Meeting and Working on an Electronic Social Space: Behavioural Considerations and Implications for Cross-cultural End User Computing

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The use of computer mediated communication to support team work across different organisations and countries presents a distinct work environment in which cultures from different countries, and professions come together. In addition to the national and professional cultures, the electronic work environment has embedded within it a technology culture. This paper presents the use of a particular type of electronic communications technology that supports group interaction among a set individuals communicating from different parts of the world. The paper employs a structurational perspective on culture to analyze behaviours that emerge on an electronic social space and explores the creation of patterns of relations on the electronic communication media. It concludes with a discussion of implications for cross-cultural end user computing.

The support of work processes in which people do not physically meet or see each other may be provided within 'virtual structures' through Computer Mediated Communications Systems (CMCS). As defined by Hiltz and Turoff (1992), “these systems use computers and telecommunications networks to store, deliver, regulate and process communication among the group members and between the computer and the group”. Although the most common form of CMCS is
In order to investigate the formation of patterns of relations on the electronic media, the case chosen for investigation in this paper is an international network. Known as the Commonwealth Network of Information Technology for Development (COMNET–IT), this comprises a set of task forces situated in different parts of the world that collaborate on various activities (such as workshops and setting up networking projects). The function of COMNET–IT is to be set up and coordinate projects, and at the same time serve as an instrument for setting the direction and encouraging networking activities among international agencies and other specialist institutions (see Qureshi 1994a for a more detailed description of COMNET–IT’s activities). COMNET–IT is composed of a number of interrelated networking initiatives, which together provide a broad, rich domain of investigation for this research. In particular, the synchronous meetings among the task forces leaders (who are also the steering group members of COMNET–IT) are the focus of this paper. These meetings involve the use of an electronic notice board on which the participants log on from their respective institutions (and countries) to participate, in the terms of DeSanctis and Gallupe (1987), in a same time different place meeting.

In remaining consistent with an interpretivist research strategy, the communication relations are examined in their natural setting (the electronic notice board) and researcher is part of the phenomena being investigated. As the researcher is the coordinator of COMNET–IT while collecting the data for this research, she was not considered to be an outsider and the results were not compromised by a Hawthorn effect. Unlike the participant observer (McCall and Simmons 1969), the interpretivist researcher does not pretend to be neutral and recognises that her actions are implicated in the phenomena being investigated. At the same time, the role of an interpretivist researcher differs from that of an action researcher (Argyris et al.1982) in that the researcher is not part of a change process and the results of the research are not fed back into the situation being investigated.

**Investigating the Electronic Steering Group Meetings**

When investigating electronic meetings it is necessary to consider social structures, their development and influence on the behaviour of actors. Structuration theorists see social structure as meaning which is created in the ways in which actors perceive reality and enact their perceptions of reality. Social structure is recognisable in dependencies of power, cultural considerations and various contextual constraints (Monge and Eisenberg 1987). The structuration perspective proposes an emergent view of culture, in that there are deep structures of power, and influence which constrain human action and the patterns of relations. At the same time human action helps to shape and define social structure (Giddens 1984). Structures of leadership, power, and domination manifest themselves in relations among social actors creating patterns in their behaviour. Patterns of behaviour that emerge on electronic group meetings are the basis upon which it is possible to investigate human networks. The analysis of this paper, uses Linda Harasim’s term, social space to describe they way in which human communication has transformed computer networks into what she calls ‘places’ where people...
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