Integration of Web 2.0 Tools into Non-Formal Learning Practices: Exploring IBM’s Digital Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines how a group of employee volunteers in IBM used Web 2.0 tools for their collaborative learning practice and what assumptions they had for using the tools. It presents multiple approaches to using the tools and lists multiple assumptions participants had for such a practice. This research explores how their use has been appropriated by employee volunteers for their practice of volunteering and how they influenced the process of their meaning-making. By doing so, it raised an awareness of the digital tools that provide collections of traits through which individuals can get involved in non-formal learning practices by having digital interactions with others. The study generates new qualitative evidence of using Web 2.0 for collaborative learning.

Keywords: Digital Tools, IBM, Learning Practice, Volunteers, Web 2.0 Tools

1. INTRODUCTION

Today’s workplace settings are in constant need of recurrent learning processes interwoven with daily tasks on digital spaces. However, these digital spaces are not devoid of any issues and hence suggest the need for employees to be conscious of the emerging issues. As every knowledge-intensive entity needs to support their employees’ development in informal or non-formal learning environments there is a need for more in-depth research about the use of online collaboration tools for knowledge creation and sharing. Throughout the study I will be using the umbrella term “Web 2.0” to refer to the collectivity of these tools.

The case study is about the employee volunteering practice of IBMers across the globe and it reviews their use of online collaboration tools during this employee volunteering practice. This research study explores how online communities are created by employee volunteers and also provides an understanding of non-formal learning practices within such fluid settings; important issues for organizations interested in non-formal learning practices of their employees are also being raised.

IBM’s digital spaces refer to the internal IBM web-based collaboration tools and the word “non-formal learning” denotes the type of learning for which there is no predefined curriculum or syllabus which are usually bet-
ter structured than ‘informal learning’. By examining the assumptions of the participants with regard to their use of Web 2.0 tools for collaborative learning practice and presenting multiple approaches to using the tools and listing multiple assumptions the study explores how these tools can truly be integrated into the employee volunteering practice.

Conclusions are drawn as to the potential for the use of Web 2.0 tools for collaborative e-learning in organizational settings.

The study conveys a context-driven collaboration model focusing on learning through collaboration throughout a volunteering programme. This volunteering program matches communities’ needs in the developing world to IBM employees’ learning processes in a collaborative and integrated manner. This volunteering model involves a decentralized, employee-generated learning process that is driven by collaboration with colleagues, online resources and experts within the organizational setting in IBM. I identify the affordances of various digital tools from the perspective employee volunteering, and how these affordances can be leveraged to support employee choice and autonomy. The volunteers made a decision for using these online collaboration tools on their own without being under the influence of any institution, and based on their own needs and ideas they utilized these tools. In addition to being a generic space for sharing documents, the digital environment serves as a joint place populated and created by the volunteers to navigate through information, find personal routes and pathways. This set of tools provide contextual information in a seamless manner based on the learning needs of the IBM employees. My inquiry in this thesis relates to different volunteering cases that deal with the changing use patterns. I delve into the collaborative processes facilitated by the use of digital tools within their volunteering context, in other words, whether and how volunteers were supported by the content conveyed to them via means of relevant digital assets and tools. The volunteering setting embeds aspects of both virtual and physical parts of workplace learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The last decade has been witness to a shift from the individual to the constructive and social aspect of knowledge in the existing epistemologies (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003). Such a direct shift of focus onto the social nature of meaning and practice can result in the redefinition of the organisation itself as a community of practice (CoP), with organisational dimensions that convey meaning to these practices meaning.

The prominent scholars Lave and Wenger who firstly made a definition of CoP in their famous book with the title “Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation” studied how situated learning takes place as a result of the relationships built by “master practitioners” and “newcomers”. CoP’s can also refer to places in which “communicative action” occurs (Polanyi, 2002). The mutual creation of knowledge mediates these actions (Wenger, 2004). While CoP’s function as a ground for knowledge creation and transfer (Lesser & Prusak, 2000; Wenger, 2004; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) they exist at the crossroads of intellectual and social capital. Within the current body of literature it is a common belief among scholars that CoP’s support the basis of social capital, which is mandatory for creating knowledge and its dissemination (Lesser & Prusak, 2000, p. 124).

According to Wenger (1999), CoP framework can be implemented within both “intra” and “inter” dimensions of organizational settings due to being “an integral part of our daily lives” (Wenger, 1999, p. 6, 7). Building further upon the concept of CoP, Wenger utilized it to establish a comprehensive theory of how individuals within collective settings such as organizations work together (1999; 2000; 2004). In his book, Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity, Wenger (1999) states that organizations can be considered as assemblies of CoP which can reach even beyond their confines and be situated either within or between formal networks (1998, p. 30). In addition, some scholars utilized the concept of CoP to put cross-sector collaborations under
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