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Communities of Practice and Virtual Learning Communities – An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

The use of new information and communication tools such as; Web 2.0, social networks, wikis, blogs continues to grow for learning in higher education. More and more instructors worldwide have already started incorporating these tools for their course delivery and pedagogy. The growing literature suggests that virtual communities of practice (CoPs) and virtual learning communities (VLCs) are becoming common for collaboration and sharing resources due to the emergence of Web 2.0 tools and other social networks within higher education institutions. This exploratory study examines the existence of such communities of practice or learning communities in higher education particularly among business school instructors. The data is collected through phone and e-mail interviews with academic staff. The preliminary findings suggest that business schools professors have still not become part of CoPs and VLCs

Key Words: Communities of practice (CoP), virtual learning communities (VLCs), communities, higher education, online communities, network communities

INTRODUCTION

More and more universities are using advanced information and communication technologies for delivering education. Many instructors worldwide already have incorporated Web 2.0, social networks, wikis, blogs in their course design. The literature also suggests that there have already been few virtual communities of practice (CoPs) and virtual learning communities (VLCs) in existence. These CoPs and VLCs are helping instructors not only to collaborate and share their resources but also to learn from each other and share the best practices among them. The CoPs and VLCs increase interactivity among instructors which in turn help in learning (Albert, et al., 2009, Ridings, 2006).

Communities of Practice (CoP) is now well established term in literature which defines as CoP are groups of people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor. It is also known as a network of connections between people who engage in joint activities and discussions, help each other, and share information. Together a group of people develop and share a repertoire of resources: experiences, stories, tools for their learning and developing best practices (Wartburg & Teichert, 2006). Although the concept of CoP has found a number of practical applications in business, government, and education but origin and primary use of the concept has been in learning theory (Barab, et al., 2004, Bellini, & Vargas, 2006, Teigland, & Wasko, 2006).

The communities of practice concept originated when Wenger (1998) published his book *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity* in which he elaborated that learning is based on a social participatory conceptual framework of learning (Teigland, & Wasko, 2006). In the past few years, many researchers have been conducting studies on the topic of online communities or learning communities and CoP. The literature also suggests that there have been many CoP communities exist in different parts of the world. However, there is little known about CoP or VLCs among business faculty members. The goal of the study is to examine the extent of the existence of such communities of practice or learning communities in higher education particularly among business school instructors. The data is collected through phone and e-mail interviews with academic staff.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While considerable research has been conducted in the general area of distance learning, research specific to CoPs and VLCs for learning has only recently been initiated. Online learning communities facilitate communication between people who share common interests and learn collaboratively using networked technologies (Boyd, & Ellison 2007). The CoP term conceptualizes that learning takes place in social and physical context of real-world problems, including group activities, collaboration, and teamwork in which the different members bring different skills, experience, and backgrounds to help solve problems or learn from each other to devise standard practices (Cargill, 2006, Iverson, & McPhee, 2008, Teigland, & Wasko, 2006, van den Hooff et al., 2009).

METHODOLOGY

The study aims to answer research questions; What is the motivation of joining CoPs or VLC; How frequently they participate in CoP?; What is the outcome of their participation?; Has it helped in learning or knowledge transfer for developing better understanding or best practices; Has CoP made instructors a better instructors or more knowledgeable. What are the obstacles for CoP or VLCs; How are structural elements of communities enacted in online communities of practice?; How is learning achieved in online communities of practice?; What are the strengths and challenges of online communities of practice?

The population of this study included university instructors, and instructional design experts. The respondents are all involved in the undergraduate and graduate-level courses in the business schools in four different countries; the United States of America, India, China and Finland. Data will be collected from selected university instructors, and instructional design experts through e-mail survey and Skype interactions. Procedures for data collection and an overall project timeline are fully outlined. Pilot testing with few instructors is in progress. The study may take place over a year period between January – December 2011.

The data collection stage is in process. The contacts have already been made with some potential participants. A random sample of current web sites from government and city municipal organizations are selected. Participants will be asked to look for various services, and will also be asked questions about what they liked and disliked about completing the scenario. Data regarding the reflecting participants' satisfaction with the tasks will be gathered. This data will be used to understand and interpret the participants' thoughts. Each session will be set up with participating users for 10-15 minutes. We will also be videotaping and recording participants' comments and behaviors, and to record scenario.

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Currently, the study is in data collection stage. This research is aimed to understand the dynamics and existence of CoPs and VLCs among business school instructors. The results of the study would be presented in the conference. A limited set of analysis of the data will start over the spring semester and will continue in summer and fall semester. While we do not have "final" results of the data analysis, several trends in the data have been identified and can be used to indicate initial answers to the overall research questions posed.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The CoP and VLCs are not only networked community but the structure is a social system in which participants interact with others and build relationships during the process of learning. Community also cultivates a sense of belongingness and fosters participatory learning. Preliminary analysis suggest that many instructors and instructional designers have started joining discussion forums—web-based or through email exchanges but still have not joined any formal CoP or VLC. From time to time, few of the participants had email exchanges or discussion threads on web-based forums to share their experiences. Many of the participant shared that they have participated in discussion forums in a limited way and that certainly has helped them to share information and expertise.

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