

learnovation



ICT, lifelong learning and innovation reports in non-professional learning communities

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	1
1 'NON-PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES' TERRITORY	2
1.1 CHARACTERISTICS	5
1.1.1 <i>Geographical level</i>	5
1.1.2 <i>Thematic level</i>	5
1.1.3 <i>Personal level</i>	6
1.1.4 <i>The historical perspective</i>	6
1.1.5 <i>Innovation orientation/technology impact</i>	7
1.2 WEB 2.0 & NON-PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES	9
1.2.1 <i>Three types of Web 2.0 communities</i>	9
1.2.2 <i>Communities of practice & Web 2.0</i>	10
1.2.3 <i>Non-professional learning communities, storytelling and Web 2.0</i>	10
1.2.4 <i>Beyond Web 2.0: Virtual worlds & mobile learning</i>	11
1.3 SOME CASES OF WEB 2.0 NON-PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES	12
1.3.1 <i>Stadtwiki Karlsruhe (Karlsruhe City Wiki)</i>	12
1.3.2 <i>Web Monday</i>	13
1.3.3 <i>TALE</i>	13
1.3.4 <i>HiStory</i>	15
1.3.5 <i>Mobi-Blog</i>	15
1.3.6 <i>netzathleten.de</i>	16
1.3.7 <i>SLED (Second Life EDucators) mailing list</i>	17
1.4 POTENTIAL INDICATORS FOR NON-PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES.....	17
2 SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS	18
3 REFERENCES	19

1 'NON-PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES' TERRITORY

The aim of this report is to provide an overview of the rather vague field of ICT-enhanced non-professional learning communities. As clear definitions of the term have not yet been provided in literature, this type of emerging community will be regarded in contrast to professional learning communities and a first attempt will be made to sketch out the landscape. This report will focus on Web 2.0-based communities. Seven examples will be given to illustrate the concept.

To understand the characteristics of non-professional learning communities, we first need to define the core terms used: "communities", "learning communities", "professional communities" and "non-professional communities":

Definition: Communities

- ◆ Individual decisions to join, either
 - ◆ permanently (role taking as part of the personal identity) or
 - ◆ "on demand", whenever an actual need is perceived to join a community, to help the individual in case of a problem she or he is confronted with.

Definition: Learning communities

- ◆ Affiliation with a community, with the main individual intention being to gain knowledge and/or competences/skills by mutual exchange of experiences and experience-generated knowledge (exchange does not need to be symmetrical, but must in principle allow each member of the community to offer his/her own experiences as well as to demand experiences from other members).

Definition: Learning as a side effect

- ◆ Communities, where decisions to join are predominantly/mostly based on common histories, institutional and/or geographical affiliation (current/in the past), values and beliefs, interests, attitudes, etc., where learning is one of the side effects of interactions within the community, not the initial and/or dominant aim. This side effect might be driven by an intention to learn, or be unintended.

Definition: Professional

- ◆ The role of a person is defined here by a certified (or in other ways acknowledged by society) professional profile, characterized by duties, privileges, and an expected corpus of knowledge and/or competences/skills.

Definition: Non-professional

- ◆ Role of a person outside her/his current and/or former qualified professional profile in society.

Definition: Professional communities

- ◆ Communities with a mechanism to ensure that only professionals may share experiences/knowledge; professional communities may or may not allow non-professionals possessing the professional profile in question and/or guests to have read-only access to the community.

Definition: Non-professional communities

- ◆ Communities open to all wanting to participate, based on subjective, common individual characteristics.

This territory and its neighbour territories can be structured as shown in the following diagram.

Non-professional learning communities are neighbours to professional learning communities. There is a dynamic exchange between the two. Dominant professional learning communities may initially open up to non-professional guests in a read-only (passive) mode.

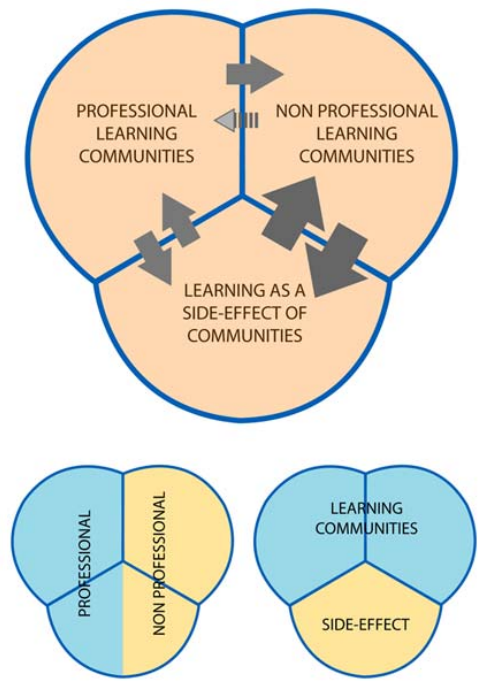
At the same time, individual professionals may – mostly on a volunteer basis – also join non-professional learning communities in the same/comparable field, in order to ensure the professional quality of interactions.

Only in very few cases can members of non-professional learning communities also qualify – by means of the respective learning process – for entry into formally professional learning communities. This “upgrading” of non-professionals has a long tradition in the arts and, to a certain degree, in the sciences as well. In the arts, we frequently used the term “amateur” to describe a person with a professional aspiration based on interest and values, not on a formal qualification process. In the sciences, the term “self-taught person” was used in former times to underline the differences in the formal level of the educational and certification process. Slowly, but with a certain observable continuity, this process of exchange between non-professional and professional communities would appear to be growing.

Learning as a side effect of communities may happen in both non-professional and professional communities, where learning is not the main goal behind membership in the community in question.

As the name would imply, a strong tendency can be observed of an influx of activities of non-learning communities into the operational processes of both non-professional and professional learning communities. We can also see the reverse process of non-professional learning communities developing their own dynamics, communications and community building, thereby considerably extending their activities beyond their intended learning outcomes. This trend may be similar, although slightly less intensive, in the case of professional learning communities, where additional learning aims are generated.

Before starting with a description of the characteristics of non-professional learning communities, it may be helpful to provide a brief comparison of the similarities and differences between the three territories.



Characteristics	Non-professional	Professional	Learning as a side effect
Affiliation	Typically individual, based on subjective allocation	By certified professional profile and individual decision	Both, depending on rules of non-learning communities
Access	Typically open	Typically conditional	Both, depending on rules of non-learning communities
Individual role	Self-allocated through own presentation	Typically related to general professional role	Typically related to non-learning purpose role
Delivering experience/knowledge	Open to every member (formal registration often required)	Depends on role profile/privileges	Both, depending on rules of non-learning communities
Demanding knowledge/competences/skills	Open to every member, often also open to guests	Only for related professionals, sometimes also open to guests	Depends on rules of non-learning communities
Preferred learning media	Advanced, anonymous, new paradigms, dominant informal learning	Conservative, person-related, traditional paradigms, close to non-formal learning	Role flexibility. By non-professional flexible roles, by professional ... roles, or both, depending on rules of non-learning communities
Dominant learning aims	Oriented to personal development	Oriented to professional development	Oriented to participation/affiliation
Isolated actual knowledge/competence deficit	Frequent	Rare	Depends on rules of non-learning communities
Core aim	Social position/identity or entertainment/leisure time/actual problem solving	Updating/enhancing professional competences or actual problem solving for guests	Social positioning/identity or professional positioning/identity
Core benefits of virtual communities	Closer fit of interests/values/motivations due to more communities to choose from; wider thematic spread due to net anonymity	Access to specialized professional learning, also for "remote" professional and smaller groups; improved individual "tailoring" of learning	Both, depending on rules of non-learning communities

Non-professional learning communities can be described as informal or non-formal learning environments organized by individuals or groups of people and located outside or tangent to a formal educational or work-related organization. In contrast, a professional learning community, or PLC, is an extended learning opportunity created to foster collaborative learning among colleagues within a particular work environment or field. They are often used in schools, for example, as a way to organize teachers into job-related working groups.

Non-professional learning communities are one consequence of European lifelong learning strategies that have developed from programmatic concepts to support of new structures in practice. An increasing demand on changing infrastructures in teaching and learning has led to questions examining how to realize lifelong learning on the level of national educational systems and in practice. Important factors here are the terms "learning cultures" and "infrastructures for learning".

The term “learning cultures” is mostly used as a vague formula for principles of lifelong learning respecting changing cultures in individual, collective and organizational matters. “For strategies to foster a learning-for-all culture, direct measures are needed to motivate (potential) learners and raise overall participation levels by making learning more desirable in terms of active citizenship, personal fulfillment and/or employability” (European Commission 2001). A more concrete definition is given by Arnold/Schüssler (1998) pointing out that learning cultures are frameworks for teaching, learning, cooperation and communication processes, which offer group members specific opportunities for personal development.

Learning cultures have a concrete expression in “infrastructures for learning”, offering adequate general frameworks for effective, self-organized work on learning tasks for individuals, groups and organizations.

Hence, non-professional learning communities are embedded in specifically constructed learning cultures and at the same time are part of (new) infrastructures for learning on different levels. These levels can be geographical (e.g. new local/regional/national/international communities), thematic (new learning topics not targeted in formal education), personal (new target groups, e.g. adult learners) and, last but not least, technical (new tools for community building, e.g. Web 2.0 communities).

1.1 CHARACTERISTICS

1.1.1 Geographical level

Non-professional learning communities can be built on a local, regional, national or international level - or can ignore the geographical level completely.

Local and regional projects are designed for a city or a specific geographical area and should usually initiate, moderate or collect local or regional resources, create adequate communication structures, give access to innovative potentials or strengthen the strategic position of the region in competition with other regions or national bodies. Typical examples can be found within initiatives of learning cities or learning regions. In times of increasing globalization, by means of an antagonistic effect, the regions are becoming more important and an increasing demand for (local/regional) *identity* and communities can be observed.

National and international initiatives are usually build on *network* models. The basic idea is to consecutively connect and match up persons, objects, interactions or visions for the purpose of synergetic collaboration. Typically, non-professional learning communities build up networks that connect people or resources in new ways, bringing people together who have not been connected before or creating new interactions between groups of people and resources.

1.1.2 Thematic level

Non-professional learning communities can be characterized and distinguished from PLCs by the themes and topics addressed. As non-professional communities are by nature not located in only one organization of the formal educational system and therefore target more general topics, themes are often related to soft skills, general knowledge or other topics of general or partly specific interest that are (not fully) covered by the formal educational

system. Although these themes or topics can also be found in PLCs, the target of general education seems to be a characteristic of non-professional learning communities.

1.1.3 Personal level

Non-professional learning communities can be located completely outside or be tangent to the formal educational system. More typically, informal learning and/or non-formal learning takes place, although learning processes can intentionally support formal learning.

Non-professional learning communities have the potential to offer a more flexible, individualized learning approach and can target groups of learners who are outside educational systems (adult learners/seniors) or looking for flexible additional learning possibilities (full-time workers). Additionally, they offer the opportunity to connect people of different backgrounds in every social dimension (e.g. projects for “everybody”, intergenerational learning projects).

1.1.4 The historical perspective

The most archaic form of social learning would appear to be learning as a side effect in a community. Through acting together and communicating, even Stone Age hominids learned as a side effect. The act of hunting together also includes sharing experiences and passing on skills and knowledge from more experienced to less experienced or even inexperienced community members. Communities that do not experience learning as a side effect are inconceivable.

For inexperienced individuals, e.g. adolescents, or in times of change and/or extraordinary challenges from the environment, communities started early on to concentrate on learning as their key activity and the development of targeted skills/competences as their core outcome.

Societies in times before professional specialisation logically formed non-professional learning communities. For example, those preparing for rites of passage could be seen as early non-professional learning communities.

In “codifying” recurrent learning experiences (processes, methods, learning environments) and the roles of instructor and learner, institutional learning developed, which included the first professionalisation of the role of teacher.

Non-professional learning communities continued, where factors such as peer learning dominated the process and its dynamics, mostly following group consensus and adaptation to actual needs.

Participation in those communities was restricted to members of a family, a clan or a settlement, with communication made possible through physical proximity. Only as settlements grew could participation also be dictated to a limited extent by common interests or a motivation to learn.

Every extension of the personal radius of frequent mobility therefore enlarges the motivational potential of learning communities. Historically, this boosted the use of professional learning communities early on. Late medieval craftsmen and university students regularly spent periods of time travelling around to extend their range of experiences around their profession.

Pilgrimages in the Islamic tradition, like the “Camino de Santiago”, can be seen from our perspective as large-scale, non-professional learning communities, or at least as learning as a strong side effect of those temporary religious communities, generating and activating comparable learning experiences for all participants.

1.1.5 Innovation orientation/technology impact

Again as a logical consequence, all opportunities to increase and facilitate mobility with the aim of increasing the number of people to share core aspects of any personal profile of interests and values would lead to an increase in the appeal and therefore use of non-professional learning communities.

From this we can derive a reasonable tendency for non-professional learning communities to look ahead for any technological innovation that may increase virtual mobility, and in this way increase the potential to share one’s particular profile of motivation with more, and more fitting, partners. Events of recent decades would appear to confirm this hypothesis.

Non-professional learning communities can use different ICT-based or ICT-enhanced environments as their main platform or as an accompanying element. The newsgroup system within the Usenet can be regarded as the first internet-based, non-professional learning community. Internet forums, modern Web 2.0-based community systems and Multi-user 3D virtual environments (MUVEs) are contemporary platforms for ICT-based, non-professional learning community building.

As early, pre-internet networks came up with so-called “bulletin boards”, non-professional communities, including a not insignificant number of non-professional learning communities, were the first to populate these new technical opportunities.

Usenet & Newsgroups

Usenet is one of the oldest computer network communications systems and can be regarded as the first major platform for non-professional learning communities. It was established in 1980, over a decade before the World Wide Web was introduced, giving the general public access to the internet. The articles that users post to Usenet are organized into topical categories called newsgroups, which are also logically organized into hierarchies of subjects. For instance, sci.math and sci.physics are within the sci hierarchy for science. When a user subscribes to a newsgroup, the news client software keeps track of which articles that user has read. Today, Usenet has diminished in importance with respect to internet forums, blogs and mailing lists. The major set of worldwide newsgroups is contained within nine hierarchies:

- *comp.*: computer-related discussions (comp. software, comp.sys.amiga)
- *humanities.*: Fine arts, literature, and philosophy (humanities.classics, humanities.design.misc)
- *misc.*: Miscellaneous topics (misc.education, misc.forsale, misc.kids)
- *news.*: Discussions and announcements about news (meaning Usenet, not current events) (news.groups, news.admin)
- *rec.*: Recreation and entertainment (rec.music, rec.arts.movies)

- *sci.*: Science-related discussions (sci.psychology, sci.research)
- *soc.*: Social discussions (soc.college.org, soc.culture.african)
- *talk.*: Talk about various controversial topics (talk.religion, talk.politics, talk.origins)
- *alt.*: Hierarchy with talks about specific topics like children's books.

In pre-web internet news groups, the “alt” groups grew most quickly. These groups were composed to a large extent of non-professional (learning) communities.

Forums

Most traditional web forums are also fed and used by non-professional (learning) communities.

An internet forum, or message board, is an online discussion site. It is the modern equivalent of a traditional bulletin board, and a technological evolution of the bulletin board system. From a technological standpoint, forums or boards are web applications managing user-generated content. People participating in forums can build bonds with each other and interest groups will easily form around a topic's discussion, subjects dealt with in or around sections in the forum.

Thematic professionals also participate in most of these groups, sometimes even playing a moderating, facilitating, managing and/or quality managing role. But usually these professional experts are participating as volunteers (which is not the case for their participation in professional learning communities). Not infrequently, we find these thematic professionals have developed from a non-professional background with the help of non-professional or similar learning communities.

Web 2.0

The term "Web 2.0" describes the changing trends in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aim to enhance creativity, communications, secure information sharing, collaboration and functionality of the web. Web 2.0 concepts have led to the development and evolution of web culture communities and hosted services, such as social-networking sites, video sharing sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies.

MUVes

MUVes are online, multi-user virtual environments, sometimes called virtual worlds. While this term has previously been used to refer to a generational change in MUDs (Multi-User dimension/domain), it is most widely used to describe MMOGs that are not necessarily game-specific. Modern MUVes have 3D isometric/third-person graphics, are accessed over the internet, allow for some dozens of simultaneous users to interact, and represent a persistent virtual world.

In future

The pioneering role of non-professional learning communities in developing a culture of innovative use of innovative technologies can also be predicted to continue in future. This justifies our decision to analyse here some early phenomena of non-professional learning communities exploring web 2.0 social software use.

This shall be done by describing learning community elements reflected in good practice cases, by their context, processes and outcomes, not with the intention to be representative, but to gain structural insight into processes and rules of development.

Some dimensions of interest for such a structural analysis

Non-professional learning communities aim at personal development, the creation of stable social contacts and the testing of personal potentials and limitations. In contrast to this, we shall investigate participation in those communities aimed at finding solutions for real problems - individual problems as well as problems faced by particular communities or society at large.

Primarily knowledge and cognitive-based exchange of experiences will be covered, as well as learning, comparing and “benchmarking” in aesthetic, emotional, value-based, belief and ethical aspects.

Abstract, language-based communities – dominant in the past as well as today – must be complemented by image and/or sound/music-based communities and those communicating via a complex media mix and interactive, rich, personal experiences (as expressed in the development of some blogs). They must include experiences in real life as well as in virtual settings, with different types of combinations or a mix of both.

One positive effect of virtual non-professional learning communities are their potential to “peer benchmark” an individual in a community of trust and mutual esteem. On the other hand, a number of non-professional learning communities benefit from the anonymity of their members – of both those asking for information and experiences and those communicating – who are then more likely to reveal their personal experiences and opinions. This aspect seems to dominate in areas under societal taboo or illegal topics (like sexual behaviour and preferences, illegal behaviour such as addiction and antisocial crime, and fundamentalist/terrorist content).

When analysing innovative potentials of non-professional learning communities, we need to be very aware of the two quite different sides of this coin, concerning societal value-added and potential dangers and harm.

1.2 WEB 2.0 & NON-PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

1.2.1 Three types of Web 2.0 communities

Web 2.0 software can be divided into three main categories: knowledge-centered, person-centered and mixed, knowledge/person-centered platforms. The typical example of knowledge-centered environments are wikis, which are organized around content and where the authors can be mentioned but stay in the background. Person-centered platforms like Facebook are built around profiles of people, which may contain knowledge-relevant content, but these environments primarily interconnect individuals and networks. The third category, mixed, person/knowledge-centered platforms, offer two different equally relevant approaches for users to navigate, offering one dimension of searching by user profile and a second level of organization by content. An example of this kind of environment is del.icio.us.

All three types of platforms can be used as environments for non-professional learning communities. Traditional online learning platforms are based on the idea of the Learning

Management System, which can be defined as a centralized website where users are registered for certain learning activities. Many LMS applications include collaborative/community elements like discussion forums, chat rooms or white boards. The LMS model assumes that content is created and stored in an online repository, and the LMS is then used as a channel to deliver the learning to the student.

Web 2.0 turns this model around, putting the learners in charge of creating content and sharing this content among their peers. In the past couple of years the balance has tipped dramatically towards a “read-write web”, where user-created content becomes the norm, and we are beginning to harvest the power of collective intelligence.

While traditional learning community environments based on the LMS model fit in with the use of PLCs of closed organizations, Web 2.0 opens new possibilities to effectively build up and organize open, non-professional learning and community environments. Depending on the purpose, blog-farms can be used to regularly share personal experiences on a certain topic. A wiki can easily be organized to create common knowledge bases. Del.icio.us is the social bookmark-sharing site for people with similar interests and Facebook keeps people from different environments connected and has the potential to integrate sources from other Web 2.0 environments.

1.2.2 Communities of practice & Web 2.0

Communities of practice originally mean a group of people meeting in informal situations and sharing knowledge or experiences. CoPs can be defined by three characteristics: 1. “Joint enterprise”: Community members have a certain common aim, which they are developing continuously in the CoP. An example is a group of distance-learning students with the joint enterprise of passing their studies successfully. 2. “Mutual engagement”: CoPs are linked by mutual engagement and the interrelated actions of their members. The group of distance-learning students, for instance, answers questions or exchanges learning resources. 3. “Shared repertoire”: The CoP develops a repertoire of routines, tools and practices through these common, interrelated activities.

Learning in CoPs is situational and social and a self-organized process of groups of people. Learning processes in CoPs are usually not controlled by external bodies; however, external organizations can deliver a framework or a certain environment to support the creation or the further development of a CoP.

Web 2.0 environments offer various tools and environments for self-organized or externally organized CoPs. A simple blog with multiple contributors, a wiki or an existing social software environment can easily be set up or used and organized by CoPs themselves. Other CoPs can be created through projects aimed at developing environments or frameworks for building CoPs on a certain topic.

1.2.3 Non-professional learning communities, storytelling and Web 2.0

Non-professional learning communities in Web 2.0 environments (especially blogs) can be built on the ideas of digital storytelling. Digital storytelling is an emerging term, arising from a grassroots movement that uses new digital tools to help people tell their own stories in a compelling and emotionally engaging form. These stories usually take the form of a relatively short story and can involve interactivity. Digital storytelling has recently been adopted in

educational environments (for instance by the Center for Digital Storytelling) and is used by several universities worldwide.

Unlike other technical options for communicating and sharing experiences on the World Wide Web, like personal websites, newsgroups, e-mail, wikis, instant messaging, etc., the technique of weblogs is especially suited to publishing individual stories and articles that develop step by step and in a chronological way.

As learning is usually not a singular event, but a process that takes weeks, months or years, weblogs are the medium of choice to share learning experiences, as they enable one not only to report about single, crucial events right after they happen, but also to form an individual collection of experiences over a wider range of time. An additional advantage of weblogs is the possibility to follow longer processes of learning and to observe certain steps of a learning period at different points of time within a longer process. The collaborative element of learning is represented by the possibility for users and readers to write comments related to certain articles and give feedback in the form of comments. But one of the main advantages of the use of weblogs for learning projects is the possibility to embed free and unstructured articles by users within a structured and organized web environment (e.g. an online guide or course).

Weblogs can be used not only as an information database, but also as a medium for community building, communication and reflexion. Among different possibilities for interaction, weblogs usually offer a commentary function for reader feedback and the opportunity for different authors to interrelate to each other's contributions using hyperlinks, known as "trackbacks". Learners on a course can use a personal weblog to document their own work or texts chronologically and publish their methods or results for their classmates or ask them for feedback and thereby gain new inspiration or perspectives for the continuing learning process. Additionally, the continuous documentation of a learning or working process stimulates meta-cognitive processes and reflection.

1.2.4 Beyond Web 2.0: Virtual worlds & mobile learning

Multi-User 3D Virtual Environments (MUVEs) have drawn significant attention from educators over the last three years, mainly due to the fast development of user rates in SecondLife and respective coverage in public media.

MUVEs can be regarded as huge informal learning communities, and can be used as PLCs or as non-professional learning communities, among other things. 3D multi-user environments have the potential to change significantly information and communication behaviour in professional and non-professional environments. MUVEs bring a new dimension to the internet, as they extend the single-user medium to a multi-user meeting point, going far beyond the possibilities of traditional chat-rooms by offering simultaneous and non-simultaneous opportunities for communication on different channels (text/voice, private/public) and various options for resource sharing. MUVEs are already widely used in non-professional communities, e.g. for language learning, communities of practice on various professional and non-professional topics, as well as in formal educational settings.

The increasing capacities of mobile device technologies (e.g. smartphones, PDAs,) will extend the possibilities for learning communities in the near future. M-learning, or "mobile learning", thereby has different meanings for different communities. Although related to e-learning and distance education, it is distinct in its focus on learning and communities across contexts with mobile devices. M-learning can be defined as learning that happens across

locations, or that takes advantage of learning opportunities offered by portable technologies. In other words, mobile learning decreases limitation of learning location with the mobility of general portable devices. M-learning is accessible virtually from anywhere and provides access to learning materials and available communication facilities. Moreover, it is collaborative; that is, sharing is almost instant among everyone using the same content, which in turn also leads to receiving instant feedback and tips. Currently, the fast growing use of microblogging (or the use of twitter), microlearning and geotagging in educational settings can be regarded as indicators for the development of mobile learning and communication channels and approaches.

1.3 SOME CASES OF WEB 2.0 NON-PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

1.3.1 *Stadtwiki Karlsruhe (Karlsruhe City Wiki)*

The Karlsruhe City Wiki (Stadtwiki Karlsruhe) is the biggest open city wiki worldwide with 32,000 articles (13,000 rated as “good”), 12 million hits, 6,500 images and 2,000 authors. Its aim is to be an information portal for the city of Karlsruhe (Germany) and its surroundings. The City Wiki contains information on all topics related to Karlsruhe – detailed and cross-linked information about geography, politics, religion, education, culture, social affairs, sports, economy and traffic. In contrast to Wikipedia, the Karlsruhe City Wiki also aims to be an event calendar.

Topics like tourism and leisure activities are covered with descriptions of destinations, restaurants, clubs and events. The only criterion of relevance for publication of an article is its relation to Karlsruhe.

More than 2,000 authors contribute to the contents. A very active core of about 50 power authors exists.

Target groups are tourists, business travelers, new residents, people interested in history and the general public.

The wiki approach enables access to information free of cost and without advertising, and permits active contributions from anybody, including those without any previous technical knowledge. The project is self-organized in terms of quality. False information or junk contributions can easily be deleted, as all versions of an article are saved in a history that is open to everybody.

Once a month, a meeting of active users, project managers and other interested parties is held, where content-related and organizational questions are addressed.

In October 2008, an English and a French version of the wiki were introduced. With the help of French and English native speakers, the articles are translated, put into context for foreign guests to the city and linked to other portals.

As more and more information is gathered in the wiki, the aim is to introduce semantic technology to the wiki, with the planned implementation of the “Semantic Mediawiki” software, developed at the Karlsruhe Institute of Technology.

1.3.2 Web Monday

Web Monday is an informal, non-commercial, and completely community-driven event organized in a blended way, involving regular, attendance-based meetings in different cities and a web-based platform. It aims to connect people who are shaping the future of the internet. Inspired by the culture of Silicon Valley, it started out in Cologne, Germany in late 2005.

Since its inception, Web Monday has spread fast: meetings are now being held on a regular basis in 30+ cities all across Germany, in Austria, Sweden, Silicon Valley as well as on Second Life. Nurturing the local Web 2.0 and internet startup scenes, Web Monday's 100+ meetings have attracted 1,000+ repeat participants so far.

Anyone involved in Web 2.0 or neighbouring fields who is interested in learning and sharing with others is most welcome to join. Whether you are a thinker, builder, designer, founder or funder – Web Monday is your chance to present your product, your service, your startup, or your next big idea to a growing audience of web aficionados.

It covers all topics mentioned below, including anything related and at the edges of these topics. Some keywords you might hear often at a Web Monday are:

Technology: Accessibility, Aggregation, Ajax, API, Attention, Atom, Citizen Journalism, Collaboration, Copyleft, Copyright, Creative Commons, Design, Digital Rights/Restrictions Management, Django, DRM, E-Democracy, E-Learning, Emerging Technology, Feeds, Flex, FOAF, Folksonomy, Identity, Instant Messaging, Location-based Services, Long Tail, Microformats, Mobile, Multimodal Interactive (Wireless Voice), Open Source, Podcasting, Presence, Privacy, RDF, REST, RFID, RSS, Ruby on Rails, Search, Second Life, Security, Semantic Web, Social Bookmarking, Social Media, Social Networks, Social Software, Spam, Structured Blogging, Syndication, Tags, Tagging, Turbogears, Usability, Virtual Reality, Vlogging, Video Blogging, Voice over IP (VoIP), Web 2.0, Weblogs, Web Services, Webdesign, Wikis, Wireless, XFN.

Business: Angel Investors, Business Plan, Financing, Business Models, Marketing, PR, Startups, transatlantic exchange, start-up funding, Venture Capital, Venture Finance.

1.3.3 TALE

The TALE project aims to use the approach of storytelling for the purpose of increasing the attractiveness of education and learning. For this, a web service is to be set up, where people can read and write stories of successful learning. TALE transfers the philosophy of Storytelling Cafés to the web. TALE is an example of a non-professional learning community using a content-centered Web 2.0 platform (weblog).

Although storytelling is more and more in the public eye and is perceived as an innovative trend in human resources development in companies, little research has been done to date to find out more about the connection between storytelling and learning. The approach of the TALE project thereby can be considered as a first attempt in field research: people are to indicate on the web whether they have learned something by reading stories on the same platform. Additionally, they are to indicate if the reading of stories told by successful learners resulted in a higher motivation for learning in previously less-motivated individuals.

The main objectives of TALE are the implementation of a storytelling platform on the web, the collection of stories about learning, and the installment of the necessary infrastructure for accompanying scientific research about learning processes through storytelling on the web. An additional main goal of the project is to raise awareness about the value of storytelling and to disseminate the project activities and results through various PR and dissemination actions.

The main activity of TALE is to offer a web service where people can relate their success stories about learning, telling how they achieved goals by learning something new. Interested people who access the server should first get an introduction on how to work with the service which should, on the one hand, be detailed enough that potential users will be competent to use the service and will feel well guided but, on the other hand, not be too complicated and comprehensive to discourage the user. Among other things, the user should get an appealing description of the idea and philosophy of storytelling and see some attractive examples.

Readers of the stories have the possibility to give feedback on the stories they have read, including a rating of the story and the opportunity to contact the author, if the author is not anonymous. Additionally, a service has been integrated offering a translation of the inserted stories, which in most cases will have been written in the mother tongue of the authors.

For a number of stories, the translations have been done by the project partners themselves, in order to increase the level of recognition of the service, but the idea is that the translation will be done by the network of users, who will translate the stories after other authors have submitted them. One task of the project partners was to coordinate the creation and maintenance of this network.

The translation should also include a contextualization, a culture-sensitive transfer from one language to another, for example by describing the cultural background of a goal which has been achieved in a story, by explaining why this goal is recognized as important in the respective culture, or by giving information about the educational system and the context in which the story was happening. This contextualization will be given in cases where it is necessary to understand the story.

The first online version of the story area was finished in late July 2005. The final version of the story area was implemented in late December 2005. The platform is in English and contains two main categories: stories and guidelines with an explanation of the legal aspects.

In the story section, all the collected and uploaded stories are displayed as single entries of a weblog. Translations of stories are also single entries within the same weblog. Translations and original stories are linked with each other. Each story can be commented on and rated by registered users. Via the comment section of each story it is possible for the author to continue the story (e.g. after receiving comments or questions by other users). Every story is directly linked to the profile of the respective author (authors can remain anonymous or provide their full name and other personal data).

The story area contains several different *search and filter functionalities*. As a default option, (when the user enters the website) the stories are ordered by date, which is common in weblog environments. On each page there are 10 stories listed. By clicking on a menu on the top or the bottom of the site users can switch to the next (older) ten stories. The second filter option is the categorization by language. By clicking on a certain language category, only stories in this language are shown. The third search option is a free search by individual keywords.

1.3.4 HiStory

HiStory is a user-friendly weblog environment for the exchange of experiences of senior citizens with the general public. It is about stories and tales of personally experienced history in the 20th and early 21st century. Seniors of different countries all over Europe participate.

The learning processes of senior citizens are of high priority in the framework of the aging society in Europe. Psychological findings show that learning in higher ages is possible and desirable, when some particularities of the target group are taken into account.

The project HiStory – Seniors tell about History - regards these particularities by choosing a subject, the personally experienced history, which is highly relevant and motivating to the target group of senior citizens, and integrating the subject into an easy-to-handle weblog learning environment with the potential of including audio and video files.

The methodological approach is a narrative one and combines the approaches of oral history, biographical research and storytelling. Senior citizens tell about their individual experiences within European history in the 20th and early 21st century. The learning process can be both the telling itself, because it means reflecting and working through personal experiences, and the listening to/reading of the tales of others.

Thus, the aims of the proposed project are various: Besides the objective of European approximation and cohesion, HiStory wants to address the social inclusion (and e-inclusion) of seniors and to advance active citizenship in terms of awareness of historical contexts and, as a consequence, responsible political and cultural action in the presence and future.

The learning process in HiStory is not just a collection of data, but advances meaningful, emotionally and socially relevant knowledge. The learning process and the learning environment are adapted to the needs of seniors, advance communication and (intercultural) exchange and thereby contribute to socially integrated ageing.

1.3.5 Mobi-Blog

Mobi-Blog, a European Weblog Platform for Mobile Students, aims at bridging traditional storytelling approaches with Web 2.0 applications, at fostering processes of model learning, self-reflection and independent decision-making amongst European exchange students and at informally supporting learners in formal higher education environments.

Mobi-Blog has, accordingly, the following aims and objectives: to provide a multi-institutional, web-based, bottom-up but well-structured and multi-lingual service on a European level for peer-to-peer exchange of experiences of individual mobile students containing all non-organizational aspects of mobile studies like motivation, social issues, communication and cultural issues; to develop a structured and comprehensive online guide for the target topic; to encourage a network of universities in Europe to integrate the service into their portfolio of services for mobile students; to gradually complement existing, more conventional services; to integrate the Mobi-Blog services into existing virtual campuses; and to test the innovative learning concept of an approach to combine (and link) the relatively unstructured concept of blogs with the structured offer of an online guide for learning purposes.

The envisaged direct target users or beneficiaries of the Mobi-Blog services are the following three groups of stakeholders and institutions:

Students: Mobi-Blog is a European project offering a new service for you as future, actual or former mobile student. First of all, in the weblog you can write about your personal experience abroad, motivate other future international students and help them to overcome possible psychological, motivational, social, communication, etc. barriers providing them with a variety of hints and tips.

On the other hand, if you will be a European mobile student in the future, you can read these reports of experiences of other students to find out more about the international adventure you are going to undertake. Secondly, you will find an online guide with lots of useful information for your stay abroad. This online guide will be linked by keywords to the real life stories in the weblog area and vice versa.

Universities & networks: Universities, networks and student associations are an important part of Mobi-Blog. One main objective of Mobi-Blog is to build a common service instead of developing single, institutional approaches. Moreover, with Mobi-Blog offering an online information platform and an online guide for students, information can be uploaded directly by students and all other Erasmus stakeholders, being online immediately and providing a multicoloured valuable source of information for students. Finally, universities, student associations, European networks and portals are welcome to join the Mobi-Blog service through cross-linking of services, from the Mobi-Blog portal to their web sites and vice versa, providing information on each other's services and activities, informing students about their various offers, and thus acting as multipliers and information brokers. Let's cooperate together and build up a common European Erasmus Student Service Network.

Families & friends: Families and friends are usually also interested in Erasmus programmes, and probably will come to a visit abroad. That's why families and friends are also welcome in Mobi-Blog. With Mobi-Blog, families and friends can get a deeper insight into the importance of international exchanges as a part of lifelong learning in the area of higher education. You can also get some useful information about different places in Europe when you are about to travel abroad.

1.3.6 netzathleten.de

netzathleten.de is an German online platform for athletes, coaches, teams and clubs and the biggest European social sports network. Sportsmen (professionals, amateurs and fans) introduce themselves, find friends, report about events and create virtual and real teams. An aim of the platform is to bring different sports together and bridge the gap between professional and amateur athletes.

Its a Web 2.0 social networking site and communication platform which enables athletes who met at events to keep in touch, to find new training partners or just friends with the same interests, to share information, news and knowledge about the different sports, to extend communication beyond the border of single clubs and to make organization of club work or events easier.

For each sport there is a forum, where topics like training, equipment, injuries, sport psychology, etc. are discussed. Additionally, sports news can be shared and published. In the beginning of 2009 netzathleten.de will open its own online sports journal.

Each user has his/her own profile with personal data, sports, friends, teams, photos, videos and a blog. Everyone can become a member, friend or fan of other members of virtual teams and an own club or team site can be created. Partners for training can be searched for by location, sport, intensity of training.

1.3.7 SLED (Second Life EDucators) mailing list

SLED is an example of a simple mailing list enhanced by some additional Web 2.0 environments and is working effectively as a non-professional learning community. It is a list for educators interested in or currently using Second Life, and we will be using it to send out information we feel is of interest to educators and academics. This list is also an opportunity for all interested people to communicate with each other, to find new colleagues and to share experiences using Second Life for education.

SLED currently has approx. 5,000 registered users with a high overall activity (> 20 new entries per day on parallel threads). The mailing list has recently been supplemented by other, more specialized lists (for people interested in research and educators working with teens).

SLED is additionally supplemented by an in-world group called 'Real Life Education in Second Life' which is also composed of people who are interested in the educational possibilities of Second Life. The group is open for anyone to join, and is a way to find colleagues and collaborators to help with your education work in Second Life.

Besides, a wiki system to provide 'Information and Community for Teachers in Multi-User Environments' and a Second Life Education Wiki exists. In addition, a SLED Blog focuses on issues raised in this mailing list.

1.4 POTENTIAL INDICATORS FOR NON-PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

In our definitions of “communities”, “learning communities” and “professional vs. non-professional communities” we saw the very subjective nature of the core defining elements of all these terms.

So, “objective” indicators will not really help to “measure” or compare/benchmark this territory and the neighbouring ones: websites, URLs, forums, information identified and offered by search engines will not be able to distinguish whether interactions can be classified as a “community” or not, as “professional or non-professional”, as characterized by “learning” or not. All these categories are a matter of individual perception and classification.

Will “individual, subjective indicators” help – and is it possible and feasible to collect these indicators in a methodologically acceptable way?

The answer is no, not directly, given the situation surrounding the indicators available today. Why? Because the terminology to ask individuals to classify their subjective use is not yet substantially “standardised” across different data collection tools (e.g. applied to different national or cultural settings, in different languages and within different contexts).

But there seem to be some promising perspectives. Let us take the Euro-barometer pan-European tools, asking representatively selected individuals to classify their behaviour subjectively under – partly – standardised conditions.

Questions like: “The last X weeks, did you use the Internet for a..., b..., x... learning?” at least, when repeated over a longer time line in a comparable format, will give us a first impression of the relative position of the perceived activity “learning” within other alternatively perceived types of Internet use. Even if this will not allow us to deduce clear, absolute, quantitative data, the nature, speed and demographic social differences of processes can be identified with sufficient accuracy.

Starting from here, Learnovation needs to create awareness of the need for a broad consensus-building process on suitable indicators, standardisation of the terminology used, data collection methodology, granularity and periodicity of data harvesting and intelligent methods of data interpretation.

Such a process must include an awareness-raising exercise on the side of the learners, who in many cases still use the term “learning” in the overly narrow sense of formal learning and educational institutions.

To understand and support the evident development towards increasing non-professional learning communities, a dialogue is required to broaden the connotations of the term “learning” into the lifelong and therefore life-relevant exchange of individual experiences and mutual support.

2 SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

A clear definition of non-professional learning communities cannot yet be found in literature, and the best description might be to contrast them with professional learning communities (PLCs). Due to the various overlaps between formal and informal, professional and non-professional educational settings, single projects or initiatives might thereby best be put on a seamless dimension from non-professional to professional.

Non-professional learning communities create a certain (usually open & flexible) learning culture and (in some cases ICT-based) infrastructure for learning. Non-professional learning communities can be characterized according to geographical spread, the themes addressed, the target groups and the technological approach used.

Web 2.0 environments are especially suitable as main platforms or supporting spaces for non-professional learning environments. CoPs are one important form of non-professional learning communities in Web 2.0 environments and storytelling can be a successful method for Web 2.0 community learning. Virtual worlds and mobile devices could be important platforms for non-professional learning platforms in the near future.

The seven examples described in this report show models for a regional learning community (Karlsruhe City Wiki), a national semi-online community for learning about Web 2.0 technologies (Web Monday), a web-based storytelling platform for learning experiences (TALE), an online intergenerational learning community (HiStory), a weblog-based learning platform for mobile students (Mobi-Blog), a social network for athletes (netzathleten.de), and a mailing list for people interested in education in Second Life (SLED).

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