



Chapter XXI

Double Agents: Visible and Invisible Work in an Online Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reflects on work to create computer-supported Communities of Practice among small enterprises in the tourism sector and to establish a knowledge network for destination management. The work was undertaken as part of a project funded by the European Community. The author draws on recent work by Dourish in which he makes a case for an approach to design that takes account of both ‘embodiment’ and ‘embeddedness’. An online knowledge network is embedded in a given domain, but it is also embodied in physical interactors working with machines. Novices who interact in this environment by means of ICTs are thus double agents, working in a domain but also working with artefacts. Where the ‘workings’ of a device are not fully understood, expectations of what may be achieved in an interaction are likely to be unrealistic; this may affect the reach and richness of a knowledge network.

INTRODUCTION

What do agents or actors in an online Community of Practice (CoP) need to know to participate? The chapter that follows addresses this question by means of a case study that involved a group of novice computer users, loosely affiliated in a small traders association, who took part in an EC funded project over a six month period in 2000-2001. One of the aims of the project was to transform such associations into more substantial learning communities. The case is of interest because it addresses the issue of agency in online communities: the identification and negotiation of aims, tasks, resource allocations, alignments and alliances. In doing this, the case raises questions about what needs to be done at different stages of community activity. The overall aim of the project consortium was to develop learning and support platforms for small firms in the tourism sector and encourage them to aggregate into larger 'virtual enterprises' with stronger competitive presence in the global market. Such an aggregate enterprise might, for example, contribute to regional economic development by managing a group of tourist sites as a consolidated attraction, thus providing a richer (more diverse) and more streamlined (better co-ordinated) experience for visitors. Different learning environments (face-to-face, hybrid, 'pure-play' online) were explored, though all shared a common concept of the workplace as a series of co-ordinated, structured interactions.

The author was a member of a development team in Edinburgh that chose to work with a 'pure play' online scenario, and a prototype set of modules was designed to support and validate learning in this context. The first challenge was to find an appropriate framework to prepare small traders for collaboration in an extended virtual enterprise. The design team shaped the learning platform as an online CoP, a social form that is appropriate to knowledge network activity. Malone and Laubacher (1998), for example, reflecting on what they call the 'e-lance economy', describe a world where the traditional hierarchical corporation has been replaced as the exemplar of organizational work by a new organizational order of networked small organizations, which must be able to rapidly configure resources and tactics in the interests of both change (when required) and consolidation. Others have corroborated this vision in reviews of 'drivers' of the virtual and knowledge economies (Igbaria, 1999; Castells, 2001). In such an environment, expertise may best be acquired and nurtured in CoPs that persist across space and time and are independent of fixed-term teams or projects. Online interaction may strengthen traditional community in different ways. It may make interactions more visible, for example, and thus extend the reach of individual community members (Davenport, Connolly, Spence, Buckner, Whyte & Barr, 1999), or it may sustain interaction when individuals are separated by circumstances or location and provide an archive, or trace of interaction, that contributes to reflective practice (Hara & Kling, 2002).

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