Community Without A Vision Won't Work

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to show: "Online communities without a benefit for each participant won't work". From a socio-scientific point of view it will be shown which crucial social aspects are necessary for the development of learning communities. Bearing in mind that through the satisfaction of the individual problem, need or interest in the field common knowledge is created and a reciprocity of information is guaranteed. Two examples in the field of eLearning in higher education will underline this argument. Based on these experiences an attempt to improve and redraw Salmon's (2000) figure is undertaken.

1. Introduction

> "What amazed me wasn't just the speed with which we obtained precisely the information we needed to know, right when we needed to know it. It was the immense sense of security that comes with discovering that real people are available, around the clock, if you need them."
> (Rheingold, 1993)

E-Education, truly online or blended, is the buzz word for learning institutions and suggests success and profit for both sides – the learner and the institution. Isn't this hype sometimes only old wine in new bottles? Combining new ideas about computer-mediated technologies and well-loved theories of learning and teaching can result in fantastic possibilities, but they need a rethinking of the learning process, human time and energy to get them to work (Salmon 2002, 4). The advantages of eLearning must not only be summarized through the expression A^3 (anytime, anywhere, anybody), but have to include interaction (Preece, Sharp, & Rogers, 2002) as a very important, social element of deep, effective learning. The interaction can happen between learner and content (hypertext, simulation), learner and instructor (Computer mediated communication - CMC), learner and learner (collaborative learning) and learner and interface (usability (Vredenburg et al, 2002)).

Based on the assumption that interaction and participation are crucial elements for viable learning communities this paper examines from a socio-scientific point of view which aspects help to enforce the different kinds of interaction. However, active engagement by the participants will

only occur when they see their needs to be fulfilled in the community vision (Fig. 1).

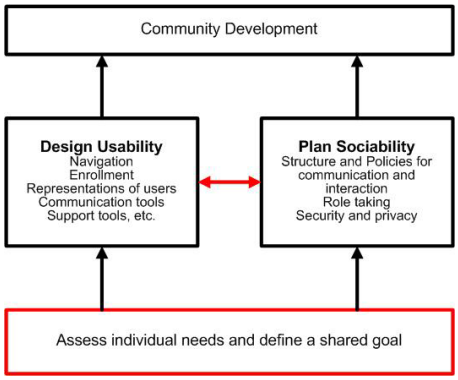

Fig. 1 Development of Communities (Preece, 2000)

Then the virtual collaborative space will be a fruitful and profitable place for individuals and the system as whole. To pinpoint, the success of building a virtual community strongly depends on the usefulness for each learner.

Two case studies from the field of higher education will show which methods trainers can use to support community building processes, bearing in mind that through the satisfaction of the individual problem, common knowledge is created and a reciprocity of information and participation is guaranteed.

2. Everybody talks about communities

"People are the pulse of every community."
(Preece, 2000)

If you ask for "learning community" the searching machine "Google" will offer over 6 million entries; showing the scientific and every day use of this term.

What are the hopes, fantasies and imaginations behind this term? Is it the associativity of security and cosiness which seams to be fulfilled through a community in a dynamic, chaotic and (always) changing world? Is it loyality, self-realisation and self-organisation within a community that individuals as well as institutions look for?

On the surface, the term (online) community is easy to grasp, but due to the interdisciplinary use and the different associated connotations it is important to clear-cut the term.

(Web-)communities are a group of persons with similar interests and goals which build a common knowledge base through social interaction and participation on the basis of an Information and Communication Technology (Kim 2000, Hagel/Armstrong 1997, Preece 2000). The collective purpose of a community, the goals and roles of the individual participants, and the policies developed to structure the activities all influence social interaction and the specific appearance of the online community (Fig. 1).

In accordance with the definition above we describe communities through following characteristics (Baumgartner/Dimai, 2002):

- Participants have a *common goal*, desire or specific interests. On the one hand this special focus or domain helps potential fellows in their individual assessment of the community. On the other hand the founders get an idea of the structure and elements of the community. Furthermore, the goal strongly influences the interaction and communication, more generally, the culture of the community. For example you will find more emphatic messages in emotional, protective communities, whereas a more aggressive communication is observable in religious, political or cultural communities.
- The specific appearance of each community is formed and reformed by interaction and participation. The capacity to generate and integrate *knowledge through communication* is a crucial difference to other social systems, like organisations, institutions or project teams.
- At an advanced level *information circulates* within a self-defined structure and within a climate of trust and appreciation. This selforganised, situated, individual and collective learning (Wenger/Lave 1991, Wenger 1998) is probably the main advantage of communities.
- Over time a *shared context* of conventions, rules, language, power relations, role taking and making is developed which gives sense and meaning to each activity.

Virtual communities are not an once defined, durable, stable and through the technical system determinated entity, on contrary they develop and redevelop their structure, identity and culture through processes of communication and interaction between human beings and machines. To oscillate between a redesignabel usability and a flexible sociability is the art of a successful community.

3. Step by step to a successful learning community

To which social and technical dimensions do you have to pay attention to develop a community?

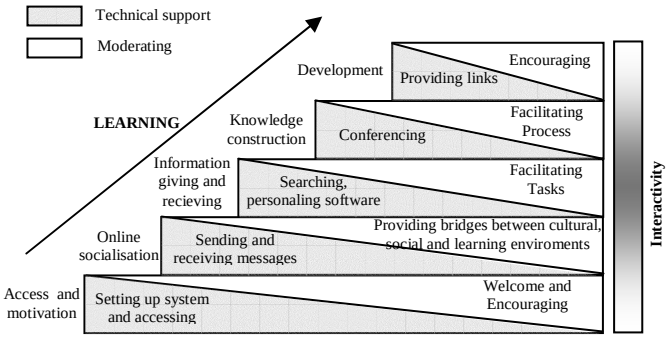

Fig. 2 Steps torwards a viable community (Salmon 2000)

However fancy and hype the online platform may be, the community building process won't work if the person in charge (teacher, founder of a specific community) does not define a shared goal, interest, need or activity that provides the primary reason for belonging to the community (Wenger 2002, Salmon 2002). Participants' individual needs have to be fulfilled so that they are motivated (Holzinger, 2002) and willing to actively communicate and interact within the community. So if a clear goal, access and motivation is not satisfied you will never reach the state of a self-organized, knowledge-creating community. During this first contact it is important that the members are not confronted with an information overload concerning the handling of and navigation in the virtual platform. Online socialisation can be compared with other group building activities and dynamics. Here, a sense of belonging to this group at this time and a web of trust (Salmon 2000, 20) are created through teaching methods which are supported by appropriated technological tools. Information exchange depends on interaction with either the content or people, namely the e-moderators or other learning collegues. Knowledge construction and development are highly self-organised states. Participants choose critically and reflectively the learning content which is relevant for them and via combining the new information with their experience they create knowledge.
The following case studies will show how this learning and community building process can be supported on a technological and media-pedagogical level.

4. Two case studies in the field of higher education

A. The lecture course Structural Concrete

The lecture course in "Structural Concrete" at the Institute of Structural Concrete at the University of Technology of Graz has been supported by the eLearning project iVISiCE (http://ivisice.tugraz.at) for two years now. With the aid of a web-based course management system a blended learning scenario was created.

Every year about a hundred students attend to the lecture. The course is a compulsory subject for the study of civil engineering and takes place in the 7th semester of the curriculum, lasting about four months from November to February.

In March 2002 the project iVISiCE (Interactive Visualization in Civil Engineering) has been established (Ebner & Holzinger, 2002) to investigate the possibilities of the Internet use in education. Based on the three foundations interaction (Ebner & Holzinger, 2003) , visualisation and communication the aim of the project is to make the content sufficiently approachable for the students (learners).

Synchronous tools (chats, virtual office hours) as well as asynchronous (e-mail, discussion forum and a virtual blackboard) have been employed. It must be pointed out, that the students are not obligated to use it. The idea was that the decision of participation should be made by the students themselves. In the first time of running, the course addressed to follwing questions: "Can CMC work without the obligation of participation? Is Community building possible during a very short time or is the traditional face-to-face communication not replaceable?"

As a result of now two years of using online communication it could be noticed that - although voluntarily - the rate of attendance is surprisingly high. Nearly 100 statements have been posted every week by the students or tutors and 2 virtual office hours per week have been carried out. About 30% of the students took an active part in the eLearning scenario, they attended the virtual office hours or posted to the newsgroups. But why are the new ways of communication so successful? What are the benefits for each student? After the end of the lecture polls and interviews with our learners helped to understand the reason of the results.

> "To get an answer on the weekend to a short question during my own learning process within a very short time is now possible. This supports me a lot." (Student – from Personal Essay)

"Support 'round the clock" – It seemed to be necessary to achieve satisfaction of the learners. The work of the tutors during unsocial hours

but during the main learning time leads to a high acceptance of the discussion forums.

> "The runtime of the virtual office hour between 8.00 p.m. to 10.00 p.m. was a great help for getting information in my main learning time " (Student – from Personal Essay)

The access to information via virtual office hours during their typical learning time has often been pointed out. But it must be noticed that similarly to the discussion forum, the explanation of complex coherences was not possible. The strength of the tool is to give short answers and solutions of easier problems.

> "Standing in front of an empty lecturing room – a thing of the past" (Student – from Personal Essay)

The use of the virtual blackboard (so called infoboard) was very successful. With this one-way communication the smooth expiration of the course has been possible. Updating the board keep the students to bear in mind about the latest information of the lecture.

According to Price & Lapham (2003) the efficiency of CMC has been confirmed by the experiences with this blended learning scenario. The possibility to bring teachers and students more in touch and the promotion of student-student as well as student-teacher dialogues seem to be a great promise of eLearning in higher education. The personal relationships also become common in such an environment (Parks & Floyd 1996).

B. Impressions from blended learning at the Institute for Organisation and Learning

For more than two years lecturers at the Institute for Organisation and Learning (University of Innsbruck) have been integrating different eLearning moments and methods in their courses. Referring to the titel some examples are shown which make clear that depending on the aim (of the learning situation) and the maturity of the participants (concerning expertise in the professional field and eLearning experience) the specific needs and expectations demand different methods (Baumgartner, 1994).

Especially in situations where teachers and students are most of the time present it is difficult to convince members of the advantages of CMC. They use the learning management system as a content repository and most of the time define the discussion board or cafeteria as artifical.

> "I see my fellow students every week. Why should I communicate online? That's artifical, impersonal and time

> intensive. And if you look at all these computer kids – they have a hard time to find friends in real life. I think personal contact is more valuable and reasonable." (Student – from Personal Essay)

To overcome these prejudices, peer reading and online feedback was established, which supports interaction, communication and collaborative learning and gives transparency and esteem to the students' work.

> "Through the comment of a fellow student I had a Aha-experience which I wouldn't have gained by reading all the literature in the field." (Student – from Personal Essay)

In particular for eLearning novices it is useful to offer a very personal online socialisation which helps to develop a sense of belonging and a fruitful working culture. For a high participant rate it is suggested to divide the students into smaller sub-groups, so that they aren't confronted with a social information overload. In the learning process they can then contact selected members who are important for their personal succeeding. There are many icebreaker activities (e.g. two verities and one lie about yourself which have to be commentated by the others) which help to overcome the anonymity and to create an individual profile of each participant - the first steps towards a learning community.

The building of effective online learning communities will only work if all participants see and feel by doing the additional value of eLearning. This benefit has to be embedded in a solid fundament and supported by different technical equipment and methodical competence.

5. Conclusions and Summary

Due to our experiences in different eLearning courses we modified and expanded Salmon's five step model (Fig. 2). In our opinion the constantly referring basis of any online learning consists of access, commitment, (self-)motivation and (self-)discipline, benefit and usefulness. This permanent existing fundament determines the success or the failure of eLearning (and community building) no matter how sophisticated the virtual platform or competent the e-moderator may be (Fig. 3). Evaluations of the blended learning courses at the Universities of Innsbruck and Graz have shown that especially access (stability of the system, usability) and a clear vision (is the aim within the expectations of the students?) are crucial factors for the decision to participate actively. If each learner recognises the benefit for himself, the community building will work smoothly.

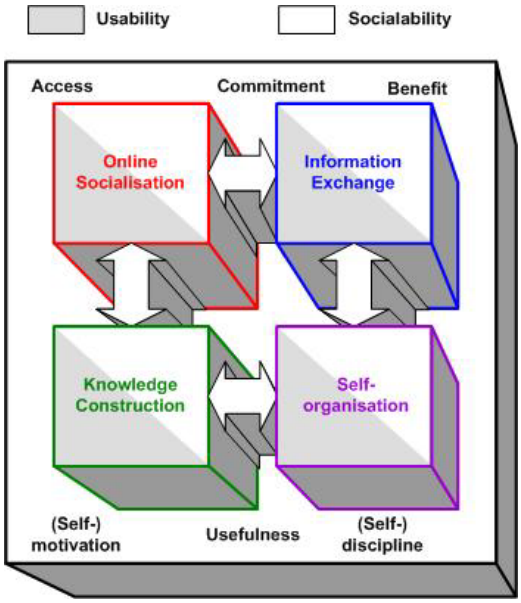

Fig. 3 The building of virtual community

Furthermore it is important to keep in mind that dependent on the subject (the aim), the specific learning situation and the target group different learning and teaching elements are more important than the other elements. Learners who are familiar with eLearning environments don't need that much time for online socialisation; a learning group with less time sticks more to information exchange; learning expert in a specific field come together to create new, situated knowledge.

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