Chapter X

A Social Context Model for Discussion Process Analysis

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Abstract

Computer-mediated discussion processes play an important role in achieving sustainable development. However, when part of authoring complex documents, these discussions have so far not been very effective. One reason is that in the design and application of the information tools supporting discussion, the social context is not sufficiently taken into account. We outline a social context model for discussion process analysis. The GRASS tool for group report authoring and the freeText tool for document review are authoring tools in which the social context of discussions is given explicit attention. Analyzing GRASS and freeText, we show how the model could be used to construct information tools that enable more effective discussions.

Introduction

Globalization leads to an increasing number of complex societal problems related to sustainable development. Their solution requires the involvement of ever more stakeholders, with often strongly opposing interests. Discussion processes play an important role in public debates, the development of alternatives, and political decision making. Many types of electronic discussion tools already exist, such as newsgroups, mailing lists and various Web tools. However, so far, computer-mediated discussions have not been very effective in consistently fostering societal change. One important reason is that in the design and application of many tools, the social context in which the discussion processes are carried out is not sufficiently taken into account. This is especially important when the tools are used not only for discussing the pros and cons of issues, but also for the authoring of structured documents. We therefore define authoring tools as those discussion tools that are tailored to the effective authoring of structured documents.

In this chapter, we aim to chart the social context of discussion processes, and investigate how it can be used in order to help in the development of discussion tools that are more effective for authoring. We start with an analysis of two tools used to support the authoring of group documents: GRASS and freeText. Next, we analyze related work on discussion theory and tools. We present our social context model for discussion process analysis in the following section. We then use this model to analyze and compare the functionality and application of GRASS and freeText. We conclude the chapter by indicating some future research on how the model could be used to construct information tools that help foster more effective societal discussions.

Authoring as an Effective Discussion Process

Many social, environmental, and developmental issues are examples of "wicked problems". These problems are very hard to formulate and solve, as their resolution requires input from many stakeholders and disciplines (De Moor, 1998). Co-authoring documents like policies and regulations is an essential activity in resolving wicked problems and thus making society more sustainable. Authoring is a good example of a goal-oriented communication process, in which multiple authors collaborate on a joint work. In complex discussions, editorial unity needs to be achieved, while at the same time a wide variety of author perspectives need to be preserved (Harasim & Walls, 1993).

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