

Chapter 19

A User Driven Learning Environment in Botany

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the reader to a sample 'user driven learning environment' created in an online community with a special interest centred on trees and plants. It traces the development of an online learning community through the lived experiences and thoughts of its founding members and also includes conversational learning experiences of other users to illustrate the process of 'user driven learning' in online communities. It illustrates innovative sense making methodologies utilized by group members to create a more meaningful 'User driven learning environment' while simultaneously contributing in a positive way to create information resources at no cost along with creating awareness & scientific temper among members.

INTRODUCTION

The internet enables everyone to communicate with others and have immediate access to information. Globalization of virtually every aspect of our lives, combined with new communication technologies, creates a need and opportunity to engage individuals and groups of learners who are separated in time and/or space, and may come

from different cultural backgrounds. (Moisseeva 2007). User driven learning is a form of conversational experiential learning between networked users in web space.

An online learning community is a common place on the Internet that addresses the learning needs of its users through proactive and collaborative partnerships. Through social networking and computer-mediated communication, users work as a community to achieve a shared learn-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-097-6.ch019

ing objective. Learning objectives may arise out of discussions between participants that reflect personal interests. In an online community, people communicate via textual discussion that may be synchronous or asynchronous. (Online learning community 2009)

User driven online learning communities have been found to function on a few simple principles identified as early as 1998:

1. Online learning communities are grown, not built.
2. Online learning communities need leaders.
3. Personal narrative is vital to online learning communities. (Clarke 1998)

As there are very few illustrations of such user driven learning interactions we present a detailed outline of online community building by users who may have been pushed into a leadership role to answer their own learning requirements.

USER NARRATIVES ON THE PERSONAL NEED FOR LEARNING ON A TOPIC

J.M.Garg has long been interested in the avifauna of India, at first using photography to capture the beauty that lay all around him, and later using the Internet to connect with people that had similar interests. He quickly learned that there was hardly any e-group devoted to photographing, identification, discussion, learning etc. on Indian Flora.

I have been closely associated with e-groups related to identification and discussion on Birds, Butterflies etc. Association with these groups ignited in me a desire to photograph these beautiful creatures that are closely associated with the human beings and to our environment. This resulted in heavily investing my hard-earned money in photographic equipments like camera, lenses, tripod etc., sometimes rather against the wishes

of my family. Digital photography has changed the world like never before, as has been done by World Wide Web, e-mails etc. I think e-groups have done something similar which has resulted in better documentation of our Flora and Fauna, our environment and all other aspects which one can think of. It has given the layman a power/tool to do something worthwhile and contribute towards some cause, which hitherto was a preserve of the experts/researchers, who mostly confined themselves in the journals or books and away from the layman.

While being associated with the e-groups related to Birds, Butterflies etc., I felt that there were hardly any groups related to discussion and identification of Indian flora. I was finding it difficult to learn about trees surrounding my place i.e. Kolkata, where I was staying. There are hardly any good books available in the market which a layman can lay hands on, to know even our common plants and trees.

I had a few solo exhibitions in Kolkata mainly focussing on Bird photography and the response from the people was tremendous. Tears still roll down from my eyes when I think of the villager who came to Kolkata for some purpose and entered in my exhibition. He spent about an hour through my various exhibits. When he was going away, I asked him how he felt. He was speechless and after sometime he told me that what he has seen he has no words to describe. I feel myself lucky that I showed something worthwhile to a villager who could not have even imagined such beauty in wildest of his dreams. Going down my memory lane, there are so many examples that I would not go on to write here as that would take this chapter beyond its length.

Impressed by my work of photography, one of my colleagues who had planted hundreds of trees and made the neighbourhood totally green in the past few years decided to photograph and document them and possibly collaborate on some kind of a book. I made lot of trips with him looking

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