Chapter XII

Evaluation of an Online Community: Australia’s National Quality Schooling Framework

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Abstract

This chapter considers the development and implementation of Australia’s National Quality Schooling Framework (NQSF), created particularly for teachers and others involved in improving school education. This large-scale, highly structured, and outcome-focused community space, funded by the Australian government, was developed as a means of building and testing knowledge. Using Wenger’s infrastructure for communities of practice, the chapter evaluates the NQSF in light of its capacity for engagement, imagination, and alignment. Although these three are often intertwined, we conclude that firstly, users value the space for engagement and that this needs to be supported by a national telecommunications infrastructure. Secondly, in terms
of imagination, a community of this scope and purpose benefits from management that shares the same purpose in order to develop the profession. Finally, alignment is achieved through visionary leadership and a rigorous process to maintain the quality of the resources introduced to and generated within the community.

Introduction

The National Quality Schooling Framework (www.nqsf.edu.au) is an online environment established by the Australian government to encourage knowledge building, particularly among school educators. The NQSF is managed by the Center for Applied Educational Research (CAER) at the University of Melbourne. In this chapter we describe the main features of the developing community and propose Wenger’s (1998) model of community of practice as a framework for evaluating its capacity to build knowledge over the period from its inception in 2001 until 2005.

The use of community to describe certain online interactions raises expectations of a positive experience. Preece (2001) uses the term online community to mean any virtual social space where people come together to get and give information or support, to learn, or to find company. Rheingold (2000) calls these virtual communities: cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. A virtual community is a group of people who may or may not meet one another face-to-face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks. These definitions do sound like the equivalent of the communities that develop in and around schools, where people bump into each other. Place has been important in such conceptions of community (Sergiovanni, 1999), among teachers and students in a school, parents in a local community, even students in a class group. However, like Wellman (2001), we see that this is changing, and that through online environments, those involved in schooling can constitute a new type of community, with both a focus on educational outcomes and a supportive role for individuals and families. We see this very purposeful community could be a community of practice.

Community of practice is a term grounded in a social constructivist approach to learning and frequently applied to the management of organizational knowledge. A community of practice is a group of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). The definition in itself is not new or startling, but, Wenger et al. argue, a focus on intentional and systematic knowledge management has become increasingly important in the knowledge economy, and communities of practice are seen to be a necessary structure for organizations.
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