

Chapter 10

Impacting Practice: The Role of Digital Credentials in Social Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter follows the journey of Participate, and diverse organizations within its platform, utilizing a peer review micro-credential system through adult learner research, product development, and design iterations. Throughout the past eight years, Participate has developed and tested various peer review structures where learners and reviewers leverage chat functionality to provide real-time formative feedback and collaborate to build new ideas together throughout the micro-credential, not just at the end in summative review. This chapter covers the evolution of the design and development of digital credentials to support social learning, provide evidence of competencies and impact, and create the foundation for reputation building and trust in an online community of practice (CoP).

INTRODUCTION

Learning is a social and relational activity. People learn and find deeper meaning when they create new knowledge together; however, most digital credentials are designed for single individuals to demonstrate a competency. This prevailing top-down design has driven the construction and implementation of most digital credential systems, where experts use existing frameworks to review work and award recognition. While these models are scalable and have driven innovation, they often do not provide the necessary learner agency for true open and equitable systems.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-3820-3.ch010

This chapter follows the journey of Participate, and the diverse organizations supported by its platform and education strategy services, in the development and implementation of a micro-credential system that is built upon peer review and formative feedback. Participate's product development team has designed and tested various peer review structures where learners and reviewers leverage chat functionality to provide real-time formative feedback and collaborate to build new ideas together throughout the micro-credential, not just at the end in summative review. This chapter covers the evolution of the design and development of digital credentials to support social learning, provide evidence of competencies and impact, and illustrate how they can provide the foundation for reputation building and trust in an online Community of Practice (CoP).

THE RESEARCH BEHIND SOCIAL LEARNING

In 2013, Participate (formerly VIF) provided an overview of one of the first digital credential systems for educators (Keane et al., 2013). Researchers observed in early phases of implementation that educators regularly learned from one another. As learning between these educators expanded beyond the classroom, it became essential to recognize specific competencies and expertise gained from professional learning communities, online courses, and other innovative, education-oriented environments. Open digital credentials are meant to recognize and capture learning. Integrated within a social learning context, Participate's digital credentials capture collaboration and trust through embedded learning interactions and peer mentorship within the micro-credential itself.

One year later, Participate received a grant through the Digital Media and Learning (DML) competition focused on trust (Keane, 2016). The organization's expertise and background in building online learning programs for educators and other adult learners sparked a redesign of the platform, and of the digital credential system, to support social learning and CoPs. The digital credential system needed to become the centerpiece of the platform that supported evidence-based theoretical frameworks of social learning.

Building knowledge and competencies in any field occurs through processes of co-construction (Vygotsky, 1978). When individuals work together, Vygotsky theorized, their understandings are deeper and more developed. Competency-building occurs when ideas take on new meaning and learners create something unique that they otherwise could not construct on their own. Similarly, Dewey (1916) observed that when students engaged in real-world, practical learning, they developed knowledge through creativity and collaboration. Dewey believed education is critical for participatory democracy; he championed the importance of connecting classroom, community, and learners' lived experiences. The importance of social development, collaboration, and social constructivism must be central to understanding learning and its close connection to identity formation. Social constructivism focuses on the nature of learning and the importance of cultural and social contexts. According to Vygotsky,

Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level and, later on, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. (1978)

This process is similar for adults, yet must also accommodate existing knowledge, skills, and professional experiences. In developing its peer review system with the digital credential, Participate education

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