



Looking back to look forward: Creating and sustaining peer connections through digital communities

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Digital communities provide opportunities to engage with local, national and international communities of learners or colleagues around a particular domain of practice. This paper briefly describes an adapted communities of practice model used to structure digital communities for a professional association's peer mentoring program. Methods and techniques for the facilitation and leadership of digital communities are explored and findings from two evaluations of the program are examined to identify successes and areas of improvement. Recommendations for future opportunities are also proposed.

Keywords: peer mentoring; digital communities; barriers; motivation, engagement.

Introduction

Peer support and collaboration provide means to address isolation and build knowledge, skills and expertise. Communities of Practice (CoPs) have emerged as non-hierarchical structures that offer contexts for the formation of peer connections that support sustained learning and collegiality situated in shared practice (McDonald, Star, Burch, Cox, & Nagy, 2012). Wenger (2010) defines CoPs as groups of individuals who share their interests and problems around a specific topic and gain a greater degree of knowledge of and expertise in a topic through their regular interaction (Probst & Borzillo, 2008). Early work on CoPs posited that the concept was one of unstructured learning through unstructured social connections within a shared field of practice. It was not thought that communities should have any formal or semi-formal structure which implied that such communities were not led, managed, or facilitated (McDonald, Star, & Margetts, 2012).

More recent work, however, has introduced the concepts of facilitation, leadership, management and organisational involvement. Agrawal and Joshi (2011) found that CoPs need a leader who is responsible for driving, promoting and steering the CoP in the right direction; community leadership positively affects community effectiveness. Ortquist-Ahrens and Torosyan (2009) similarly argued that effective facilitation is essential to creating and sustaining an environment in which learning communities can thrive. A learning community facilitator must, they observed, find ways to help establish a climate that is conducive to genuine inquiry, learning and productivity.

In this paper, a Community of Practice model focused on the growing of community, sharing of practice and building domain knowledge that had experienced great success in face-to-face settings was applied in a digital community context. Participation in digital communities draws on the premise from social learning theory that we are social beings, who learn best in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 2010). This application was used with the ascilite Community Mentoring Program which provides a mechanism to link more experienced

educators and researchers in a mentoring relationship with early career professionals. An evaluation of the Program was undertaken in 2011 to identify successes and potential limitations of the Program. A follow up evaluation has recently been conducted and this paper also reports on those findings in order to support and guide future planning.

Three-element model in a digital environment

In 2011, the three-element CoP model was trialled in a digital environment with ascilite's pilot Collaborative Community Mentoring Program. Mentoring can play a beneficial role in enabling participants to increase knowledge and experience, enhance career prospects and improve job satisfaction. There are few experiences as powerful as connecting with other people who are united by the need to work collegially and to resolve mutually shared problems. The Collaborative Mentoring Program matched a pair of consulting mentors who had devised a shared theme concept with up to six corresponding mentees who had their own projects that fitted within or related to the proposed theme. This resulted in a group of peers who worked collaboratively and creatively in interdisciplinary teams on shared questions and challenges. The Program aimed to engender an environment that was safe and non-judgmental that promoted the sharing of perspectives and experiences and fostered trust among participants.

It was important that the Program be flexible enough to accommodate a range of needs/proposals. A dedicated area for the Program was hosted in the association's Moodle environment and was used for social interaction, focused discussions and the sharing of ideas, resource building and planning, seeking and providing feedback, and linking to the web conferencing facility where synchronous gatherings were conducted. In addition to the Moodle application, participants were encouraged to use other media for communication, information sharing and knowledge construction including Skype, Facebook, Twitter, and other applications.

Evaluating the model in a digital environment

The results of the first evaluation revealed that the Program was highly valued by the participants and the digital CoP enabled peer support and collaboration by providing access, convenience, flexibility, utility, speed, and cost-effectiveness. Participants acknowledged that "new networks, relationships and ongoing partnerships [were] forged from opportunities gained from being involved in the program" (Reushle, 2012, p. 4). They appreciated the opportunity to have intellectual conversations around shared areas of interest, getting confirmation that their ideas were valid as well as having somewhere to share their professional frustrations. One participant noted that the collaborative mentoring program was particularly successful by observing that "what can (and has) been achieved as a group is much more than what could be achieved as individuals in silos". Their access to more than one mentor added to the breadth and depth of advice.

On the other hand, some participants indicated a lack of sustained engagement with the community. One participant noted "the difficulty in making the program a high priority. It kept slipping down the list of things to do". Another noted that "it seems like 18-24 months would be best for this program. The year just flew away. If it were an extended collaboration in the digital space then definitely it will be beneficial and a good round off for our projects". Extending the duration of the program was a recurring theme in the evaluation. One participant asked, "Does ascilite consider there to be a progression through the mentoring program ... would the participants be considered down the track taking on a mentoring role?" Another respondent also noted the difficulty of creating and sustaining the motivation levels of the Program participants: "I often felt distracted from my project goals and, due to conflicting demands on my time, this made me feel frustrated that I could not progress my project outcomes. Although I felt fully supported, I was not fully committed" (Reushle, 2012, p. 5).

It was also noted that the relationships that are formed between mentors and mentees do not appear to be sustained beyond the official duration of the program. The evidence suggests that there are two factors that contribute to the "fading-out" of these relationships:

1. The objectives set by the mentor and mentee at the beginning of the Program are achieved and so the relationship comes to a logical end; and
2. The lack of a leader, or facilitator, inevitably results in the termination of these collaborations.

Leadership in a digital environment

The results of the initial evaluation showed that once the objectives of the group had been achieved, sustaining the engagement of the community was difficult, despite an expressed desire for the collaborations to continue beyond the duration of the Program. Despite there being no reason why the CoPs could not continue once the

official Program had ended, participants acknowledged that they did not continue to engage with their networks after that time. While traditional CoPs were thought to be self-managing, with little or no structure (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), more recent studies (Cox, 2006), and the results of this evaluation, show that leadership has a significant impact on the CoP success.

In a study that explored the role of the facilitator in a Community of Practice, it was noted that their first role is to serve the group and create opportunities for members to achieve their individual and collective goals (Dale, 2011). Facilitators should encourage members to take responsibility for the tasks and processes needed to foster effective group work. The results of the latest evaluation of the mentoring program support the importance of this more structured approach.

Evaluation: Stage 2

In order to attract and enhance users' commitment to participation in online communities, it is necessary to know what types of motivations are important for the members. In 2013, the authors (one the leader of the mentoring program; the other a mentee participant in the 2012 program) revisited the literature and conducted a survey of past participants in order to identify the aspects of the mentoring program (one-to-one and two-to-many arrangements) that the participants perceived as successful, and the potential issues.

The survey was made-up of both multiple choice and open-ended questions. Completion of the survey was voluntary and the participants were given a two-week time frame in which to submit their responses. Of the 35 former mentors or mentees from the Program in 2011 and 2012, 25 responded, yielding a participation rate of 71.5%. At the end of the two-week period, data were collected and analysed and key themes were identified.

Results and discussion

Of the 25 respondents, 10 mentors and 15 mentees completed the survey. In order to assess the perceived value of the Program, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements using a Likert scale. The participants were asked to indicate "To what extent do you agree/disagree with the following statements". 24 survey respondents agreed that the Program was a valuable experience, while none disagreed. 1 respondent believed that the Program was valuable for the mentee but not the mentor, compared to 19 who disagreed. No respondents agreed that the Program was valuable for the mentor but not the mentee, whereas 20 disagreed. 22 respondents agreed that the Program was mutually beneficial for both the mentor and mentee and none disagreed. 24 respondents said that they would recommend the community mentoring program to others and no respondents disagreed.

Participants' answers to each of the five open-ended survey questions were examined for themes regarding the successes and/or drawbacks of the mentoring program. To analyse the open-ended questions, an independent rater read through all the responses in order to identify themes that were present. The participants were asked: "Why did you choose to participate in the CMP?" The most frequent response to this question was for networking and collaborative opportunities, with the aim to attend the ascilite conference at the end of the year. One participant said that "I thought it would provide an opportunity to work with someone, to publish and to achieve goals that were set". Another participant said that they hoped that the Program would "provide the incentive to produce a paper for a conference". The participants were asked to outline the objectives that were established for the mentor/mentee relationship at the commencement of the Program. The most common objective was the production of peer-reviewed papers and journal articles that would enable them to take part in the annual conference.

Participants were asked to indicate aspects of the Program that worked well and aspects that did not work well or could benefit from improvement. Of the positive aspects of the Program, establishing goals and objectives and achieving them was said to be the most rewarding aspect. One respondent said that they "relished planning together, outlining objective goals, individual challenges, executing separately and regrouping for evaluation, feedback and then setting the next goal".

In terms of aspects of the Program that the participants felt did not work well, a lack of time and the difficulty of sustaining relationships were the most common responses. One participant lamented that "I haven't really kept in touch with my mentor since the program (I suppose my work demands have taken me in a different direction to the project we looked at)". Another respondent noted "there is never enough time", which was supported by another respondent who similarly acknowledged the difficulty of "finding times when everyone could attend". Following the annual conference, which signified the "official" conclusion of the mentoring program, the

majority of partnerships came to an end.

The survey respondents also made a number of suggestions for how the Program could be improved, noting in particular the importance of setting clear goals and objectives (“insist on tangible outcomes e.g. a conference paper for ascilite or journal paper” and “encourage presentation of outcomes at a subsequent conference, as well as the progress one in the year of the mentorship”); and allowing participation in the Program beyond one year (“extend the duration officially to two or three years”). The need for an ongoing leader and/or facilitator (“Perhaps offering more ideas/ guidelines for the new participants” and “more guidance from the program leader”) highlighted the importance of the facilitator’s role in the sustainability of communities indicating that it is the role of the facilitator, in conjunction with the setting of objectives, which have significant bearing on the success (and potential sustainability) of the Program.

The literature often recommends building new Communities of Practice on already existing networks as it is assumed that these networks will provide a solid basis for the new CoP (Dube, Bourhis, & Jacob, 2005). The findings of this study suggest, however, that meeting one’s mentor or mentee in advance made little difference to the sustainability of the Program. The respondents who said that they had met their mentor/mentee were asked to indicate whether they would have agreed to take part in the Program if they had not previously met. 10 respondents said that they would have participated regardless, while 2 said they would not. This suggests that, in general, even those who had existing relationships did not believe that it was necessary or beneficial for the success of the Program.

The importance of setting objectives was a recurring theme in the open-ended questions, which the participants saw as a positive of the Program. However, despite acknowledging that setting clear goals increased their motivation to participate in the Program, only one of the respondents noted the importance of setting new objectives as the initial goals were achieved: “Planning together, outlining objective goals, individual challenges, executing separately and regrouping for evaluation, feedback and then setting the next goal”. Wenger and Snyder (2000) described Communities of Practice as “groups of people who share a concern... and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis... [As they] accumulate knowledge, they become informally bound up by the value that they find in learning together. Over time... they become a community of practice” (p. 79). The results of these evaluations suggest, however, that without appropriate facilitation and the continued forming and reforming of objectives, these participant relationships will not be sustained long-term.

Conclusion

In this most recent evaluation study, the participants in the ascilite mentoring program in either 2011 or 2012 completed a non-compulsory survey that was aimed at determining the perceived benefits of the Program and the areas that could be improved for future iterations. The data suggest that clear objectives provide members with roles, responsibilities and planned outcomes which motivate them to contribute to the communities more actively. Once the objectives that are established in the goal-setting agreement have been achieved, the relationships tend to come to a close suggesting that clear goal setting and the role of the facilitator are crucial to the continued activity in the community. Although Communities of Practice are often defined as spontaneously emerging groups, it is now widely believed that organisations have an important role to play in facilitating their emergence, supporting their development and sustaining their activities (Bourhis et al., 2005). How to achieve this in an association reliant on voluntary membership and engagement continues to present challenges and opportunities for more exploratory work.

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