Chapter 3.14
Knowledge Media Tools to Foster Social Learning

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to overview the ways in which knowledge media technologies create opportunities for social learning. The Open Content movement has been growing rapidly, opening up new opportunities for widening participation. One of the Open Educational Resources (OER) initiatives is the OpenLearn project, launched by the Open University, which integrates three knowledge media technologies: Compendium, FM and MSG. In this chapter, the authors analyse some examples, which show how these tools can be used to foster open sensemaking communities by mapping knowledge, location and virtual interactions. At the end, they present some questions and future horizons related to this research.

INTRODUCTION

Due to the widespread use of new technologies, people have greater access to information, interaction at distance and knowledge reconstruction than ever before. Open learning materials, online libraries, electronic journals and collective repositories are part of a larger movement to create a public online space providing open high-quality content in different formats such as hypertext, image, sound and video. The Open Educational Resources (OER) movement has also been opening up new opportunities for widening participation (Willinsky, 2006; Dholakia, King & Baraniuk, 2006; Downes, 2006; O'Mahony & Ferraro, 2003; Open Source Initiative, 2007).

The Open University UK´s OpenLearn Project, for instance, is a large scale project that makes a selection of higher education learning resources freely available on the internet. OpenLearn, which is supported by William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, was launched in October 2006 and in eighteen months released over 5,400 learning hours of the OU's distance learning resources for free access and modification by learners and educators under the Creative Commons license (OpenLearn, 2006). OpenLearn also offers three knowledge media tools: Compendium (knowledge mapping software), MSG (instant messaging application with geolocation maps) and FM (Web-based videoconferencing application).

This chapter introduces these three OpenLearn technologies and presents examples about the use and integration of these tools to promote social learning. During its first year and a half there are 50,000 registered users in OpenLearn, over 1,000,000 unique visitors to the site, over 1,000 video meetings booked, 1,377 Compendium Knowledge Map downloads and 17,000 MSG users.

Our current work is to investigate how these tools can be applied to foster open sensemaking communities (Buckingham Shum, 2005a) around the OERs, that is, the interpretative work that must take place around any resource for learning to take place. How can these technologies be used to support this critical activity in an OER context when learners must find and engage with peers themselves, if they do not wish to study alone?

"Open sensemaking communities" refer to open and self-sustaining communities that construct knowledge together from an array of environmental inputs (Buckingham Shum, 2005a; Weick, 1995). Thousands of open communities can be found on Facebook, MySpace, Orkut, Flickr, Yahoo groups, Google Groups, Moodle etc. However, there are some challenging issues for an "open community" (Reagle, 2004) to turn into an "open sensemaking community"(Buckigham Shum, 2005a). Participants must literally reflect upon information (Brooks & Scott, 2006) and "make" sense together by giving shape or modelling diverse ideas through significant representations (Buckingham Shum and Okada, 2008). They need transform their abstract thoughts about what is being learned into their personal framework - "knowledge objects" (Entwistle, 1995) and into "collective representations of knowledge" (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). The term knowledge object is used *"to describe the essence of these quasi-sensory experiences of aspects of understanding"*, through structures of thinking paths or summaries of integrated body of knowledge produced by a student (Entwistle, 1995:50). However, the "making" of a "shared artefact" to express the emerging, collective view of the problem/solution is an important distinction. Sensemaking is a "*mutually negotiated understanding*" (Weick, 1995:4). It means interpreting and representing plausible narratives about the world collectively. Through sensemaking, externalising one's understanding clarifies one's own grasp of the situation, as well as communicates it to others — literally, "*the making of sense*" (Weick, 1995: 4). An example of open sensemaking community is a community of open source software's developers. They learn with each other by representing and sharing understanding

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