Chapter X
The Roles of Social Networks and Communities in Open Education Programs

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ABSTRACT

Open Education Programs provide a range of digitized educational resources freely to educators, students, and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning, and research. In the current chapter the authors study how the educational experience for users and the effectiveness of these programs can be enhanced by incorporating new social networking technologies along with traditional virtual communities, such as bulletin boards and chat-rooms. An overview of open education programs is provided, discussing their common characteristics and participants' motivations for joining and contributing to such programs. The authors also consider the roles played by collaboration processes in open education programs, examine how communities evolve on theses sites, their roles in making the programs sustainable, and what site organizers can do to enhance these processes. They conclude the chapter with a discussion of future trends and how social networking technologies will contribute to the next generation of open education programs. Throughout, their discussion is informed by our experiences and engagement with the Connexions project (www.cnx.org).

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"It isn't about making it cost-free or busting patents. It's about harnessing the latent creativity of a very large number of people who are out of the loop right now" - Dr. Richard Jefferson

Cutting across disciplines, a wide range of academics share a common set of values: that knowledge should be free and open to use and re-use; that collaboration across distances and across disciplines should be easier, not harder; that people should receive credit, accolades, and financial remuneration (if relevant) for contributing to education and research; and that concepts and ideas are linked in unusual and surprising ways and not just in the simple linear forms that textbooks and classroom lectures present (Baraniuk, 2007). Over the last decade or so, aided by technological advances, these values have crystallized into the growing and often grass-roots-driven Open Education Movement, which has the potential to fundamentally change the way authors, instructors, and students produce, share, and use educational materials worldwide (e.g., Baraniuk & Cervenka, 2002; Cape Town Declaration 2007; Materu, 2004; see OECD, 2007, for an excellent overview). As an example, over 1,500 individuals representing 153 organizations (as of March 2008) have signed the Cape Town Open Education Declaration (2007) which articulates the principles and strategy surrounding the Open Education Movement, and engenders commitment amongst signatories.

Inspired by developments in open source software such as the Linux operating system and the Apache web server (e.g., Hamm, 2005; Lakhani & von Hippel, 2003), scientific research such as open source bio-technology initiatives (e.g., Hope, 2004), and the open licensing of intellectual property (e.g., St. Laurent, 2004), the open education movement seeks to provide free access to any internet user to high-quality educational materials through an easy to access and easy to use website. Furthermore, the materials can be customized and personalized to match the local contexts of users (language, level, users' educational goals, etc.). Many educational institutions have implemented open education programs (OEPs) over the last few years that make available repositories of teaching and learning materials. These can include text (course notes, curricula, and textbooks), images, audio, video, interactive simulations, problems and answers, and games. These resources are usually digitized and are freely and openly available to educators, students, and self-learners to use and reuse for teaching, learning and research (OECD, 2007). The communication capabilities and connectivity of the internet further enhance the value of these resources by allowing producers and users to collaborate, share materials with each another, and enhance their knowledge and understanding of the materials through these social interactions.

Despite the exploding popularity of OEPs over the last five years (OECD, 2007), most existing analyses of these programs tend to, implicitly or explicitly, view these resources as learning objects that individual users interact with. Relatively little is known about the roles of new technologies that foster online social interactions, social networking, and stimulate interpersonal relationships among users in the functioning of OEPs. Even less is known regarding such questions as what is the best structure of interactions that should be encouraged on OEP sites (synchronous or asynchronous, shallow or deep, etc.), what benefits and detriments partnering with existing or start-up social networking sites will have on OEP success, and the role played by social interaction technologies in making OEP sites financially viable and sustainable(?).