

Chapter 16

Integration of Web 2.0 Tools for Non-Formal Learning Practices: A Study of IBM's Digital Spaces

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ABSTRACT

This research tries to explore the specific benefits of online collaboration tools, and finds out how their use has been appropriated by employee volunteers for their practice of volunteering and how they influenced the process of their meaning-making. By doing so, it raised an awareness of the digital tools that provide collections of traits through which individuals can get involved in non-formal learning practices by having digital interactions with others.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study provides an insight into how online engagement enabled the continuation of non-formal workplace learning practices such as volunteering and opened up possibilities for new ways to contribute to the learning process of employees. Today's workplace settings are in constant need of recurrent learning processes interwoven with daily tasks on digital spaces. However, these digital spaces are not devoid of any issues and hence suggest the need for employees to be conscious of the emerging issues. As every knowledge-intensive entity needs to support their employees' development in non-classroom and non-instructional type of learning the crucial aspect of digital applications in terms of contributing to related processes of knowledge creation by fostering collaboration needs an emphasis. While doing this I reflect upon the strategies adopted in alignment with the umbrella term of "Web 2.0".

This research study explores how online communities are created by employee volunteers and also provides an understanding of non-formal learning practices within such fluid settings; important issues for organizations interested in non-formal learning practices of their employees are also being raised.

The study conveys a context-driven collaboration model focusing on learning through collaboration throughout a volunteering programme. This volunteering program matches communities' needs in the

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developing world to IBM employees' learning processes in a collaborative and integrated manner. This volunteering model involves a decentralized, employee-generated learning process that is driven by collaboration with colleagues, online resources and experts within the organizational setting in IBM. I identify the affordances of various digital tools from the perspective employee volunteering, and how these affordances can be leveraged to support employee choice and autonomy. The volunteers made a decision for using these online collaboration tools on their own without being under the influence of any institution, and based on their own needs and ideas they utilized these tools. In addition to being a generic space for sharing documents, the digital environment serves as a joint place populated and created by the volunteers to navigate through information, find personal routes and pathways. This set of tools provide contextual information in a seamless manner based on the learning needs of the IBM employees. My inquiry in this thesis related to different volunteering cases that deal with the changing usage patterns. I delve into the collaborative processes facilitated by the use of digital tools within their volunteering context, in other words, whether and how volunteers were supported by the content conveyed to them via means of relevant digital assets and tools. The volunteering setting embeds aspects of both virtual and physical parts of workplace learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The last decade has been witness to a shift from the individual to the constructive and social aspect of knowledge in the existing epistemologies (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003). Such a direct shift of focus onto the social nature of meaning and practice can result in the redefinition of the organisation itself as a community of practice (CoP), with organisational dimensions that convey meaning to these practices meaning.

The prominent scholars Lave and Wenger who firstly made a definition of CoP in their famous book with the title "*Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*" studied how situated learning takes place as a result of the relationships built by "master practitioners" and "newcomers". CoP's can also refer to places in which which "communicative action" occurs (Polanyi, 2002). The mutual creation of knowledge mediates these actions (Wenger, 2004). While CoP's function as a ground for knowledge creation and transfer (Lesser & Prusak, 2000; Wenger, 2004; Wenger & Snyder, 2000) they exist at the crossroads of intellectual and social capital. Within the current body of literature it is a common belief among scholars that CoP's support the basis of social capital, which is mandatory for creating knowledge and its dissemination (Lesser & Prusak, 2000, p. 124).

According to Wenger (1999), CoP framework can be implemented within both "intra" and "inter" dimensions of organizational settings due to being "an integral part of our daily lives" (Wenger, 1999, p. 6, 7). Building further upon the concept of CoP, Wenger utilized it to establish a comprehensive theory of how individuals within collective settings such as organizations work together (1999; 2000; 2004). In his book, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*, Wenger (1999) states that organizations can be considered as assemblies of CoP which can reach even beyond their confines and be situated either within or between formal networks (1998, p. 30). In addition, some scholars utilized the concept of CoP to put cross-sector collaborations under scrutiny (Lathlean & le May, 2002; Dewhurst & Navarro, 2004). These scholars have also contributed to my motivation for approaching the CSC Program from the perspective of CoP. These studies suggest that organizational initiatives provide a fruitful ground to implement the CoP theory.

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