

E-Collaboration within Blogging Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

The act of blogging is not an inherently social or community-oriented one, but increasingly blogs have been used both as a forum for sharing information with and interacting with others and as a huge repository of information and opinions to be collected, organized, and shared. New blogs are being created at a very quick rate; Technorati, a blog-indexing company, estimates that they are tracking over 70 million blogs as of February, 2007, a number that is continuously growing (Technorati, 2007). Combined with current trends toward online social networking and learning communities, it is not surprising that blogs have been used to support e-collaboration.

Blogging communities have developed in two ways. First, through this proliferation of blogs, individuals with like interests have found each other and built online connections. Second, people with real-life connections have realized the potential of blogging technology to facilitate collaboration and have purposefully created blogs to support their efforts. This article provides an overview of how blogging communities of practice are defined, have developed, and have come to use the tools for e-collaboration.

BACKGROUND

The Internet was developed in part to bring together groups of people who are separated by time and space, and the concept of people working together in virtual communities stretches back to the pre-Web days of this technology (Rheingold, 2000). Blogging is an act that can be done individually, but has come to be done collaboratively by many people over the years. It is essentially involves writing and publishing brief posts to a Web page in reverse chronological order.

The definition of blog contains no requirement of an external audience, interactants, or discourse; a blog could be a personal diary, a log of work, or a collection or personal links intended for the authors' eyes only. That blogging became a community-oriented activity in some contexts is perhaps more indicative of a desire for technology-mediated communication than of anything inherent in the technology itself, which did not extend beyond basic Web-page creation.

Communities, in the general sense, may be cultural, geographical, or based on interest. An online community might be any of these three, but defining community can prove a big challenging. The word community often is used rather casually with reference to people communicating via the Web. Any collection of people who might communicate online has come to be called a virtual community, and corporate entities have used the concept of online community as a marketing strategy. However, online community is based on more than just the ability to communicate with others, reading the same blog or having signed up for the same bulletin board or email list. Just because people read the same online newspaper, for example, does not make them a community; individual readers likely do not know of each other's identity or presence, nor do they gain anything from it.

A true community requires that additional criteria be met, and evidence of community can be found in many forms. Kling and Courtwright (2003) have criticized overly general use of the term community, suggesting that a true community extends beyond mere ability to communicate with others. They highlight interpersonal elements such as a developing sense of trust among participants and the resulting willingness to take risks as indicators of community. Josefsson (2005) provides a framework of social dynamics to be explored, with community being demonstrated through the interrelationship of forms of expression,

individual identity, relationships, and behavioral norms. Baym (1998) suggests that community is dependent on having a fertile external context, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics. When a sense of interdependence can be achieved based on these elements, we can say that community likely exists. Thus the determination of community extends beyond just noting that people are interacting via blog posts.

BLOGGING AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Blogs have been viewed as a forum for sharing one's knowledge and points of view. A study by the Pew Internet Foundation (Lenhart & Fox, 2006) showed that 64% of bloggers surveyed engaged in blogging to share practical knowledge or skills, and 76% did so to document and share personal experiences. Both of these types of sharing are critical elements of a community of practice, in which people not only pass along information but also how they use, understand, and feel about this information. Additionally, 50% of the bloggers surveyed indicated that they blog to network or meet new people, showing how it can be a community-expanding experience.

Essentially, blogs or groups of blogs authored by people with commonalities or like interests have evolved into communities unto themselves, often becoming communities of practice (CoPs). Communities of practice are groups of people who engage in social learning about a given subject or profession (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). It is this shared practice that differentiates them from any other type of community (e.g., a cultural community or geographic community). The process through which they learn is called a cognitive apprenticeship (for more information, see Dennen & Burner, in press). Those engaged in a community of practice are not merely acquaintances; rather, the members are usually practitioners who share similar backgrounds, tools, experiences, goals, and ways of thinking. As a community, these individuals engage in discussions, exchange ideas, ask and answer questions, and share what they have learned individually, thus building relationships and group knowledge. Although these are all visible acts described as part of a community of practice, the community of practice model allows for those who interact largely by observ-

ing. Such engagement, termed legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991), often leads to more formal and tangible community involvement.

Wenger (1998) describes the various trajectories or paths that one might be on within a community of practice. There are five trajectories: (1) peripheral, or a newcomer who generally observes and may or may not become more involved; (2) inbound, or one who is joining the community and learning much about it in the process; (3) insider, or one who has been a member for a while and is engaged in supporting new members and community maintenance; (4) boundary, or one who participates as a member of another related community; and (5) outbound, or a member who is preparing to exit the community. In a blog-based community of practice these trajectory designations take on two meanings; a member may be on one trajectory with regards to the practice itself and another with regards to the blogging community. An experienced practitioner may have much to contribute, but be new to the norms that govern blog-based interactions and thus find the need to observe at first, and then gradually increase participation over time before becoming an insider in a blog-based e-collaboration.

It is important to note that just as communities are not created by putting a group of people in the same room, online communities of practice are not simply created by linking a certain number of related weblogs; rather, these communities are gradually built through the interaction of members who may never meet each other in person, yet enjoy lasting informal relationships. Relatively little is known about how CoPs naturally form and evolve, given that most are studied after they are fairly well formed. Additionally, the sub-set of intentionally designed communities is different from those that develop organically (Schwen & Hara, 2003).

Tapped In® (www.tappedin.org) is an example of an intentionally designed CoP, and its designers still struggle with terminology in that the technology may be supporting several communities engaged in a variety of practices (Schlager & Fusco, 2003). In other words, this site, which was designed to support e-collaboration and professional development for teachers, has grown through community involvement into something somewhat different from its original plan. The deviation or drift from the original design is not a bad thing; meeting the needs of community members is more important than following a prescribed path.

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