

# Communities of practice in the digital age. Managing communities with the use of social networking tools.

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## **Abstract**

The context of the digital age, described as “information society”, “network society”, and “networked information economy”, is highly dynamic and thought-provoking. Research efforts (Leadbeater 2008, Shirky 2008) reveal that information or knowledge society gives rise to social collaboration and fosters outburst of community formation, especially with the help of the Web 2.0 tools. These tools, in particular social networking, facilitate knowledge sharing, stimulate information exchange, and foster cross-cultural connections. What becomes possible for communities of practice when they operate online, via social networking sites like Facebook? Do particular communities on Facebook display the characteristics of dispersed, or virtual, communities of practice? This research seeks to conduct a case study of a virtual community of practice (VCoP) on Facebook and explore how this community setup contributes to knowledge sharing and creation of alternative learning paradigms. The exploratory case study focusses on Consciousness Coaching® Academy (CCA) – an international organization that offers professional coach training curriculum.

Nine months of participant observation and semi-structured interviews with VCoP members reveal that community members acknowledge the existence of a CCA community, online as well as offline. Community members testify that they participate online and believe that virtual community will continue its operation in the future. With over 300 members (as of January 2012) – trainers, practicing coaches, and CCA students - this community is not only dispersed geographically, but also shows high levels of socio-cultural heterogeneity. Participant observation reveals that the VCoP is active, with an average of 32 Facebook posts per week. Community members negotiate community content and rules, respond to each other, build relationships, do things together both online and offline (for example, informal face-to-face meetups and coaching practice sessions), and share a repertoire of stories, actions, artefacts, events, concepts, tools, and discourses. The facts above attest that the Facebook group in question displays the traits of a community of practice, as defined by Wenger (1998). The case study will be nearing completion by the time of the conference (April 2012), therefore, a more accurate picture of the VCoP will be obtained, lessons learned will be derived, and recommendations for community development will be formulated.

## **Keywords**

Community of practice, social networking, network society, Web 2.0, knowledge sharing

## **Research context**

The context of the digital age described as “information society”, “network society” and “networked information economy”, is highly dynamic and thought-provoking. Recent research efforts (for example, see Leadbeater 2008, Shirky 2008) reveal that information or knowledge society gives rise to social collaboration and fosters outburst of community formation. Such concepts as crowdsourcing (coined by Jeff Howe), collaborative production (proposed by Clay Shirky), and commons-based peer production (suggested by Yochai Benkler) capture how creative powers of many people are leveraged for launching projects and managing learning initiatives with the help of Web 2.0 tools.

These tools, in particular social networking, facilitate knowledge sharing, stimulate information exchange, and foster cross-cultural connections. What becomes possible for communities of practice when they operate online, via social networking sites like Facebook? Do particular communities on Facebook display the characteristics of dispersed, or virtual, communities of practice? This PhD research seeks to conduct a case study of a virtual community of practice (VCoP) on Facebook to explore how this community setup contributes to knowledge sharing and creation of alternative learning paradigms.

## Research design

Drawing on integral theory (Ken Wilber) and its AQAL (“all levels, all quadrants”) approach, this research addresses the internal side of individual and collective phenomena in virtual community of practice (the upper left - “I” - and the lower left - “We” - quadrants of AQAL). The “I” refers to autoethnographic, the “We” to the ethnographic data obtained in the case study.

This research project employs qualitative research to conduct an exploratory case study of Consciousness Coaching® Academy (CCA) – an international organization that offers professional coach training curriculum. In particular, the case study looks into CCA's virtual community of practice on Facebook. As of January 2012, the VCoP has over 300 members – trainers, practicing coaches, and CCA students. Not only is this community dispersed geographically, it also shows high levels of socio-cultural heterogeneity (participants' age, social and educational background, nationality, level of income, interests, personality etc.).

Data collection strategy combines phenomenological tradition of participant observation with autoethnographic methods. The autoethnographic part of the research will present the author's first-hand experience as an active collaborator and manager of the VCoP. Autoethnographic data will be analyzed and interpreted in combination with ethnographic data, derived from participant observation and semi-structured interviews with VCoP members and managers in Consciousness Coaching® in South Africa, the Netherlands, and India.

## Aims and Objectives

This research seeks to understand how to facilitate virtual community of practice in cross-cultural settings through the use of social networking technologies that Web 2.0 places at our disposal.

## First findings

Nine months of participant observation and in-depth semi-structured interviews with nine VCoP members have revealed the following. All of the interviewees acknowledge the existence of a CCA community, online as well as offline, and testify that they participate online and believe that virtual community will continue its operation in the future. Moreover, four months of observing posting activity on Facebook shows that the VCoP is active, with an average of 32 posts per week. The members of the VCoP negotiate the content and the rules of the community (for example, whether it should become accessible to people outside of CCA), respond to each other, build relationships, do things together both online and offline (for example, they have initiated regular informal face-to-face meetups and coaching practice sessions), and share a repertoire of stories, actions, artefacts, events, concepts, tools, and discourses. The facts above attest that the Facebook group in question displays the traits of a community of practice, as defined by Wenger (1998). The case study will be nearing completion by the time of the conference (April 2012), therefore, a more accurate picture of the VCoP will be obtained, lessons learned will be derived, and recommendations for community development will be formulated.

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