Chapter XIV
Designing Online Learning Communities to Encourage Cooperation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is concerned with how to design an online learning community in such a way as to encourage cooperation, and to discourage uncooperative or antisocial behavior. Rather than restricting design to visual and interface issues, I take a wide view, touching on aspects of the governance, social structure, moderation practices, and technical architecture of online learning communities. The first half of the chapter discusses why people behave antisocially in online learning communities, and ways to discourage this through design. The second half discusses why on the other hand people behave cooperatively in online learning communities, and ways to encourage this through user-centered design, applying some results of experiments in social psychology. The chapter is intended to be of practical use to designers of online learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

Human beings being what they are, any social venue is likely to experience some antisocial behavior. The kind of antisocial behavior that appears in a particular venue will depend on the characteristics and opportunities of the venue, and of the tenor of the social interaction that takes place; this applies to online venues as well as to off-line ones. In this section, I will give some examples of antisocial behavior in online learning communities. As will be seen, there are some differences in what is possible (and in what is common) online from off-line.

Flaming is disruptive emotional speech. It has been noted for a long time as a problem with online conversations. For instance, in an early experiment by Sproull and Kiesler (1991), a group
solving a problem online threw more flames than a control group solving the same problem off-line (p.119). A flame by one annoyed, angry, or frustrated person can often bring another flame in response, leading to an escalation that disrupts the possibility of calm conversation.

Obscene or violent speech can be a problem in that it destabilizes the tone of communications in the learning community. Some online learning communities for teenagers, for example, have experienced students testing the boundaries of language permitted.

Harassment and bullying do occur in online learning environments, just as harassment and bullying by mobile text message, off-line written message, and the spoken word occur in off-line learning environments. In a survey of 770 UK youngsters aged 11 to 19 (NCH, 2005), 14% said they had been bullied by text message, 5% in Internet chat rooms, and 4% via e-mail. For the youngsters in formal education, half of the bullying messages happened at school or college, and 11% said that they had sent a bullying or threatening message using a digital medium.

Identity theft is easier to carry out online than off-line. I have been successfully impersonated in an online learning community, on several occasions, by a man; I doubt that he would have been successful face-to-face.

Malware can be spread via online communication and shows no signs of becoming less common. According to measurements by MessageLabs® (2005), about 1 in 28 e-mails sent in June 2005 contained computer viruses.

MessageLabs® also estimates that 2 out of every 3 e-mails sent in June 2005 were spam. Spam occurs not only via e-mail, but via other online media too. For example, open wikis and the comment pages of blogs have been invaded by spammers in the last few years. In addition to advertisers and fraudsters who try to reach as many people as possible over the public Internet, members of online learning communities can cause a problem if they decide to send many messages to a very large number of community members.

Privacy intrusion can be a problem in online learning communities, particularly if the norms of how information in the online environment may be used are not clear.

Online learning offers enhanced opportunities for cheating (Foster, 2003; Jones, 2003). The ease of cutting and pasting from Web pages, and the very wide variety of information available online, makes plagiarism easier than it was pre-Web. Ready-made essays on commonly set topics and illicitly obtained exam questions may be obtained from specialist Web sites or from other students. The ease of online impersonation may allow students to let a substitute sit their exam for them. Students have been known to change their marks by gaining entry to online databases containing their results.

Finally, online learning communities can suffer from a low signal-to-noise ratio. For instance one online learning community based at the University of Virginia, originally designed for serious discussions on postmodern literary theory, turned out to be very popular with members of the public who logged in from all over the world just to tell silly jokes. In general, the ease and convenience of online communication can lead to the practice of near-immediate responses in asynchronous media, allowing members little time to think about or edit their messages before sending them. Synchronous online media such as chat rooms allow little time for editing by their very nature.

Why do People Behave Badly in Online Learning Communities?

Possibly the main factor contributing to bad behavior in online learning is disinhibition. Contrary to early findings on computer-assisted communication by the RAND Corporation, modern online communication technology tends to have a disinhibiting effect. The Internet sage Esther