Sociability and Usability for Active Participation

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PARTICIPANTS AND POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTORS

An online community is identified as a group of people who come together for a particular purpose guided by policies and supported by Computing Technology (Preece, 2000). Some community members act as invisible observers of synergetic activities and never cross the threshold of observation. Research has been conducted on these observers or lurkers, as it is considered to be a common phenomenon. Sproul and Faraj (1997) refer to an 80% lurking, Preece from 46% to 82% (2000) and Lambropoulos 97% (2004). Efforts for defining inactive contributors were made in order to portray the silent but mentally active involvement in discussions, "copying" creatively active members. The terms Potential Contributors and Contributors are introduced here, after Andrews, Preece and Nonnecke (2003) suggested that lurkers actually never participate in the discussion. Potential contributors are mainly the newcomers and the ones who might exhibit a wish for contribution and lurk before taking part in the discussion. The terms describe past and real-time situations, depending on the time view point of analysis, since it is not possible to predict the individuals who will lurk or contribute.

The challenge was to investigate whether Informal Learning (IL) could result in Community Knowledge Building (CKB) for Communities of Interest (CoI). Deutsch (1949), in his theory of social interdependence, stressed the importance of promotive interaction that occurs as members encourage and facilitate each other's efforts to help the community. There is a need to understand each other to a sufficient degree in order to build common knowledge. Awareness for understanding is another concept within the theory of social interdependence. In an IL framework, group-generated text and CKB are created by the active members. Dialogues increase the capacity to say to one's self by means of words or symbols, what one has done or one will do (Bruner, 1995). The more advanced member acts as the leader, while there is no demonstration of his/her behaviour, but the waste of it in the abstract form of knowledge. Non-structured group messages taken out of CMC in a focus group might better:

- test a specific question
- obtain greater depth and breadth in responses compared to individual opinions
- verify plans or findings
- extract patterns and themes of agreement or disagreement as knowledge units
- enhance the reliability of responses

As a result, activities in an online discussion forum are not anthropologically strange. Common dialogues as conversational material contain stocks of knowledge based on common understanding, revealing patterns as a "cookbook recipe for actions."

METHODOLOGY

Twenty eight members from the E-mint Association for Online Community Managers participated in an online focus group study on lurkers for 20 days. CoI focus group discussion provided the data, and ATLAS.ti was used in content analysis. Content analysis (Bauer, 2000) was conducted based on a) Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (Herring, 2001) and b) empirical linguistic analysis (Herring, 2001). Codes Analysis Network created the tree of the theory, and the final matching of Preece framework was made. As a result, the following chapter was extracted from informal learning discussion as part of CKB for the Community's Knowledge Database.

SOCIABILITY: PEOPLE, PURPOSES, POLICIES

People

There are different types of communities and different types of participants and potential contributors. As such, two basic issues define the nature of an online community: (1) the individual as a social being (community building (CB)) and (2) the natural tendency of the human being to learn (CKB). The actual decision on registering in a CoI indicates the most important drives for an individual, the intention and motivation for sharing

knowledge. Online Community Managers (OCM) are responsible for community building, and there are techniques to achieve it: encouraging members to create their profile, initially getting to know each other, encouraging awareness and empathy, opportunities for self-observation, induction courses, providing sub-groups, finding suitable discussions and so forth. Community Culture influences interactions within the community for CB, whereas CB is essential for community evolution. Volunteers, except OCMs, could provide great help for CB since *they are* community members. One suggested technique for potential contributors' activation is the analysis of interaction in one-and two-ways of communication. When members are confident about themselves, it is easier to proceed with the interaction. Initial one-way communication could be encouraged with votes, polls, surveys or special offers and anonymous posting. The positive climate during the group discussion in our study activated seven members in 20 days. But in the end, potential contributors have the right not to contribute if they do not want to; these are the lurkers.

Purposes

The main community's purposes need to appear before registration processes. The entrance to the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), related to CKB and supported by asymmetrical interactions, is the key for newcomers' integration via legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Policies

OCMs need to foster and support their community as a unique, organic body, seeing each member on an individual basis with specific interests, needs, targets and common visions for themselves and the community. Culture and ethics, netiquette, empathy, awareness and insights from improvisation, feelings of acceptance and trust, guidance and support develop attitudes for interacting with people in a safe environment. The initial week of registration is the time when OCMs need to support newcomers and prevent the "lurker's corner." As such, OCMs leave delurking as the last weapon.

MATCHING SOCIABILITY AND USABILITY

Correspondence between Groupz' Theory and Management and Technology in Virtual Communities, and between sociability and usability are needed for activating potential contributors. As such, the combination of interactions could be presented as follows, based on members' suggestions:

1. Initial information regarding people, purposes and policies on the front page
2. Good registration system
3. Members profile
4. Welcome note
5. Induction/training
6. Automatic notification for newcomers' initial activities
7. Clickable members
8. Initial one-way communication (votes, polls, surveys, newsletters, special offers, anonymous posting)
9. Real-time communication (video conferencing, chat rooms, real-time discussion forums)
10. Subgroups
11. Sub-discussions (facility to split the discussion topics in sub-topics)
12. Netiquette and "ignoring facility" by name and user name, Word filter
13. FAQs
14. Indexation option for members' message categorization
15. Semantic search facility
16. Discussion highlights as newsletters
17. Invitation of experts (occasionally)

A useful structural architecture of replying to messages was derived from the messages. Twenty-five messages (53.1%) appeared to have a pattern: An initial introduction appeared as a response to the selected message, an extensive explanation and justification of their point was made, an example clarified suggestions and, lastly, a greeting or interesting quote was used to "sign out." The procedure was the following:

1. Introduction, usually with an agreement with a previous message
2. Arguments and points of view
3. Use of example to support the previous suggestions
4. Stress of interesting points, more suggestions
5. Signing out

CONCLUSION

An OCM's group created valuable knowledge in their online focus group discussion about inactive contributors. A Virtual Communities Architect is required to be an expert in many areas in order to help and support community members and allow self-organizing evolu-