

Personal profiles: Facilitating participation in Learning Networks

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Abstract

Learning Networks are particularly suitable for the self-directed lifelong learner. As the learner takes control over his personal competence development, it is in his interest to find suitable learning opportunities, relevant information and optimal support, particularly in interactions with others. Effective online communities rely on an active social structure. The key question then becomes which factors in the Learning Network inhibit or enhance social interaction for effective learning. It is against this background that we investigate aspects of successful social interactions in online communities. In this paper therefore, we focus our attention on the question of how personal profiles can be used to stimulate active participation in Learning Networks.

Keywords

Learning Networks, social interactions, personal profile, motivation to contribute

1. Introduction

Knowledge society demands individuals to be responsible for their own competence development, which no longer takes place in a limited period of time but rather continues throughout life in various situational settings. This requires a different approach from the traditional classroom-based educational settings. Education thus shifts away from traditional forms of teaching towards forms of lifelong learning in which the learner decides, takes control

and becomes a self-directed learner, the one that organizes his own competence development [1].

Learning Networks [2] and ad hoc transient communities [3] therein are particularly suited to accommodate this new form of learning. In Learning Networks learners can find peers, experts and learning resources that might fit their learning needs. To this end, the learner has to take on an active role, setting up his

competence development plan, looking and searching for relevant resources, finding experts, asking input, questions and feedback from experts and from peers, and providing answers, resources, and advices, when needed. To support these processes design guidelines for fostering the emergence of the Learning Network and community and for enhancing sociability and stimulating the learning process are needed.

But, what are the factors that inhibit or enhance social interaction for effective learning in Learning Networks? To answer this question, in this paper we briefly mention aspects of successful social interactions in online (learning) communities and, hereafter, we explore existing personal profiles present in non-learning communities; we believe that they can provide clues to identify factors that stimulate active participation in the social structures of a Learning Network.

2. Social structures

Communities can be defined as networks of people with a specific or shared goal. Several theories attempt to explain people's behaviour and motivation to participate and contribute in online communities. The social exchange theory and reciprocal altruism theory, for instance, state that people will invest only when they can expect something in return. Similarly, the notion of swift trust, which helps to establish engagement and commitment [3], emerges in temporary teams whose existence is formed around a clear purpose and common task with a finite life span [4, 5].

Research on how to foster participation in online communities includes exploration of theories of motivation. For example, the design of the Comtella system [6] follows guidelines taken from theories on motivation to contribute: reciprocation theory, consistency theory, social validation, persuasiveness of liking, and

theories of discrete emotions. Also, other researchers have argued that participation in online communities is due to intrinsic and external motivational factors, or personal and interpersonal factors [7].

Social psychological theories have been also explored. For instance, the design principles for *Movielens*, a movie rating site, were based on social psychological theories. The researchers found an increase in contribution when the system indicates to the members how unique they and their contributions were [8].

Furthermore, it has been also argued [9, 10] that visualising people and their actions in a network can enhance members' contribution and participation, in particular when the benefits of these actions are made visible.

From our perspective [11, 12], effective learning communities depend on social space, characteristics of the members, and characteristics of the community. Affective relationships, strong group cohesiveness, trust, belonging, and satisfaction characterise social space; the emergence of the latter can be enhanced through social interaction. For social interaction, in particular cooperation to occur, there should be continuity (it must be possible and likely for people to meet again in future), recognisability (people should be able to recognise each other), and history (people should know the past behaviour of the other participants). If these conditions are not met, people are more prone to act selfishly, because they can not be held accountable for their actions [13].

In this line the design of the learner's personal profile plays a key role in facilitating participation. Earlier we described how a contextualized personal and expertise profile (pExpi) [14, 15] is effective in enhancing participation in (ad hoc transient) communities [16]. We believe that it should be designed not only to give information about the learner, but also to foster interaction [17], encourage participation and motivation [16] and develop trust [15]. To that end, we

conducted a first exploration of existing popular profiling sites, to determine what kind of information is made available in user's profiles and how they motivate registration and stimulate contribution. Clearly, we believe that some lessons can be learned from these successful sites.

3. Composition of online profiles

There are many online profile sites that allow people to look for, contact or share information with past or new friends, classmates or colleagues, by adding their profile to the site. Some communities serve a specific aim, e.g. dating sites, networking sites, file sharing sites; others have a more generic, social function. All these communities have in common that the services they offer evolve around the members' profiles. We looked at some of the popular profile communities for indications on profile composition and motivation to contribute: two Dutch sites: Schoolbank (<http://www.schoolbank.nl>) and Schoolpagina (<http://www.schoolpagina.nl>) that allow people to look for former classmates, contact them, and organize get-togethers; some more general purpose sites like Hyves.net (<http://www.hyves.net>), MySpace (<http://myspace.com>), and Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com>), offer a variety of functions such as sharing of photos, music, blogs, etc. in addition to looking for friends, people and classmates; and professional sites, like LinkedIn (<http://www.linkedin.com>), allow people to build a network of former and new colleagues and classmates with as main purpose to further your career options. All these sites have in common that their main aim is to get as many registered people who put their profile online. Therefore registration on all these sites is free. Registration is required to get access to other people's profile and personal information, although some sites offer public access to (parts of) the profile. Not all sites clearly indicate the benefits of

registration (e.g. Hyves); although at most sites the need for registration becomes obvious when trying to access certain areas of the site. MySpace for example greys out areas that are available only to registered users and overlays a message that this area is available for members only, clearly describing the benefits for registered members and providing the entry to the registration process at that spot. Moreover, these sites provide extensive information about the benefits of the membership and importance of the profile and assist in compiling it, often already in the registration process. There is quite some variation in the data requested during the registration process. Facebook seems to have the shortest registration profile, consisting of full name, indication whether you are at school, company, high school or none of the above, email address, password and birthday. The other sites use a more extensive registration profile, distinguishing at least first name and surname, address, country, interests, school, company. Name, email, password are always obligatory fields. After registration, all sites offer the option to update and change the profile. The profile usually contains many more fields and areas than are completed during registration. Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn all allow the user to indicate which part of the profile is public, although they differ in the level of detail and not all fields can be hidden. All sites are very particulate about privacy. Email addresses are verified; usually the registration process involves several email confirmation messages. All sites send out notifications via email about changes to the site, new registrations that may be relevant, and changes on a user's profile. These notifications usually explain the benefit of the new additions or provide hint and tips why expanding your profile is of benefit to yourself and others. LinkedIn provides extensive support and guidance to ensure that people use the profile to the maximum benefit. The site visualizes to which extent the profile is completed and provide clear

hints and tips on how best to add to the profile.

4. Conclusion

This first exploration of online profile sites confirms, as we argued before [11], that effective learning communities depend on social space and characteristics of the members. People should have an identity, should be able to recognise each other and should be able to get to know the other participants. From these sites we learnt the importance of ensuring that learners create a suitable profile.

For Learning Networks, the process of creating a personal profile could be supported by providing a template that contains those required fields that are imperative, such as first name, surname, screen name, email, but also background information about reasons for participating in the network, preferences, interest, competences to be developed, favourite resources and people, and so on.

During the registration process learners should be provided with sufficient information that explains the objective of the various fields and the importance of filling in true data as they may be required, for instance, for the optimal operation of learner support services, for assisting them in finding peers and experts, resources and getting recommendations. After registration, users should be always able to update and expand their profile. This profile should be extensive as possible. The profile page(s) should indicate the more relevant fields, next to the obligatory ones and provide feedback why it is relevant that they complete these.

Privacy is also important as shown by the sites that allow people to decide what personal data is shown to others. Motivating people to provide as much information and more importantly the relevant data in their profile is equally necessary. This should be done by illustrating the benefits, e.g. more accurate

support from the various learning support services. Furthermore, visualization of the user's profile can be used to motivate the users in completing their profiles, but it can also assist users in finding relevant peers. Another way to keep people interested and motivated is by informing the learners of changes to profiles of their friends and contacts. This makes visible the actions of the learner and enhances his recognisability.

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