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oz-TeacherNet 2.0: Redefining the education online community

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Abstract: This paper will report on a 12-year project, “oz-TeacherNet” and its role in supporting teachers who are connected. It will describe the issues around supporting and sustaining an online community over this duration. With the adoption of web 2.0, social networking and the ease of use in creating digital content, many online communities are changing and being influenced by youth who lead the way in identifying what tools are a necessity to them. The communities that do not change often disappear very quickly. This paper explores how the oz-TeacherNet has responded to the changing technologies that exist and explores the lifecycle involved in sustaining an online community for teachers. Further, the paper will identify what tools are seen as a necessity for this type of community to survive and offer recommendations on how to sustain an online community for educators.

Keywords: oz-teachers, communities of practice, online, knowledge building tools, web 2.0, social networking

Introduction

Building and sustaining an active community for educators can be a challenging task as its members need to identify a need to be part of the community. If members do not have a relevant need to be a part of a community then these communities will often lose the momentum needed for them to survive. Online communities have the potential to act as informal learning environments for its members whether the participants role is that of one who is actively contributing or one that is merely a peripheral “lurker” (Gray, 2004). The oz-TeacherNet (<http://oz-teachernet.edu.au>) community has survived the many issues that challenge these communities. It was established in 1995 by the Research in Information Technology Education (RITE) group, now known as oz-teachers, to provide educators and pre-service teachers with an infrastructure for using the Internet to support professional development and curriculum design.

The oz-TeacherNet community is a non-profit community service managed and maintained by academics at the Queensland University of Technology and more recently LaTrobe University. It is one of the longest running education communities of its kind in the world. According to Lloyd (2007), “the oz-TeacherNet is manifested through its main community list, oz-teachers.” This is a discussion list with over 1000 current members, mostly in Australia, who are educators and education system leaders. Oz-TeacherNet hosts a number of online curriculum projects that offer essential national and international networks to teachers and students. More recently, the oz-TeacherNet has become involved in research partnerships and has been particularly effective in providing educators with the mechanism to conduct collaborative research.

1. Building the oz-TeacherNet community

1.1 Why develop an online community?

With the advancements in information and communication technologies (ICT), a number of tools have arisen that allow for new strategies in teaching and learning. In particular, the Internet has opened the door to many new possibilities that overcome the boundaries of traditional teaching methods. However, while the internet has offered many new opportunities, and there is a push to have as many schools connected as possible, there has been mixed results in its successfulness as a teaching tool and as a tool for teacher professional development (Nykqvist, 2005). The oz-TeacherNet community was originally conceived as a way of supporting educators in the use of the Internet in education and as an informal place where educators could learn from each other. It is also within this context that Brown (1999) claims that the “most promising use of the Internet is where the buoyant partnership of people and technology creates powerful new online learning communities” (p. 19). It is this notion of an online learning community that has been central to the development and success of the oz-TeacherNet community.

1.2 The community has spoken

Developing an online learning community involves more than member access to a range of information and technology tools such as a threaded discussion forum, a list server or a chat room. An online learning community goes beyond this to establish a sense of belonging by members, where they depend on each other to achieve the learning outcomes of the course or intended group goals (Reil, 1996 & Palloff & Pratt, 1999). One or two participants who post regular messages on an asynchronous discussion forum does not equate to a successful learning community. When one looks outside education to the wider community they are witness to a number of successful learning communities such as the LINUX community or some of the many gaming communities that exist. The LINUX community, in particular, has been seen as a successful community that has led to the development of one of the most popular server operating systems in the world. In this community members have discussed and argued about various ideas using both synchronous and asynchronous tools.

More recently, many other communities and community tools have emerged as being essential to those who live and work in a connected world. The boundaries of distance have become harder to identify and it is now quite easy to track the movements of people and their thoughts through personal blogging sites. The popular introduction of online diaries known as blogs, the ability to share photos in Flickr, which in turn allows one to develop a wider social network has become part of the norm for many virtual citizens. Internet communities such as del.icio.us, YouTube and My Space have also flourished with the ease of their user interfaces and the relative ease of digital media creation tools. Now mobile phones form a subculture that allows the content acquired through their abilities to capture and share audio, video and images to become part of these online environments, hence becoming part of an essential repertoire of tools deemed as an everyday part of today's culture. Many of these recently developed online tools are classified as web 2.0 tools due to the many rich features and simpler user interface that they provide.

It is also within this context that a recent report issued by the New Media Consortium (2007) outlines the future technologies that will have a significant impact on higher education. It identifies six areas that will have the most impact. These are user-created content, social networking, mobile phones, virtual worlds, the new scholarship and emerging forms of publishing and massively multiplayer educational gaming.

1.3 The challenge

The challenge for oz-TeacherNet has been to survive through the arrival of these new online communities and community tools and adopt best practices that meet the needs of its members. The main focus that oz-teachers has kept central to its developmental of oz-TeacherNet over the years is the needs of its members. In identifying the needs of its members the one issue that is common to all is that educators lead extremely busy lives and are often seeking a community that is supportive, but not too time consuming. Hence, the one technology that has survived all the new technologies is the asynchronous tool of email and in particular, that of the oz-teachers email list. The notion of changing the basic communication of oz-teachers subscribers from an email list to that of a web-based forum has arisen as a discussion topic on several occasions during its existence, however members always decide against it, due to the extra time it would take to log into a forum and then read each of the messages. The strength of the oz-teachers list is also in the fact that it is run and maintained by all of its members rather than having a moderator that is always there. A list moderator does exist, though this is a shared role where the moderators are seen as general members rather than list administrators.

The oz-TeacherNet started its existence as a basic html website that provided information for its members. It then changed to a site that used rich html pages that allowed users to interact with a database of content, before moving to an opensource content management system that would identify which users were online and give the users a multitude of options. During this time the oz-TeacherNet ran a variety of projects for teachers such as Travel Buddies and Bookraps that also changed to utilise the new technologies presented by the emerging technologies. For example, the travel buddies project moved from one that only had email as its communication to one that utilized a database for teachers to describe their travel buddy and advertise their travel buddy via a web site. Many of these systems have worked well for many years, however with the move to a content management system that was feature rich and provided many options for members, there was also much difficulty in maintaining the security of such a system along with trying to develop project tools within the system. Further, due to the many options within this system, members often had difficulty in being part of projects and finding their way around. This problem with having a complex site with too many options was further exasperated by new members that continually sent emails to the administrators asking for advice on how to subscribe to the email list for oz-teachers or where certain project information could be found. This was a case where the introduction of a complex system saw the demise in the use of web functionality and member use.

The oz-teachers team has learned many valuable lessons in maintaining this community and the development of community tools for its members. As a consequence a new online community has now been developed that takes on board many of the lessons learned and the underlying concepts of new technologies. This online community resource known is the oz-teachers project management system and was released on the 1st of April, 2007. Research into how members use the wealth of technologies available on the Internet has

contributed to its development enabling the new system users to be part of a project and to locate information using a simple easy to use user interface, but with rich features.

1.4 The solution and work in progress

The oz-teachers project management system is a feature rich web 2.0 application that allows its members to easily find information about projects and be part of these projects. The tools within this environment are built using opensource software such as php and mysql. As a consequence the tools within this project management system are designed to be easy to use and are provided free to the education community that it supports. The content of the site is licensed under a creative commons license that encourages educators within this community to share their ideas. The user interface is designed to be simple but like all web 2.0 applications the underlying technologies are designed to be feature rich. In the design of this system, which is continually evolving to respond to the needs of its community members, the user interface and initial experience has been a central focus as all the feature rich tools are developed. This user experience extends itself to even the smallest aspects of the design such as the url's used for accessing the community projects and general information. The url's used for any part of the site are classified as human readable, such that they are never too long or contain too many other non-standard characters. The feature list of the site is quite extensible such that at anytime within a project a blogging tool or even a gallery of pictures and movies can be added to a project to be shared used participants in projects. The site allows for technologies such as RSS feeds, wiki's, forums, blogs and media galleries to be used within all projects or for communication between members.

Conclusion

Creating and sustaining an active online community for educators needs to start with placing its members needs at the centre of all decisions and then working forward from there. While this is often assumed in the development of many projects it is not always at the forefront and as a result the projects can be short-lived. It is great to have every new tool available and many options for the members of a community, however it is more important to have tools that the members need and can easily use to produce rich learning experiences for all. The oz-teachers team has worked with many educators and pre-service teachers to trial many its community tools and to find a balance of what is needed. For the long-term existence of the community, the tools used must be able to be adaptable, and emerging tools need to be able to be incorporated as their needs become realised.

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