place and in shifting the time requirements to allow asynchronous participation. Since then there have been many successful virtual conferences employing various combinations of synchronous and asynchronous interaction. However, few have been based on applicable theories related to development of communities of practice or relevant knowledge management theory nor have many evolved much beyond the 'horseless carriage' emulation of face-to-face seminars or conferences.

The Online Tutoring Skills (OtiS) e-workshop described in this chapter makes a significant contribution to knowledge of how to effectively design and manage virtual conferences or e-workshops. In addition they provide a useful discussion and exemplar of means by which the content of these forums can be re-used and repackaged for wider and continuing use. The first contribution of the paper is a description of an innovative process for soliciting and evaluating content from within the community of practice. This was done by soliciting case studies that describe both the content and the context of an evolving field of professional expertise ? that being on-line tutoring. Peers adjudicated the case studies and 35 were chosen from the 80 submitted. The second contribution was to pioneer a sophisticated instructional design for the two weeks of the e-workshop. This structure defined roles for participants ranging from authors,

to raconteurs, moderators and contributors. Also delineated was a two-week schedule that mixed synchronous chat sessions with asynchronous discussion groups, keynote presentations and small group summary postings to plenary sessions. The structure was designed to facilitate knowledge extraction and growth amongst the community throughout the e-workshop. Finally, the paper helps us to extend the learning across longer periods of time, by documenting the process by which writing teams created chapters for a book during a post workshop phase of the e-workshop.

This excellent paper ends with a discussion of a series of issues that arose during the e-conference and that could be described as a first look at best practice guide for e-workshop designers. I liked the article and I appreciate the serious conceptual and physical work put into organizing and documenting for re-use this professional development initiative.

The authors use Wenger's familiar model of a community of practice and with Preece's (2000) features of online community, to provide a strong theoretical base to the workshop design. The theory provides a scaffold to facilitate understanding of community formation during this workshop and how discourse within the community leads to knowledge construction and affirmation.

While I find the model and the description of the workshop useful, I'm left with lingering doubts related to the efficacy of the workshop from the participants' perspective. These doubts are based upon my own participation in virtual conferences over the years. Sorry, I meant e-conferences ? I'm still not quite with it enough to preface most of my nouns with "e-" to gain currency! Do the majority of participants really connect and develop critical "mutual engagement" in virtual conferences? I know that I have enrolled in many such conferences ? some I have followed religiously, others I have skimmed through lightly at the end of a busy day or week. Does reading the conferences alone count as meaningful "joint enterprise" or "shared repertoire"? Are those who read, but do not post, members of the community of practice? I realize that attendance alone at a face-to-face event doesn't guarantee meaningful participation or the development of the necessary sense of awareness of the proceedings that Langer (1997) refers to as mindfulness. But I'm left with a lingering suspicion that the commitment of physical attendance with concomitant removal of the distraction of other work responsibilities, email, telephone and family intrusions, differentiates the extent and perhaps the quality of participation in the e-workshop and thus the critical 'mutual engagement' may be missing from the communities thus formed. Of course, this lingering doubt is merely a hypothesis and begs some empirical verification. This is perhaps my only criticism of this paper ? how do we know the level of commitment and participation in the community of practice or more importantly of development of personal or professional knowledge achieved by the participants? The study provides no survey data, transcript analysis of interaction, interview data, or even reports of the numbers of interactive messages exchanged by the "over 100" participants. I realize that such data is hard to gather as evidenced by the pathetically low return rate of electronic surveys from participants in my last virtual conference (Anderson, 1996). I also realize the challenges of measuring community, social or cognitive presence derived from the transcripts of these online interactions conferences (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). These difficulties were motivations that led to my work with Heather Kanuka on a book on e-research techniques (Anderson & Kanuka, 2002) - he says, shamelessly promoting his own products J.

This chapter gives us a first rate example of the way to design a professional development activity based on sound theory and facilitated by a team of dedicated and more important skillful educators. However, the field is far too young to assume that theoretically derived intervention will necessarily lead to quality outcomes. These must be thoroughly tested. Of course the test results themselves then contribute to honing and further development of the theory.

Besides the theoretical strength of this chapter, the authors make a major contribution by documenting their "lessons learned" in a discussion of "online workshop management issues". The thorny copyright issue is addressed and I'm pleased to see that the workshop alerted participants to the fact that the "participants are free to use, develop and adapt the case studies, materials, ideas and exemplars developed in the e-workshop either to improve their own practice or to develop the skills of others". This certainly is in the spirit of open and free use of content, facilitates maximum reuse and helps build a sense of the gift culture that we need to counter the pressure for commercialization of so much public knowledge today. However, a more systematic and clear way to facilitate this re-use is to make clear who does own the copyright ? I would assume the authors of the case studies or the posters of responses. Despite the desire to have their content reused, I think that many authors would prefer to retain the copyright, but specifically allow reuse by others. Defining the terms and formally licensing reuse of this type of text content is supported through the Open Content license [www.opencontent.org] or more recently through the exemplar work of the Creative Commons initiative [www.creativecommons.org]. Creative Commons in particular, provides a very easy to use system, accessed via a web-based wizard, to produce a series of licenses detailing authority to use and re-use copyrighted materials. It would be interesting to engage in a discussion on this forum of the copyright, ownership and re-use expectations of both formal presenters and the e-workshop respondents.

I found the suggestions for providing an appropriate mix of synchronous and asynchronous activities of particular importance. The synchronous activities in this case were text based, but it is becoming increasingly easy to use a variety of IP based audiographic products that I believe will increase humanization and ease of synchronous interaction by supporting voice discussion. Of course this will raise new access and re-use issues (relating to the challenges of searching and indexing voice), but the tradeoffs of text chat versus voice chat are worth investigating. Finally, the authors highlight and illustrate ways to capture and re-use (the focus of the book) the knowledge generated during the workshop. As they argue, the effort to document and then provide for community review the case studies of professional practice in authentic contexts is a critically important and relatively efficient way to document the realms of tacit knowledge that mark professional practice. We need such systems to insure equitable access to opportunities for professional growth and knowledge building by all members of our society.

In summary, Harris and Higgison provide us with an illustration of the way that development activities undertaken by practicing professionals can be effectively and efficiently designed and managed. They further illustrate how the content and interaction of this activity can be repurposed for a variety of further work. Together, and perhaps most importantly, these descriptions of a real life model of an e-workshop, grounded in relevant theory, further contributes to the evolving theory of online community growth and its application to professional development.

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