

Chapter 4

Engaging TBR Faculty in Online Research Communities and Emerging Technologies

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ABSTRACT

The growing impact of online research communities and emerging technologies is creating a significant paradigm shift and consequently changing the current research landscape of higher education. The rise of online research communities exemplifies a shift from traditional research engagements, to online research communities using “Web 2.0,” in which communities of researchers are the basic unit of research engagement. As institutional practices become increasingly digitized, the role of faculty, scholars, and professionals are constantly reshaped and re-negotiated. The rise and use of emerging technologies in the field of research, has the potential to significantly impact the individual researcher, their institutions and ultimately the State. The project Critical Conversations Research Network is a part of a broader initiative undertaken by the Tennessee Board of Regents Office of Academic Affairs.

INTRODUCTION

Online research communities (ORC) and emerging technologies (ET) have become a growing phenomenon with many and varied implications for academic use in higher education. Online research communities are a part of an emerging and developing area in research, that employs the use of cutting-edge technologies and engagement tools. The idea of an online community is not a new one. On mobile devices and in the fast paced digitized world, social interactions no longer have to be based on proximity; instead social interactions can literally occur with anyone anywhere. (Harmon, 2005). Online research communities have become a part of that dynamic network of access by anyone at any time. Online research communities can be defined as groups of individuals with common interests who engage in a variety of meaningful research interactions, network and engagement in an online or virtual environment. These

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interactions can have a major impact on strategy and operations on an individual, institutional, state and in some instances on a global level.

According to Wenger, an online community consists of three basic elements: i) first, the notion of joint enterprise, that participants shared and identify as common goals; ii) second, participants mutually engage, co-create, learn and undertake significant activities together; and iii) third, participants have a shared repertoire, a set of communal resources that have developed as part of their engagements. (Wenger, 1998).

Online research communities (ORCs) can be either private or public depending on the overall mission and goals and are typically closed password-protected communities whose members are selected based on specified profiles. (Comley, 2008). The profiles of members of an online research community are individuals with common interests, goals and a set agenda, for example frequent flyers. However, there are also instances when participation in the network are specialized experts from outside of the niche or network. Online research communities may vary in size but generally, it has been reported that the response rates of participation in an online research community (ORC) are usually higher than the open “naturally occurring” online communities. (NOOCs). (Dwyer & Hiltz, 2004). These communities tend to attract a collective group of individuals who are passionate about a given subject area of particular significance in a geographic location or of international or global dimensions. Recruitment to the community is targeted and strictly controlled and the agenda is clearly communicated at the recruitment stage. Those who wish to become a part of an online research community have to become a member via a specific site.

Online research communities can also act as an information system where members can post, comment on discussions, provide expert advice and or collaborate with each other on given topic or issue of interest. Online communities have become popular means for researchers and scholars to interact, collaborate and network with each other in a virtual platform. The most common forms of communication in an online setting are chat rooms, forums, e-mail lists or discussion boards. (Brandtzæg & Heim, 2008). Individuals also join online communities through video games, blogs and virtual worlds. In sum, online research communities are virtual communities whose members engage in meaningful and significant research and scholarly interaction and engagement via the Internet or virtual spaces. (Paragas, & Dela Cruz, 2014).

Baym (2007) suggests that online groups are taking new forms as participants spread themselves amongst multiple Internet and offline platforms distributing themselves throughout a variety of sites in a quasi-coherent networked fashion. (Baym, 2007). She notes that this new form of distributed community poses particular problems for its members, developers, and analysts and identifies several implications for theorists, researchers, developers, industry and independent professionals. (Baym, 2007). There are inevitably issues that can be addressed such as the validity of research findings generated by participants in the community (Stafford and Gonier, 2007) and issues related with the consequential maintenance of such communities (Comley, 2008).

Emerging technologies (ET) as distinguished from conventional technologies (CT) is a field of technology that broaches new territory in some significant way, with new technological developments. (Soares, 1997). Some examples of current emerging technologies include educational technology, information technology, nanotechnology, biotechnology, cognitive science, robotics, and artificial intelligence (Soares, 1997). Emerging technologies are those technical innovations which represent progressive developments within a field for competitive advantage. (Soares, 1997).

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