Chapter IX

Evaluation: A Link in the Chain of Sustainability

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Abstract

Our emphasis in this chapter is on the sustainability of online educational communities, particularly the role that evaluation has to play in promoting sustainability. From the literature on online communities and evaluation of technology, we select and extend models of online community and technology acceptance that inform and enable the design and evaluation of sustainable online educational communities. Sustainability is a key issue that highlights the sociotechnical nature of these communities. Collaboration Across Borders is an online learning community that has received EU Socrates-Minerva funding to establish international collaboration between tutors and students, and investigate sustainability of online learning communities. We present a case study of the development of the CAB community and its associated portal http://www.cabweb.net as a chronology of significant events. We then chart the evaluation process, using examples of tools and data to highlight the role of evaluation in the development of CABWEB and the sustainability of the CAB community. Finally, we offer practical advice to those who wish to develop online learning communities, either small-scale collaborations between two groups of students or international networks of students and tutors.
Introduction

Despite the hyperbole that has surrounded the growth and spread of the Internet, we can see that, year by year, more people—young and old—in countries across the Americas, Europe, and the rest of the world are using the Internet in their everyday lives for work, play, and education. It is easy to imagine the educational opportunities presented by cheap and easy communication between people in different countries. More challenging questions are:

How can we turn those opportunities into viable and satisfying educational experiences?

How can we manage the social, technical, linguistic, and pedagogical challenges in realising these opportunities?

Evaluation makes an important contribution to understanding learners’ and tutors’ experiences in online learning communities, which can help to improve the social and technical aspects of those communities. In this chapter, we link theory with practice by exploring the relationship between evaluation and sustainability in a case study on the process of development of an online community over the period of a two-year funded project. Of particular interest is the use of an open source software (OSS) package in the development of an online educational community. We extend two existing models of online community sustainability, both firmly grounded in the literature, to explore the sociability and usability aspects of online learning communities in an educational setting.

The Role of Evaluation in the Sustainability of Online Learning Communities

What is an Online Learning Community?

Goodyear (2001) defines networked learning as:

“...learning in which information and communications technology (ICT) is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources.”