Understanding How Thriving Internet Quasi-Communities Work: Distinguishing Between Learning About and Learning to Be

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Introduction

In today’s Internet-connected world, we observe the strength of communications and the potentials that can be derived from the distributed expertise such a technology affords. Through the Internet, we are now noticing how expertise can be tapped beyond regional borders and distance constraints. One of the most profound “killer applications” in the ICT (Information and Communications Technology) world is none other than the pervasive e-mailing tools that have transformed personal and corporate communications and collaboration. Increasingly, we have also noticed some thriving Internet-based communities that are attracting participants to their services and how members in those communities are motivated to participate in them. We believe that the communications dimensions of the Internet will yield great promises to the ICT world, perhaps even more significantly compared to the wealth of resources currently proliferated by the World Wide Web.

In this article, we attempt to distil out the reasons why some Internet-based online communities thrive, and why members are motivated to participate in them. As we are concerned with learning and issues relating to learning communities, we start by discussing Brown and Duguid’s (2000) framework for learning within the context of communities of practice. We then use this framework to analyze two thriving Internet-based communities. Results of the analysis lead us to a realization of the distinction between a community and a quasi-community. In other words, the categories of Internet sites or ‘communities’ we have analyzed are not communities of professional practices, but rather limited kinds of online quasi-communities in which groups of people are brought together and participation is based on specific needs and demands. Our fundamental thesis is that Internet-based quasi-communities are strong with the support of learning about and not learning to be. This distinction points to a lack of effective support for identity formation (learning to be) on the Internet.

We conclude the article by suggesting directions for future exploration. For the purposes of discussion, we continue to refer to Internet-based communities as ‘communities,’ and in a later section of the article, following our analysis of these sites, we subsequently refer to them as ‘quasi-communities.’

Learning from the Community’s Perspective

Brown and Duguid (2000), in their book, Social Life of Information, have outlined three principles of how communities enable learning to take place within themselves. They suggest that learning is a phenomenon which occurs not only as an intentional derivative, but also, when participants engage in the context and processes of community life, they learn (both implicitly and explicitly). Although much of what happens in thriving Internet communities is not motivated by demands for learning, but rather a demand or a need for something, learning takes place as a by-product.

For this reason, we felt that Brown and Duguid’s framework would serve as a useful starting point for analyzing two thriving Internet communities as identified in this article—epinions.com and AskMe.com.

The three principles of learning within the context of communities, as identified by Brown and Duguid, are:

Learning is: demand driven, a social act, and an identity formation.

By demand driven-ness, the authors mean that the motivation for learning is usually linked to defined goals and needs within the community through which the participants or learners become engaged. Recent notions of problem-based learning and authentic tasks address such concerns. One major strength the Internet medium provides is timeliness. When we are able to attend to a problem ‘on the job’ or then and there, the situated context through which the problem has arisen often provides the opportunity for contextualized engagement of tasks. These rich contextual meanings make the learning process more natural, and thus the sense-making process is much facilitated, due to the
rich contextual inputs. Such is the reason why we are able to learn many everyday ‘concepts’ so quickly—they are embedded within the rich context of everyday meanings.

By learning as a social act, Brown and Duguid fundamentally subscribe to the social constructivist view, wherein learning is a dialog with others in the context of social-cultural norms and tools. Over the Internet, we are also now beginning to see many communities in which opinions are being shared through dialog by experts and “opinionators” over all kinds of issues, products, ideas, etc. The Internet has now enabled differing cognition and expertise to be within reach, as long as there are individuals who, for one reason or another, are willing to make a contribution. Ratings are commonplace in Internet sites these days, and individuals who contribute can gain popularity—a form of ego boosting—when their views are rating highly by others. In this sense, there is an almost naturalistic accountability mechanism to overcome abuse within such environments. These thriving Internet-based communities are also currently employing rating mechanisms to sieve out prominent opinions, comments, notes, etc., which may attract readers. In a sense, based on the formative feedback mechanisms, these popular contributions are retrieved for easy reference.

The third dimension of Brown and Duguid’s (2000) framework is learning as identity formation. They contend that through the process of enculturation in communities, learners assimilate certain dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs—from which an identity is formed. With regard to identity formation, the authors distinguish between learning about and learning to be. The distinct characteristic of enculturation within communities of practice is that of learning to be. Certainly, most of one’s knowledge is about knowing many things, that is, products of knowledge. We know about American football, baseball, statistics, physics, etc. Most of the discourse on Internet sites is predominately learning about something. In other words, learning about is the accumulation of factual knowledge, of “knowing that” (Brown & Duguid, 2000, p. 128). Learning to be, however, is about “knowing how” by application and practice. Learning to be involves enculturation within the rich context of social community life and practice.

The notion of learning to be, or identity formation in the context of communities of practice, is emphasized as well by Wenger (1998):

Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity. It is not just the accumulation of skills and information, but it is a process of becoming—to become a certain person or, conversely, to avoid becoming a certain person (Wenger, 1998, p. 215).

Within communities of practice, members who begin as novices engage in a process referred to as legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This process begins with peripheral participants (as novices) appropriating an identity through lurking and observing ‘masters’ at work. After extended opportunities of practicing the ‘trades’ of the community, these novices begin to behave and think like the experts in the community of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) maintain that by exposing a newcomer to the practices of a community and providing for opportunities to engage in those practices, the newcomer would move from peripheral participation to a more central participation. In other words, there are levels of participation and contribution through which members in a community make advancements over time. The hypothesis is that, through each advancement, members appropriate a fuller identity similar to the central participants of that particular community of practice.

Analysis of Two Thriving Internet Communities

We propose to analyze two Internet communities by using an expanded version of Brown and Duguid’s (2000) framework for learning. Learning is:

- demand-driven through contextualized engagement of tasks and problems;
- a social act through dialog and the distribution of cognition and expertise; and
- an identity formation through knowing how or through gaining experiences relevant to the community’s practices; it includes knowing about the knowledge required for a practice.

We now offer an analysis of two sites—epinions.com and AskMe.com—based on our expanded version of Brown & Duguid’s (2000) framework. The purpose of both sites centers around asking questions, getting answers, giving opinions, and receiving comments. Topics discussed upon include Arts and Leisure, Education, Science, Health, etc.

Within the two case studies noted in Table 1, recognized participants are sieved out by members in the online community, based on their perceived contribution to issues, problems, and questions raised. In essence, the celebrities (within these sites) have gained recognition via ‘writing’ and discourse, rather than through the practice of doing and performing skills and actions likened to performances of a real community of practice.

It is quite evident that these communities include the dimensions of learning as demand-driven and as a social act. It seems that the two communities provide diversity of content topics and issues through continuous contribution of members. These topics for discussion or question and answer are based on the
Table 1. Analysis of two Internet communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Framework</th>
<th>opinions.com</th>
<th>AskMe.com</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demand-driven through contextualized engagement of tasks and problems</td>
<td>Members ask for opinions of commercial products because they are interested in them for personal ends.</td>
<td>Members ask questions and experts answer. Questions are of a varied nature.</td>
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<td>Members are not limited in their opportunities to review products and have their reviews rated.</td>
<td>Members are not limited in their opportunities to ask questions. Avenues are available to gain points.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Members have a choice to focus on areas in which they are most interested (asking questions) and capable (answering questions).</td>
<td>Members have a choice to focus on areas in which they are most interested (asking questions) and capable (answering questions).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social act through dialog and the distribution of cognition and expertise</td>
<td>All registered members can access the opinions, ratings, etc., sent in by other members.</td>
<td>All registered members can access the questions and answers submitted by other members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Members can share comments/reviews. The quality of the reviews is rated by other members. Each member has a role to play. Even a member who reads a comment will contribute to the cash rewards earned by other members.</td>
<td>Members can ask questions/rate answers and sign on as experts to answer questions posted. They can take on different roles, depending on the topic.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>There are many different levels of participation available to members. Users can start with the easiest, that is, reading opinions.</td>
<td>There are many different levels of participation available to members. Before members post any questions, they can search and take a look at similar questions posted before.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>All members can assign different numbers of points to rate the value of any opinion submitted. Critique is therefore not personal.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It is stressed in the rules and regulations that the opinions should be relevant, original, etc. Ratings include one option, not recommended, which means that the text is offensive, off-topic, etc.</td>
<td>Abuse of any kind can be reported via a template to the Webmasters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity formation through practice</td>
<td>Members can choose their level of involvement and contribution:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• provide an opinion that others have posted</td>
<td>• ask questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• comment on an opinion that others have posted</td>
<td>• rate answers</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• rate an opinion that others have posted</td>
<td>• sign on as an expert to answer questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• send an opinion that others have posted to their friends</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• send in their own reviews/opinions about any products</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Opinions of those whose opinions are often rated highly by others are given more recognition.</td>
<td>The top 10 experts list is given; therefore, quality of answers is assured, as each expert knows that his or her answer is rated by other members.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>The ratings give a member an idea of the quality of an opinion in relation to that of others.</td>
<td>The points that each member gets give him an indication of his level of expertise.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
personal demands and needs of the participants. In terms of learning as a social act, where differing expertise can be capitalized, there are many avenues to contribute opinions and ideas, have access to other members’ contributions, and critique other members’ contributions, but without being personal. Through the social acts of asking for answers, making contributions, and evaluating comments, members have the opportunity to exhibit their expertise and gain recognition. The social acts revolve around a mechanism for rewarding and sieving out the outstanding contributors.

However, from a stricter point of view, the points in Table 1 under Identity Formation could have been subsumed under Social Act. The ratings mechanism is but an effective strategy of encouraging a qualitative community-driven standard for comments and participation. The predominant strength of the ratings is that it enables the participant to evaluate his or her own comments or contributions based on the ratings of others. This form of rating or evaluation serves as a basis for reflecting on one’s own actions. As one’s ratings become consistently good, he or she progresses up the ladder of recognition and contribution in a way similar to the process of moving from peripheral participation to practicing the ‘trades’ of the community. This then leads us to a realization of the distinction between a community and a quasi-community.

Community Versus Quasi-Community

As discussed above, we highlight constraints of learning to be within the current Internet-based communities. Internet sites have participants from all over the world communicating and interacting at the virtual location. They may not necessarily be ‘communities’ in the sense of a group of people sharing a similar identity or profession, with common goals and distinctive rules of the community organizing their roles and responsibilities. Real professional communities include the scientific community, the medical community, and others. Thus far, what we have seen in the Internet world are groups of people coming together through Q&A forums (e.g., AskMe.com), knowledge-exchange forums (e.g., experts-exchange.com), Weblogs (wherein general highlighted issues and questions are discussed), organized online events (with specific start and end dates where specific panels of experts are brought together virtually), and management support environments for specific resource and information needs. In other words, the above mentioned categories of Internet sites or ‘communities’ are not communities of professional practices but rather limited kinds of online quasi-communities in which groups of people are brought together and participation is based on specific needs and demands. Participants participate in these sites because there is a rather quick way of receiving some (personal) benefit, such as having some query answered by someone, somewhere in the Internet world.

Here is an example: How does one become a doctor? Or how does one take on the identity of a practicing doctor? He or she becomes a doctor by diagnosing patients, interacting with patients, discussing medical issues with other doctor practitioners, engaging in medical research and sciences, etc. What is happening in the Internet is merely a way of facilitating discourse and interactions (or ‘learning as conversation’ as someone has put it) and not the fuller practice of a profession. Thus, online quasi-communities are not communities of practice in the real sense of the word. In other words, one can gain repute within an online community and not necessarily an identity or ‘way of seeing’ likened to the practitioners in a community.

We would be convinced that Internet online quasi-communities could create real identities if doctors, engineers, and accountants could be trained or formed out of such learning. In real communities, for example, the mathematics community, mathematicians think like mathematicians and see patterns (or way of seeing) related to those of their fellow practitioners (Schoenfeld, 1992). The tools of mathematics are abstraction, symbolic representation, and symbolic manipulation. However, being trained in the use of these tools no more means that one thinks mathematically than knowing how to use shop tools makes one a craftsman. Learning to think mathematically means developing a mathematical point of view and developing competence with the tools of mathematical sense-making (Schoenfeld, 1992). Using Schoenfeld’s analogy, forming an identity is much more than just being able to use the tools of some craft.

We reiterate that the Internet provides an advantage in facilitating demands in learning based on need and dialog as a social act of learning. Learning what? Learning a narrow kind of knowledge which the Internet medium affords. Not all kinds of learning! One cannot learn to operate on a real eye over the Internet. One can discuss with others their experiences with operations they each had conducted on the eye.

In other words, in most Internet quasi-communities, participants are primarily involved in discourse about knowledge rather than learning to be. There are some limited exceptions. In sites such as experts-exchange.com, although members are learning about programming, they are also to some degree learning to be as they learn to program in alpha-numeric language with someone else on the net. This is because the Internet medium as a language communication medium allows the learning collaboration (of programming). However, in other skills and behavioral performances where the Internet medium is a limitation, learning how to be is clearly lacking.
What About Online Learning Communities?

Although the above-noted Internet quasi-communities are usually not classified as learning communities, but rather commercial-based sites, we conjecture that the processes and activities surrounding why these Internet quasi-communities thrive have relevancy to learning and how communities can be designed to support learning. We have yet to see examples of learning communities that thrive in similar magnitude compared with some of the above Internet quasi-communities. From literature, we have examples of Learning Communities (Internet and non-Internet based) that have been around for some years already (even before the proliferation of e-learning), but they are not necessarily thriving. For example, we have communal knowledge bases such as Knowledge Forum, which is a second generation of CSILE—a social constructivist knowledge-building environment from the University of Toronto; CoVis (with a Collaboratory Notebook interface) by Northwestern University, etc. (Oliver, 2000).

From our analysis of quasi-communities, and when applying it to the context of learning environments, we recognize that certain characteristics are fundamental:

- **Creating the demand for learning.** If the learning environment is for the context of students’ learning (for school-going children), we need to understand that students’ motivations for learning are usually pseudo-created, i.e., not as authentic as in real demands of actual needs, as with the two cases above. In other words, we may have to consider how to motivate students in generating their own demands and problems for which they are self-regulated to engage in online discourse.

- **Tools for social act.** In order to simulate real practice in learning communities of students, ‘simplified versions’ of practice-related tools and processes need to be engineered into these learning environments. Students should participate in doing tasks, mediated by tools and artifacts similar to those used by practitioners or mature individuals within the community. Students cannot use the same artifacts as experts because they are at a different developmental level; however, artifacts modeled on expert artifacts and simplified in certain ways can mediate the development of what is required.

- **Tools for identity formation.** It remains for further research to determine whether technologies within the Internet can facilitate the processes of learning to be or identity formation within the context of online learning communities.

**Future Directions**

What quasi-communities have shown already is their effectiveness in the dimensions of learning as demand-driven and social act. In terms of demand-driven-ness, there is a need to do research into: (a) how authentic tasks can be engineered from students’ demands for knowing, and (b) personalized knowledge representations of current states in established knowledge. For example, libraries contain a representation of the current state of established knowledge of the academic community. It is a collection of writings. In an online community, however, we do not expect everyone to see all the discussions of an issue or knowledge base; rather, we should provide a mechanism to facilitate everyone building his or her own personalized knowledge representations.

For learning as a social act, we could consider research into: (a) effective groundrules for discourse in online learning, and (b) simplified mechanisms for participants to be engaged in discussion and at the same time not to be overwhelmed by the vast amount of transactions. These two dimensions strongly support the dimensions of learning about some knowledge through discourse.

Finally, for identity formation or learning to be, there is a need to research into: (a) modified modes of assessments related to peer- and self-evaluations, and (b) flexible entry levels and exit points and mechanisms to reward learning goals within these communities.

**Conclusion**

We hope that this article has provided insights into how we should go about understanding the current state of Internet technologies in relation to e-learning and online communities. The potential of learning through the Internet remains to be explored, and there is a great need to better understand the rules and mechanisms which sustain these communities in the pursuit of learning.

**References**


