CASE STUDIES ON NEW LEARNING COMMUNITIES: EMERGING RESULTS FROM FIELD ANALYSIS

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SCIENTER – Research and Innovation in Learning

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To investigate the innovation emerging in 12 online communities in pedagogical and organisational terms
Methodology

Desk research
- Identification and selection of communities
- Content analysis
- Interaction analysis

Field research
- Interviews
- Surveys
The Data Collection Toolkit

- Case Study Procedures
- Case Study Work Sheet
- Case Study Observation Sheet
- Output Notes
- Case Study Interview Schedule
- Survey schedule
- Observation of the interactions
- Content analysis
- Outcomes
# Data capturing

## Collaboration of the involved communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Name</th>
<th>Interview Community Manager/Staff</th>
<th>Interview Members</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Supporting material</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TappedIn</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>//</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RezEd</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eTwinning – Time after Time</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>//</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEDDET</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Il Cantiere</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microbiological Forum</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Englishforums</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tudiabetes</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bookcrossing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>216</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Experience Project</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>x</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>GAY.tv</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>488</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muxlim</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- eTwinning - Time after Time
- CEDDET
- TappedIn
- RezEd
- Microbiology Forum
- Englishforums
- TuDiabetes
- Bookcrossing
- GAY.tv
- Muxlim
- Experience Project
- Il Cantiere
The Microbiology Forum allows microbiologists to primarily keep up to date with current requirements and trends, discuss with peers and gain support for new ideas or advice when in need of practical know-how.

• The main aims and objectives are:
  • To create an area where practitioners can “benchmark their practices”, share notes, debate and get advice on matters related to their field.
  • To help practitioners keep up-to-date with new initiatives and thus keep an open mind and facilitate continuous improvement and greater uniformity amongst practices.

Members: 8,372
## Microbiology Forum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main learning features</th>
<th>Main points of interest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to debate and content that members (microbiologists) could not access elsewhere</td>
<td>Professional community funded by corporate sponsors but independent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning happens by “peer exchange, evaluating discussions, trying to be innovative and being part of an active community” (manager Interview)</td>
<td>Highly acknowledged in the field, with the negative effect that some companies are reducing their training budget and encouraging their employees to participate in the community instead.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Benchmarking of ideas and practices (support to theoretician and laboratory professional development)</td>
<td>15 years history, members from 88 countries</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Professional development is coupled with increased self esteem as main outcomes of community participation</td>
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</table>
“Similar information transfer happens at industry seminars, however topics are limited and attendees are sometimes coy about asking questions (they do not want to appear stupid!). Here the topics are not limited and you can ask anything at all and someone usually points at the right direction without prejudice”. (Member interview)

“[…] the community has also given me the opportunity to demonstrate my own capabilities to my colleagues” (Member interview)

“In the professional arena microbiologists are generally low within hierarchy. The fact that through the community they are allowed to grow in stature […] allows them to become, and be viewed, as experts in the subject matter at hand”. (Manager interview)

[Being a member of the community] improve my credibility as a researcher internationally and improve my general personality to be an open-minded person. (Survey reply)

[Being a member of the community] reinforce my technical decisions, get a handle on common or best practices. (Survey reply)
Considerations

- Members join to upgrade professionally and take advantage of a very active community where peer support is the key for success.
- Beside improving their work performance, they claim significant side effects in terms of increased self confidence and self esteem.

- Though there is a precise choice not to have a formal role in training, the value of the debates and contents have made the community highly acknowledged, with positive and negative side effects.
- The community has been alive for 15 years and it is still very active and successful despite the low technological endowment and the inconvenient economic model chosen.
CEDDET offers online courses to LA institutions with the objective to improve their management procedures. Within CEDDET, the Latin American Experts Network on Public Management aims to:

- promote the collaboration between public organizations and the development of common activities in a Latin American context.
- create a permanent forum to share knowledge, and exchange experiences and good practice.
- improve lifelong learning programs
- give the opportunity to CEDDET training courses participants to keep in touch.

Members: 770
## Main learning features

- Formal and informal Learning happening (refresher courses vs Forums).
- The community addresses the professional upgrade needs of a closed group of PA experts and practitioners in a defined and vast area (LA, Spain).
- Learning happens through the sharing of theoretical knowledge and through practice exchange among participants.

## Main points of interest

- Quite “structured” community.
- Closed experts network.
- Cross-cultural collaborative exchange among professionals (Latin America and Spain).
- Community started from the suggestion of participants to on-line courses who wanted to keep in touch and keep on discussing on relevant topics.
- The community fosters cultural awareness and expression.
“I think the most positive aspect of being involved in this community is that I have developed myself professionally. [...] and obviously to learn from all the Latin American experience”
(Member interview)

“The community with the exchange that takes place is unique because this could not be done in a full time classroom course. For this reason the community is just fantastic”.
(Member interview)

“We have never considered ourselves as a social network. Suddenly I believe we have become a social network”
(Manager interview)

“[Being a member of the community] helped me to improve my ability to work in team”.
(Survey reply)
Considerations

- This is a good example of a community where learning is an explicit aim (with refresher courses), but informal learning also emerges through interaction of participants (Forums) leading to practice exchange among LA countries and Spain in the field of Public Administration.

- Contrarily to all other communities, this one has restricted access. Only people who have attended and passed at least one course are invited. Their motivation to join is to keep in touch, share experiences and documents which are relevant to their profession.

- The community was born with socializing aims (keeping in touch after courses) but it then evolved into a learning community.

- Learning outcomes are tracked (refresher courses, Forums, Electronic Journal).
The main aim of the “Il Cantiere” community is “to propose and experiment” a collaborative approach which finds a concrete output in the development and production of videos on free software use. This is a production oriented community, born to experiment with a collaborative approach to production.

Members: 50
Il Cantiere

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Main learning features</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ø The learning happens in the very process of sharing and confronting</td>
<td>Ø Spontaneous self-regulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø Practical knowledge</td>
<td>Ø Potentiality of the collaborative approach</td>
</tr>
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<td>Ø Practical application of innovative theories</td>
<td>Ø Constructive, positive, fruitful atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø Creativity</td>
<td>Ø General satisfaction of all participants.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Ø Digital skills improvement</td>
<td>Ø Strong cooperative spirit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ø Knowledge Co-construction</td>
<td>Ø Flexibility and openness to different viewpoints, approaches, ideas.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Ø Reciprocal respect among participants</td>
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"Individuals feel free to express themselves, their opinions and ideas and become more creative and self-confident when they realize their contribution is actually helpful and appreciated by others” (Manager Interview)

"I joined because I thought that together we could learn from each other and have fun. Later I realized it could also be useful for me to develop new skills and become more creative” (Member Interview)

"[thanks to the involvement] I became more creative, more critical and more digitally skilled (...), I also became aware of the importance of being as clear, correct and neutral as possible” (Member Interview)

“[Being a member of the community] helped me to understand how to generate and develop a creative project” (Survey reply)
Considerations

- This is a production-driven and self-organised community with no explicit learning aims.
- Learning is the result of collaborative production and of the discussion, knowledge and experience sharing involved in this process.
- Despite the community does not have an explicit educational aim, its outputs (videos) are educational.
- Members join to produce collaboratively in the field of free software. Interviews suggest that their personal esteem of the founder had a role in choosing to join.
- According to interview results, collaborative production has supported the development of organisational, technological, communication and social skills.
The main aims and objectives of the GAY.tv community are to:
- Share experiences and information
- Meet people
- Socialize and support each other

The main feature of the community is the gay target audience. The difference between the GAY.tv website community and other gay communities is that it is more like a social network than a dating community.

Members: 131,932
### Main learning features
- Informal, incidental learning
- Knowledge and experiences sharing
- Practical Knowledge (learning to live homosexuality in a positive way)
- Centralized discussion spurs on gay life topics to raise awareness

### Main points of interest
- Community with social network features
- Strong awareness raising role
- Members’ sense of belonging
- Active, positive model for LGBT people
- Majority of lurkers
Quotes

“The main type of benefit is the opportunity to avoid isolation and participate in an environment where the gay lifestyle is presented in the most positive way possible”
(Manager Interview)

“I don’t think we can say we have explicit learning activities in the community ...but it may be true that – through our trivia [game] we involve people on important issues through which – maybe- they can learn something”
(Staff member interview)

“I realize I am learning now that you are making me think about it”
(Member interview)

“ICT allows people to “hide behind the screen”
(Survey reply)

“[Being a member of the community] reassures me: I’ve realized that I’m not alone and that, as many other people, I can live my life normally ☺”
(Survey reply)
Learning is not an explicit aim of this community, it happens unintentionally.
Learning happens through interaction. Members learn to express themselves, to respect other people’s opinions, to help others, to ask for help, to share what they know.
Members join to avoid isolation and to be free to express their identity in a safe space.
Members can discuss on general topics feeling free to express their opinions from a gay perspective.
Survey showed that a relevant number of members, helped by anonymity, have made the first step towards acceptance inside the community.
RezEd can be described as an “expert community” whose participants are committed to explore further the features and potential of virtual worlds for learning. In particular, they pursue the following objectives:

• To share information on state-of-the-art technologies and practices, and related events and conventions (traditional and online)
• To share good practices in the use of virtual worlds for learning purposes
• To refine both conceptual and pedagogical models and practices
• To explore emerging features brought about by the use of virtual worlds for learning, such as ethics and ethical behaviour.

Members: 1447
### RezEd

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“RezEd explicitly pursues the goal of stimulating learning among its members, making the best out of diversity (position, experience, professional background)” (manager interview)</td>
<td>Expert community exploring the potential of virtual worlds for learning. Focus on theory and practice related to virtual worlds</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newcomers are guided to get to know the community</td>
<td>Discussions launched by community animators are tracked, those launched by members are not.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning happens by knowledge and practice sharing and by interaction.</td>
<td>Open community (“to real people and avatars”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lurking (if temporary) is not considered negatively, rather as a way of learning how the community works.</td>
<td>Marketing strategy, but word of mouth is important</td>
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<td>Community used as a platform to start new partnerships and develop one’s network</td>
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"The issue of measuring learning outcomes has not been addressed. The community is an informal learning setting where members are engaged in learning activities out of their willingness and interest. The only possible measure might be their feedback/level of satisfaction once they have applied in their daily activity what they have learnt in the community” (Manager interview)

"it is not a matter of teaching and learning [in the community] but to share knowledge and elaborate together on a stream of thoughts. This is what collaborative learning is about” (Member interview)

"I could not connect with most of these people without distance technologies. I live in an isolated part of the US and am at an institution where the chancellor is actively working to eliminate videogames from campus because of their supposed addictive effect. I need this group just to keep me sane” (Survey reply)

"It is very important that communities are active in the ICT 'world'. This is because they can feed information about themselves and for themselves to develop further. Access information that can be useful to them is another aspect. Another point is that through interacting with ICTs, communities bridges the digital divide. These points are governed by the notion that ICTs are a human rights issue” (Survey reply)
According to the words of the manager *Learning is an explicit goal but happens informally and unintentionally.*

The hierarchical model adopted supports the well functioning of the community but prevents in some cases active participation.

Learning happens mainly through discussions, these can be started with a paper, a podcast, a video.

Members join because they want to be part of a community that does something important and want to learn through participation and for networking and partnership search.
The main goal of the Englishforums is to help people learn English. It is based on the principle of questions and answers, where members of the community both ask the questions and answer each other. This way they try to gather as much information on different aspects of the English language as possible. It is dedicated to learning a language by involving people from all over the world in a community with a shared goal.

Members: 78000
## Main learning features

- Learning (English) is an explicit aim of the community.
- The spill overs from the main activity – learning the language – are: learn how to teach the language; learn how to find information; learn how to use ICT; develop social skills, develop critical thinking.
- These learning outcomes are mainly developed passively.

## Main points of interest

- Culture of the community: policy on loose roles: policy on good manner of discussion; trust the people you trust
- “Military organisation with a hippie attitude” (administrators, moderators, trusted users)
- Most members are lurkers
- Plan to award qualifications for the different levels of language proficiency
“Because this is a virtual environment it has some positive elements which do not exist in real life. For example one can’t see the person he/she is talking to and draw any conclusion about their age or social status. This makes it much easier on moderators and even other users to halt people who are too extreme in their discussions. In a real life a young moderator might have quite a problem gaining authority over an older person in the community”

(Manager interview)

“The main internal problem is misbehaviour of the users. The procedure is that first, the problematic post is discussed among the moderators, and then the person is warned, watched and in worst case scenario banned from the community”

(Member interview)

“It is the ease that allows one to ask questions in an appropriate forum. It is there to access at any time, night or day. I google lot of things I want to know about, which led me to English Forums, and I found lots of posts I could help with answers.

Glad to be able to”

(Survey reply)
Considerations

- Learning happens mainly by making questions and receiving answers on various issues (grammar, expression, pronunciation) concerning the English language.

- Interviewed members state this community differs from the other similar ones as all questions are answered in a short time and answers stay there forever.

- The community plans to provide formal learning certificates.

- Born as a community to support students, it now helps also teachers in better teaching the language and updating/solving doubts.

- There is significant unintentional learning in terms of social and critical skills.

- Members join to learn English and benefit from total flexibility coupled with the development of the culture of discussion and making new friends.
Conclusions

... more questions than answers
Thank you

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