

Social Software for Supporting Interaction in a Community of Practice Dedicated to e-Learning

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INTRODUCTION

In this position paper, the InCorPorate community of practice is presented and the role of a social software in sustaining collaboration and interaction within this community is described.

THE INCORPORATE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

The notion of Community of Practice (CoP) has been widely used and commented in the last decade since the publication of the book “*Communities of practice: learning, meaning and identity*” [1]. A CoP is a group of professionals who share a common interest for a domain or a specific topic. They meet on a regular basis, face-to-face or online, synchronously or not. They share their daily practice, collect useful resources, and generate new insights and understanding of their profession. Through their activities, they formalize tacit knowledge, discuss issues related to their reference domain of activity, incrementally build a ‘shared repertoire’ of methods, resources and vocabulary, and develop their individual professional know-how.

On May 15 2008, a group of e-Learning experts from large enterprises and academic research institutes organized a meeting in Rolle, Switzerland, in order to discuss their experiences with the use of e-Learning in training employees. The meeting involved participants from Nestlé, Sanofi Aventis, France Télécom, MindOnSite, the University of Fribourg as well as the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (EPFL). The meeting was a first step in enabling e-Learning experts to establish communication across their enterprise boundaries, and discuss good e-Learning practices and suitable platforms for coaching employees. Participants agreed that forming a CoP (community of practice) would constitute the best way for experts belonging to different corporations, but facing the same challenges, to collaborate with each other, reify their knowledge and improve their practices. This is how the InCorPorate CoP was created.

As a very young CoP, InCorPorate and its members have specific needs:

- to identify objectives and short activities in order to define its ‘raison d’être’;
- to create a feeling of belonging and make the members aware of the presence of other participants interested in common issues;
- to set up interactions between the members in order to introduce themselves and their personal objectives and competences;
- to share interesting documents and members’ practices regarding the CoP domain of interest.

In order to satisfy those needs, a collaborative application was necessary. The choice fell on a Web 2.0 social software known as eLogbook. The latter is developed at EPFL in the framework of PALETTE, a European research project aiming at facilitating and enhancing individual and organizational learning in Communities of Practice (CoPs). The usage of eLogbook is not confined to any institution or enterprise. It is an open Web 2.0 application, which can be used by individuals and different types of public and private communities. It provides Web 2.0 features widely spread nowadays. It can simultaneously serve as a community representation and management tool, a communication and networking platform, as well as a shared repository of knowledge artifacts [2].

First, with respect to community management, eLogbook allows flexible configurations of membership access rules. Moreover, default configurations help ease the management task in situations where the community itself doesn’t have specific access policies or various predefined roles and associated rights. As an example, the InCoPorate CoP was created as a public CoP, announced to all the eLogbook community. Any registered user is invited to join it. But what is visible to non-members is only the description and title of the CoP. The possibility to access its resources and posting new material is only limited to its members. This

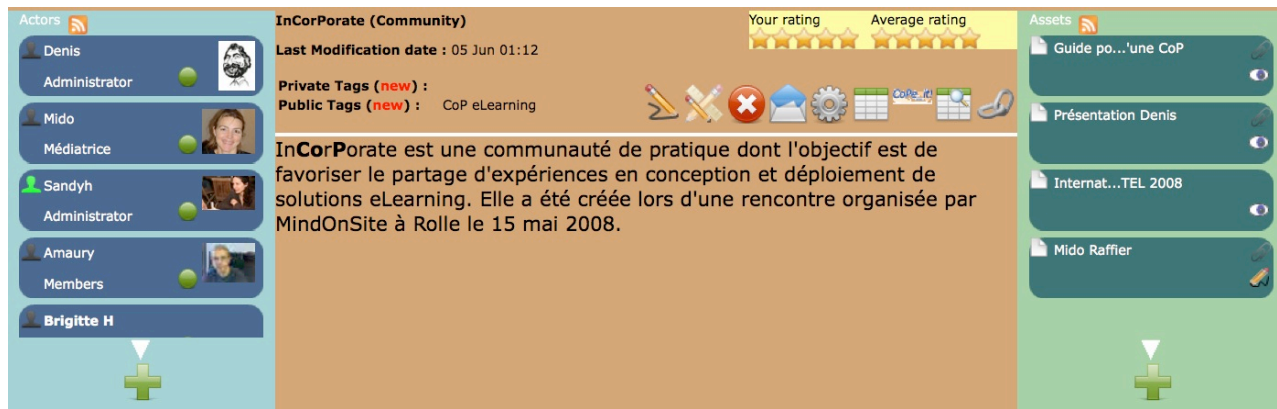


Figure 1: The InCorPorate community in eLogbook

being said, if a new person wishes to join InCorporate, he/she can automatically take a limited role labeled “Candidate”, expressing by this his/her interest to join the CoP. After that, the actual active members are notified of the arrival of this new member, they check his/her profile, and decide accordingly whether it is beneficial to grant this person a stronger role, allowing him/her to check the community resources, annotate them, post new ones and participate in the discussions.

Second, to facilitate social networking, eLogbook allows CoP members to express their professional relations by creating links between each other (i.e. colleagues). They can also enrich each other’s profile and recommend people by tagging them according to their expertise and interests. Furthermore, eLogbook provides synchronous as well as asynchronous communication means in order to facilitate the interaction between individuals sharing common interests.

Third, eLogbook helps manage the community’s knowledge by contextualizing and centralizing the artifacts produced. These artifacts can consist of simple documents, wikis, as well as chat discussions threads, which can also be posted in the community and annotated like any other community resource or asset. Annotation includes tagging, rating, defining semantic relations between knowledge artifacts, as well as leaving comments in each artifact’s wiki page. Moreover, different levels of sharing are possible: artifacts can be kept private, shared within a community or a subgroup of the community or made completely public.

Furthermore, the eLogbook interface has “the look and feel” of trendy social applications used in private spheres to maintain social ties and is augmented with pertinent awareness cues [3]. This is believed to have a positive impact on the software’s acceptability and the users’ active participation. Thanks to the eLogbook awareness services, which could be tuned according to each user preferences, notifications are sent to CoP members when significant events takes place in the workspace. This also

creates contribution incentives and sustains the collaboration between CoPs members. Finally, since eLogbook is a public social software aggregating users from different enterprises, institutions and organisms, the opportunities of discovering individuals, communities and resources relevant to a specific domain of interest are high.

CONCLUSION

There is a strong demand to share practices among e-Learning experts in large enterprises. This paper presents the first experience in setting up a community of practice across institutions. The InCorPorate CoP was created to allow e-Learning experts belonging to several large enterprises and academic research institutes to share their best practices with respect to using e-Learning for training employees. The CoP relies on a dedicated social software for managing its knowledge artifacts and its activities, for social networking and for distant communication. One should underline that, in addition to supporting exchange among e-Learning experts, the introduction of social software paves the way for new e-Learning paradigms in large enterprises, i.e., introducing social software as e-Learning platform and community of practices as e-Learning approach. In the future, researches will be conducted to study the impact of this social software on motivating contribution and sustaining collaboration for the InCorPorate CoP. eLogbook is not dedicated to any particular institution or enterprise, and is not imposed on its users. Individuals and communities freely choose to adopt it. This is a true challenge but is also an important factor in measuring its success. To explain, CoP members can rely on others tools to interact, such as email or Google Groups. This being said, if CoP members start and continue using eLogbook for their different types of interactions, then it means that eLogbook has a high “stickiness” factor. If CoP members, stop using it at some point or express some dissatisfaction, then this means that there is a problem with its usefulness and/or usability. To better assess the

eLogbook acceptability, all events that happen in the workspace are logged, and quantitative studies related to usage patterns and evolution over time will be conducted. Also, qualitative methods will be used and will include interviews and questionnaires.

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