What kind of difficulties may teachers encounter, in the process of constituting a virtual learning community?

Anastasios Matos, Greek Secondary Education, Eleftherias 20, Tirnavos, Greece 40100, anmatos@sch.gr
Vassileios Kollias, University of Thessaly, Glavani 182, Volos, Greece 38221, vkollias@uth.gr

Abstract: We studied a virtual teacher community that had some crucial attributes that could lead to disruption of outdated learning and professional development norms. An analysis of factors that prevented the emergence of a learning community leads us to point to the crucial role of some moderator practices: open negotiation of hidden tensions, the sensitive use of learning opportunities to build personal interest for the subject matter to the community members, the bringing in of experts in a way that respects the members prior contributions

Short description of 'Friktories'

"Friktories" is a virtual teacher community (www.komvos.edu.gr/fryktories/index.php), constructed by the Centre of the Greek Language (C.G.L.), in order to support teachers of Greek language in Universities around the world. These teachers are appointed by the Greek Education Department and are selected among Greek secondary education teachers.

"Friktories" is a special virtual teacher community in three respects: a) the members have much higher academic credentials than the average Greek secondary education teacher   b) the members have strong motivation to collaborate: they are isolated in different countries having to build their own curriculum for teaching Greek as a foreign language (Loughran & Russell, 1997), and c) the virtual community is not mediated by their hierarchical seniors (the Department of Education) but by a research center (C.G.L.), which is also responsible for their initial training through a two week long face to face course prior to their travel.

Research questions

Studying this virtual environment (for 40 months, starting at the beginning of its functioning in 2002), we focused on establishing whether it became a learning community and to furthermore understand: a) why the afore-mentioned propitious circumstances did not lead to a learning community, and b) what was the significance of community coordinators' management of the team for the culture that finally developed.

Development of collaboration and community activity in 'Friktories'

We analyzed in both quantitative and qualitative ways the written exchanges between all communities' members in the collaboration spaces of the environment, following an ethnographical technique to understand community's life (Barab et al., 2004). These collaboration spaces are a) Discussion forums, b) "Teachers of the Greek language", a space allocated for publishing and annotating lesson plans or other passages written by the community members about the characteristics of the Greek studies in their Universities, and c) "Electronic Workshop" a collaboration space, designed by the community mediators (aiming to raise the standards and transform the environment into a learning community) where members interacted with experts in Teaching Greek as a Foreign Language (TGFL). We also analyzed the content of two semi-structured interviews with the two main community's mediators, and studied and analyzed the user interface and the design of the "Friktories" environment.

Our analysis shows that two different types of engagement emerged in the community: a) a "core" of high participation in all three collaboration spaces of the environment and b) a periphery of much less active members. There was no members' shift from one type of engagement to the other during the three years of our study, as we arguably expected (Lave & Wenger, 1994). The active members developed a sense of ownership of the environment and considered "Friktories" the result of their own contributions in teaching resources and in comments.

Although active members took advantage of the community environment and used it as a new tool for reading and writing and incorporating it in their teaching, there wasn't observed joint creation of common lesson plans or exchanges focused on pedagogical issues related to TGFL. Moreover although there were many conflicts and misunderstandings about objectives and norms that emerged, none was discussed openly within the community. Some members express their readiness to "*to put everything on the tapis*", but mediators didn't initiate any kind of open discussion in which those matters would be brought in the foreground. As it was presumable (Navridis, 2005), this blocked much the members' activity, e.g. making comments and giving feedback to other members work. Those silenced matters caused inconvenience and made some members to be silent and not to participate actively in the life of the community, as has been found by other studies too (Edmondson, 1999).

As far as the community's development is concerned, an initial "intensive activity period" (the first 17 months) led to the establishment of a culture characterized by individual contributions. Mediators tried to encourage community members in building stronger relations among them. They also exhorted them to exchange individually made lesson plans, by publishing them in the "Teachers of the Greek language" collaboration space. However the mediators made very limited use of the opportunities offered by the community contributions to bring forth interesting theoretical issues related to the TGFL and making them topics of discussion, supporting thus the development of personal rather than situational motivation for TGFL. Instead, thinking that there was a potential for greater learning and joint production they explicitly called members to participate in "Electronic Workshops", under the guidance of experts, in a form of distant education. The Workshops did not built on prior relevant discussion on the same issues by the members and there has been no discussion on objectives and processes aiming towards members' consensus. This top-down approach (Scardamalia, & Bereiter, 2003) met a lot of members' resistance, overt or covert, and finally faltered.

Discussion

Based on the interaction in the community's forums we noted that there was a strong resistance to deeper collaboration and joint material construction.

This phenomenon is in accordance with an unwillingness to coreflect and codesign with peers which is common in Greek secondary schools. Teachers' professional identity seems to include elements of individuality and lack of peer collaboration in joint resolution of problems. Teachers seem to believe that they will be able to manage their professional challenges acting as individuals (Little, 1990) and this kind of mentality follows them when they enter in the community environment.

Moreover Friktories' members often had different visions about their role as TGFL teachers and had different pedagogical philosophies, issues on which members did not manage to arrive into some form of compromise through conflict management. To a certain extent this is attributed to their fear and hereupon refusal to discuss openly, procedural matters and bring in the front of the stage burning issues (Grossman et al. 2000).

Finally moderators combined a "distant" attitude with respect a) to engaging in learning opportunities for TGFL the contigently appeared in the process b) to training members in collaborative work (communal objectives and efforts, legitimate norms in the community) and c) to bring in the foreground and discusses openly and sincerely every issue that causes anxiety or inconvenience among community members (a change in the community's goals, a raise of its standards e.t.c.) with a top-down teaching format in the workshops.

Our study reveals that individual credentials and an external motivation to seek the help of other members are not enough to create a culture focused on learning and joint production of cultural artifacts. They also need to work on passing from situational interest to personal interest on the content of the community's work through opportunities offered by the issues that come forth.

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