Chapter XVII
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 conduit for extending and enhancing the possibilities of virtual community building is an essential issue, but the role of the individuals as participants in such a community is as important. The idea of sustainable knowledge networking is to bring about continual learning and change for the community in need. The emergent challenge of such a mission is to de-marginalize many of the non-technical issues of building virtual communities for knowledge transfer and learning. The chapter concludes by reiterating the challenge of expositing what it means to create an appropriate context of knowledge networking through which purposeful actions can be supported with the elaboration of suitable information technologies.
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 connection is also supported by affordances (Gibson, 1966) that invoke imagination about and identification with a site, such as autonomy, support, and depth of content. Besides, the learning that is undertaken as participants work with a site has an opportunity for changed understanding of our self. Thereby, it is important to consider what a virtual community means, what it offers, what it affords its participants, and what its boundaries are at the advent of the Internet that has undoubtedly created numerous possibilities for interaction that people did not have before (Cherny, 1999; Davis & Brewer, 1997; Herring, 1996).

THE BACKGROUND OF KNOWLEDGE NETWORKING

The last decade of the twentieth century saw explosive growth in discussions about knowledge — knowledge work, knowledge management, knowledge-based organizations, and the knowledge economy (Cortada & Woods, 2000). Against this backdrop, enterprises including educational institutes are challenged to do things more collaboratively in order to remain vital in an increasingly global environment of knowledge networking (Stalk, Evans, & Shulman, 1992). By knowledge networking, it means there is a strong need to share knowledge in a way that makes it easier for individuals, teams, and enterprises to work together to effectively contribute to an organization’s success.

This idea of knowledge sharing has well been exemplified in Rheingold’s (1994) description of the WELL project (Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link), which is one of the first virtual communities, still going strong today. Rooted in the San Francisco Bay Area, the WELL (http://www.well.com) is an open-ended and self-governing community that started in 1985. Attracting people from a wide diversity of backgrounds, many of them
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