Supporting the Interconnection of Communities of Practice: The Example of TE-Cap 2

Élise Lavoué, Université de Lyon, IAE Lyon, France
Sébastien George, Université de Lyon, INSA-Lyon, France

ABSTRACT

In this paper, a general model for the Interconnection of Communities of Practice (ICP) is proposed. This model creates links between local Communities of Practice (CoPs) and global Communities of Practice on the Web. To hit the target platform specifications to support an ICP are first of all proposed, soon after the TE-Cap 2 (Tutoring Experience Capitalisation) platform for an ICP of tutors is made up to support people working on it. This platform allows the capitalisation of tutors’ contextualised knowledge by making it easily retrievable from all the tutors in their daily practice. At last a descriptive investigation over a four-month period and forty-two users registered on the platform is conducted. Results presented in this paper concern the usability of the platform and the relevance of the model with regard to tutors’ needs.

Keywords: Collaborative Computing, Knowledge Modelling and Sharing, Online Communities, Social Learning Techniques, Tutors, Web-based User Interfaces

INTRODUCTION

With the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in education, new roles and professional figures have appeared, particularly the tutor. Tutors usually monitor learners’ activities and assess them. They need training and advice to become a tutor and to be helped in all the roles that are assigned to them. However, there is a lack of training and assistance tools. Tutors compensate for this lack by participating in Communities of Practice (CoPs) within their institutions. At this local level, they have many contextual exchanges to, for example, solve problems or help each other. These exchanges are computer mediated at a very minimal degree, and any knowledge generated in the process is not, or is very rarely, capitalised upon. On another hand web technologies (e.g., forums, blogs, wikis) have enabled the emergence of online CoPs of tutors. At this general level, tutors discuss more general subjects which do not necessarily help them solve the problems encountered in their daily practice. Furthermore, knowledge does amass but in a relatively unstructured and uncontextualised manner. It is with this background that our research work aims to develop a platform that: (1) makes a link between these two types of CoP by putting tutors, working in the same areas, in touch with

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each other; and (2) capitalises on the value of all produced knowledge by contextualising it, so as to make it accessible and reusable by tutors in their working contexts.

We first recall the concept of a Community of Practice (CoP) and, more precisely, of an online CoP. To situate our work, we examine existing tools that have been proposed to support CoPs of tutors at a local level within their own educational institutions, or at a global level in the form of widely distributed online CoPs. We then propose a model of Interconnection of CoPs (ICP) which considers tutors to be the links between existing local and global CoPs of tutors. We have deduced specifications for a platform to support such an ICP. The TE-Cap 2 platform, based on these specifications, is described. TE-Cap 2 has been offered to tutors from different disciplines and different countries over a four-month period. We then present the results and an analysis of the use of the platform.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many skills are required to be a tutor, generally classifiable into four categories: pedagogical, communicational, disciplinary expertise and technological (Thorpe, 2002; Denis et al., 2004; Banks et al., 2004). However, tutors are asked, ‘to run before they can walk’ (Bennett & Marsh, 2002) because most of them do not have these skills on which to lean, and there is no training which attempts to help tutors develop the required competence (McPherson & Nunes, 2004). Training methods remain specific to each campus (Denis, 2003; Class & Schneider, 2004) and therefore can be quite isolated and rather ad hoc. Furthermore, few tools have been developed to answer these particular training needs and those that exist do so in a very limited way. Indeed, there are currently few assistance systems for tutors (Dufresne et al., 2003) or only specific prototypes (Garrot et al., 2006). Research work based on data mining techniques predicts students’ results (Romero & Ventura, 2007) and locates relevant information for tutors. However, results rest on elementary rules of association which do not reflect the reality of educational practice and are applicable only to simple exercises. They do not help tutors who do not really know what they have to do and the best ways to go about it (Casey et al., 2005).

Tutors compensate for this lack of training and formal help by participating in Communities of Practice (CoPs) which emerge inside institutions and more generally on the Web. CoPs gather tutors together in an informal way (Lave & Wenger, 1991) because of the fact that they have common practices, interests and purposes (i.e. to share ideas and experiences, build common tools, and develop relations between peers) (Wenger, 1998; Koh & Kim, 2004). Members exchange information, help each other develop their skills and expertise and solve problems in an innovative way (Pan & Leidner, 2003; Snyder et al., 2004). They develop a community identity around shared knowledge, common approaches and established practices and create a shared directory of common resources.

CoPs appear at various levels: at the local level of educational institutions and at a global level on the Web, in the form of widely distributed communities of tutors from various institutions. In educational institutions, tutors have many face-to-face exchanges to solve very contextual problems. For example, tutors discuss specific lessons, students or scenarios; they give feedback on courses to make them evolve and ask for advice and explanations on the relevant means of intervening with learners. But all these discussions pass unmediated by computer; they are mainly verbal and take place, for example, during coffee breaks. Thus the knowledge created is not, or is rarely, capitalised upon. Furthermore, tutors usually prepare their own educational material for their students (Casey et al., 2005). This fact implies that there is no tracking of their work (decisions taken, events that occurred, configuration or customisation of scenarios, quality of the knowledge building process, etc.). Some CoPs are supported by learning environments offered by universities (Lefoe et al., 2002; Sherer et al., 2003). These environments provide resource directories and communication tools so as to create relations...
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