

Chapter 14

Technology Stewarding as a Medium to Develop and Sustain Niche Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this chapter is to operationalize the theoretical argument about the importance of technology stewarding in the development of niche online communities. To bring about successful changes in a system, technology stewards propose technological solutions that will help to solve the problems of a community they know well. Assuming the role of a technology steward is the theme of a course in the M.A. in Educational Technology Program at Concordia University. Students enrolled in Social Computing and Computer Supported Collaborative Learning have twelve weeks to find a community that needs technological solutions and to propose such solutions to help them develop and to sustain their livelihood. The body of this chapter presents three vignettes, each consisting of a student project. Andre and Chantal's vignettes both describe the creation of online learning communities with second language students, while Issa's vignette describes the creation of an online support community of people suffering from the symptoms of a systemic illness. The three vignettes describe the approach in which each project was undertaken, the outcomes, and the lessons learned.

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INTRODUCTION

Whether it be about people taking pictures every ten years with the same pose and the same group to show the natural process of ageing, amateur scientists discovering a new comet, members of an online community with similar interests adopting a mode of public communication to serve their own purposes without being controlled by the traditional power structures, or adolescents using a messaging system to reduce their cellular consumption, the news is buzzing with a myriad of examples of the creative use of technologies that people do on a daily basis. Such innovations often emerge naturally, with the skills of one person who has knowledge of the technology and knowledge of the needs of the community. This natural process has been labeled “technology stewarding” by Wenger, White, and Smith (2009). The goal of this chapter is to operationalize the theoretical argument about the importance of technology stewarding in the development of niche online communities. We begin by providing a description of the context from which emerged the conditions that enabled the concepts of technology stewarding and online communities. The second section presents the course in which technology stewarding is taught and describes the term-long assignment that strives to develop student tech-stewardship. The third section presents three vignettes each representing features of technology stewarding. We conclude on recommendations for practice and propose research avenues.

CONTEXT

Web 2.0 has been a promising technology to help improve learning and for building online communities. The term “Web 2.0” is often associated with Tim O’Reilly, because of a conference held in 2004 in which he used it. In a nutshell, Web 2.0 refers to the technology that presents affordances allowing end-users to contribute as much

as developers, and to become active producers of the knowledge that accumulates on the Web. This co-construction of knowledge is possible because of various enabling social technologies, which were emerging in the early 2000’s. While Wikipedia, Wikispaces, MySpace, YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn, Blogspot, WordPress, Twitter, and Pinterest slowly became adopted social media sites in North America many niche online communities were taking form within these environments. Despite the mass adoption of social media, they were dismissed for classroom use. This gave rise to a stout debate between some scholars.

When CBC reporter John Bowman (2009) interviewed Carleton University professor Tim Pynchyl about the value of social media in the classroom, Pynchyl argued that “[...] while discussion groups, blogs and email can be valuable tools in the classroom, using commercial products like Facebook and Twitter can lead to distraction and procrastination.” He stated “Facebook is like taking a person with a gambling problem to Vegas. It’s just too easy to get doing other things rather than the hard work of intellectual work. And Twitter is even worse.” On the other side of the debate, professor Ann-Louise Davidson from Concordia University claimed that educators had good reasons to be careful about the use of social media in the classroom, but insisted that much could be learned with social media in terms of generating content, developing a variety of competencies, and using them ethically and keeping oneself safe (Bowman, 2009).

What is the Value of These Interactions?

Web 2.0 tools, such as blogs, forums, wikis, and media-sharing Websites present a wide array of affordances that enable users to connect through several channels, in a variety of places (same place, different place), and times (synchronous, asynchronous). This provides opportunities for various types of learning that go above and be-

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