Chapter 3

Constructing a Sense of Community in a Graduate Educational Setting Using a Web 2.0 Environment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter posits that information technology and “Web 2.0 technology” such as blogs and wikis can be used to expand the “Claremont Conversation” by changing the nature of scholarly communication. By using social technologies, conversations outside class among students and professors help build an intellectual community that is the hallmark of a liberal education. We describe the design and implementation of an initial project that targeted only the School of Information Systems and Technology (SISAT) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU). The artifact developed was an online community for the purpose of improving the sense-of-community amongst students, faculty, and alumni of SISAT. This chapter then proposes future steps in how to improve the intellectual community at CGU by expanding the online intellectual community established for SISAT to the entire campus.

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INTRODUCTION

Intellectual community is an idea that drives most of the initiatives at Claremont Graduate University (CGU). The core ideal of CGU, oftentimes referred to as the “Claremont Conversation” by CGU’s Board of Trustees, is that the center of a great university is in great conversation, and from the everyday talk of college life springs everything else. This ideal is possible mainly due to CGU’s status as a small graduate-only university. CGU’s small population of motivated and mature students creates a close-knit environment where intellectual community can more easily thrive than at a larger university. Class sizes are usually small and professors oftentimes are on a first-name basis with their students, as opposed to larger universities, where students often feel like just another face in classrooms with populations over a hundred.

However, recent problems have arisen that threaten the university’s close-knit atmosphere. As opposed to before, when students were required to live on campus, many students live far from campus — some with commutes of several hours to travel to and from campus. Such students oftentimes arrange their schedules so they only have to travel to campus once a week, and miss most campus events. Also, a higher proportion of students also have work or family commitments that limit their presence on campus. It has become more common for PhD students to seemingly disappear once they finish their coursework, divorcing themselves from the everyday talk of campus life. A strong sense of community, affiliation, and togetherness are prerequisites for intellectual community, positively influencing the community’s social norms towards knowledge sharing (Bock, Zmud, and Lee, 2005). Social relationships, trusts, and mutual interdependencies need to be built and sustained to allow members in a group to effectively collaborate (McGrath & Hollingshead, 1994). Informal communication plays an important role in effective collaboration. It provides random participants who have no arranged agenda with interactive, rich content, and an informal language (Kraut, Fish, Root, and Chalfonte, 1990). In other words, community building is a prerequisite for successful collaborative knowledge construction.

The Board of Trustees has entrusted the Social Learning Software Lab (SL²) with finding solutions to mitigate this problem. SL², a research lab in CGU’s School of Information Systems and Technology (SISAT), commits itself to finding innovative ways in which Web 2.0 technologies such as blogs, discussion boards, wikis, and podcasting can be used to enhance learning and bring about positive social change to the university environment. SL²’s challenge has been to see how information technology could enhance the Claremont Conversation by breaking down the barriers of communication between students. This study started as an attempt to use SISAT as a test bed to experiment ideas on how to enhance the sense of community across the other departments and the entire campus.

According to many experts, such as O’Reilly Media, we are now in the era of Web 2.0, in which web applications provide a rich environment for collaboration and creativity. Web 2.0 refers to a new generation of Web applications that enables community interactions within an open environment. Web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs and wikis, enable people to become both the author and the reader, enhancing collaboration among groups of people. There is an overall emphasis on participation that allows users or website visitors to add value to a site, and an added emphasis on social networking and generating conversation. A small example of this trend is the ability users now have on several news websites to post a comment on a news story, or to post a rebuttal or response to a previous user’s comment. Many businesses employ the benefits of Web 2.0 into their business practices — an approach sometimes referred to as Enterprise 2.0 — adapting them in their organizations to support their employees’
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