

Informal learning through Internet discussion boards, NGOs and learning supporters

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The Internet offers endless opportunities for communication and sharing information. One means of communication are discussion boards, which many NGOs and local voluntary associations have also learned to exploit in their activities.

Users of a discussion board are not regarded as a group of experts in the traditional sense, regardless of the similarities: in addition to the knowledge acquired through formal education, expertise incorporates informal and experiential ways of knowing, and the application of common sense. It also involves emotional understanding and social skills, which steer the use of the individual's capabilities, problem-solving, communication and cultural interpretation. The current conception of expertise also covers communication and the sharing of knowledge (Linnakylä & Kankaanranta 1999, 222-224). NGOs can use learning supporters to facilitate sharing and learning on their discussion boards.

On-line communities and discussion boards can enable the continuous formation of collective knowledge and skills that are connected with questions members of the community consider important. In an NGO context, the learning that occurs in web-based or other exchanges is not only collective, but also often action-oriented (Fields 2005). On NGO discussion boards the knowledge that is constructed and shared often concerns the running of the organisation. As members of a community can also have personal interests over knowledge production, NGO discussion boards can include discussions in which individual members seek to find solutions to their practical problems, particularly in the field of health. Nevertheless, the specific characteristics of a knowledge-building community include the search for collective meaning and understanding, and the accumulation of knowledge (Heiskanen 2006, 194-195); thus the knowledge emerging from on-line discussions can benefit NGOs, which are inherently collective actors.

Participation requires media literacy and the skill to participate and share information. Generally, anyone with the relevant technical and social skills can join a discussion board, even though NGOs may decide to limit the group of participants to paying members. People who contribute to discussion boards form a network, which in turn can become part of their wider networks (e.g. friends and family). An on-line community can also be defined as a peer-mediated self-help group: members share a similar life-situation or a mutual problem, which they set out to solve or discuss together (Nylund 1996, 194).

Informal (everyday) learning is connected with social interaction, networks and changing spheres of activity; it is also defined as being incidental and linked with the individual's life situation (Aittola 2002, 60-61). The importance of informal learning has increased, for example, along with the increase in the use of information and communications technology and digital media in people's free time. Various social media have also become significant sites for informal learning, as they facilitate active participation and joint activity with other users http://opettajatv.yle.fi/kurssit/Sosiaalinen_media_oppimisen_ja_opetuksen_valineena_osio5_arkioppiminen (24.5.2010).

People who visit discussion boards are probably not likely to engage in a conscious learning process, nor do they aim to reach specific learning goals. Still, when visiting these boards they share their everyday observations, which have often involved some kind of learning. They also read other users' comments and replies and learn new things, albeit often unconsciously. Informal learning can either be goal-oriented or more circumstantial. It leads to the formation of informal information, which users can share on discussion boards. Even though informal knowledge is often experiential in nature, it draws on a wider range of sources than everyday experience. Some of it is based on factual evidence or expert information, which can then be meshed with experience-based knowledge. This kind of knowledge-sharing can in some cases be questionable, and it can result in the spread of misinformation. Many NGOs ask doctors or other associated experts to participate in the discussions to ensure that the discussions are based on proven facts, and also to maintain their reputation as a source of correct knowledge and expertise.

As far as discussion boards are concerned, freedom of speech is often taken to the extreme, as users often use nick names and thus remain anonymous. This can help communication: it is easier to discuss even more delicate issues if one does not have to fear stigmatisation. However, on some boards anonymity can also be problematic if the tone of discussion is inappropriate. This often leads to the moderation of the board and the requirement of participants to register before they can post their comments. Due to the anonymity of discussion boards, members often remain strangers to each other in the traditional sense, but they have forged a bond in the virtual world, and may display high levels of trust towards each other (Wellman & Gulia 2001, 171-186).

Learning supporters and discussion boards. As on-line discussion boards can act as sites for informal learning, a learning supporter can act as a tutor or moderator, extending a more technical role to steering the contents of the discussion, albeit from a distance. On an informal discussion board, the moderator does not necessarily have to act as a leader or active facilitator, as the communication often evolves more informally and is based on the group's natural interaction. The learning supporter can observe the discussion and take part if the tone or contents become inappropriate, or if the discussion needs a boost. Thus, the learning supporter can support and facilitate informal learning on line, but from a distance. The learning supporter can also document useful information shared on the board for further use in the organisation.

For NGOs, discussion boards can prove to be a valuable site for self-help or other forms of informal learning. Especially in cases where people have specific learning or support needs, discussion boards are an excellent channel. Formal learning environments and official sources provide factual information, but people turn to on-line self-help or other peer-mediated groups if their existing networks cannot provide the necessary support or they are too far away. Discussion boards act as sites for sharing experience, knowledge and ideas, and for building up participants' self-esteem. Moderated discussion boards, such as those maintained by an NGO, enable quality control and the use of formal information if the discussion becomes inappropriate. On the other hand, the Internet also hosts a vast number of groups where participants can share harmful information (such as pro-anorexia ones). NGOs should be aware of these sites and aim to improve users' media literacy by offering and promoting more high-quality sites. The internet is part of our everyday reality, and younger people in particular are skilled in searching and sharing information and communicating on line.

NGOs should consider setting up discussion boards and groups to facilitate informal learning, as most of the learning that occurs and accumulates within their realm will help them to achieve their mission and to provide a better service to members and clients. This is also vital if they want to involve younger members. The discussion boards maintained by trustworthy and credible organisations are also trusted and valued as sites for sharing everyday informal information. The learning supporter can have a vital role in facilitating this sharing and the learning that emerges as its consequence.

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