Chapter XI

Building Virtual Communities Through a De-Marginalized View of Knowledge Networking

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Abstract

The chapter investigates an actionable context of knowledge networking, from the perspective of sustainable development which should accommodate the building of communities in cyberspace so much exemplified in today’s Internet and World Wide Web. The premise of this exploration is that members, or participants, in any community are engaged in learning that is critical to the survival and reproduction of that community. Through community participation, learners find and acquire models and have the opportunity themselves to become models and apprentices of others. This investigation provides a basis for thinking about the possibilities of a virtual community and the dynamics of its construction across a variety of computer-based contexts. The design and refinement of technology as the
Introduction

The term virtual community today mostly refers to many types of Internet-based social interaction. In fact, the term community, according to Williams (1973), in the English language referred primarily to a geographically localized group of people until approximately the 17th century, and it expanded somewhere between the 17th and the 19th centuries to include the idea of a group of people who hold something in common, or who share a common sense of identity even if they do not live in a single locale. Interestingly, the term virtual came into the English language from Latin by way of French at about the same time as did community, around the 14th century. Initially, it referred to things that had special and effective physical capacities, linking it closely to our ideas of virtuous. Yet, its meaning underwent changes in the 17th and the 18th centuries to refer to something that seems almost completely real to the people in so far as the effect or result is concerned, although not formally or actually real in the physical sense, according to The Complete Oxford English Dictionary (1971).

Rheingold (1994), who appears to have coined the term virtual community in the first place, provides a definition that accords reasonably well with the context of being virtual: namely, people in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life (meet one another and exchange ideas and information), but we leave our bodies behind. We cannot kiss anybody and nobody can punch us in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries (Rheingold, 1994, pp. 57-58).

In the virtual community, relationship is typically defined not by proximity but by contents of individual interest — classes of objects, ideas, or events about which participants have differing levels of both stored knowledge and stored values (Renninger, 2000). Participants’ connections to the community are often based on cognition and affection rather than simply spatial and temporal. Such a