

Training, Information and Empowerment for Newly Arrived Citizens. Possibilities of Online Social Networking in a Non-Profit

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Contribution

Training, Information and Empowerment for Newly Arrived Citizens. Possibilities of Online Social Networking in a Non-Profit Organization.

In recent years many non-profit organizations have found on the Internet new ways of organizing, informing, reporting and participating (Castells, 2003; Duran, 2009; Fundación Chandra, 2009). However, not all non-profit organizations are able to ride the technological wave, especially the smaller ones, which have less resources and a lack of specific guidance in how to use the digital possibilities. In this sense, the universe of Web 2.0 tools provides a rich scenario to address, gradually, the use of collaborative tools for different aims. Each organization is given the capacity to understand these technologies and to adapt them in order to meet their needs by innovative responses.

Jaime Albaiges (2007) argues that ICT should be a factor contributing to a bigger and better performance of each organization's mission, observing some changes in action protocols in the Third Sector Organizations (TSO) (Nos and Games, 2006), as the case presented in this paper, aiding newly arrived citizens to adapt to their new environment and culture and provides opportunities to enlarge their social network.

Using the Web 2.0 technologies, this paper presents the 'XarxaPun TIC' project, conceived to encourage participation through a conversational environment by integrating the use of ICT in the immigrant daily lives as a tool for training, information and communication.

The project is presented as a case study with immigrant population or people at social risk, where technologies acting as connectors of their personal goals and their integration expectations. By the use of a social network, as a friendly and conversational environment, these users can interact, learn and meet their expectations.

Two were the initial objectives: (1) developing user's abilities as well as their personal and occupational skills through the access to new technologies for training and re-training; and (2) promoting and strengthening the existing in-person networks, in order to endorse social cohesion.

“NING” platform was chosen for creating a familiar and participatory environment. This tool, created in 2005 by Marc Andreessen and Gina Bianchini, offers the creation of open or closed networks, where the administrator is able to manage permissions and invitations or modify them according to particular needs, with multiple embed applications for using different communication channels. Also, this tool was chosen because it permits the translation into different languages (Haro, 2008) being these facilities clearly useful for the target population from different backgrounds and cultures.

Fifty-eight immigrants participated in the project by entering their profiles in the Social Network “Xarxa PuntTIC” (57% from 25 to 44 years; 46% come from South America, 58% from the European Union and 18,28% from North Africa and Maghreb).

An increased sense of collaborative community-training between users and the facilitator-educator was generated because of the proximity effect produced by the online social network. Both online and in-person project activities provided support to the socialization process and training on ICT. There were not merely off actions, as learners continue independently enlarging the initial guidance provided by the volunteer trainers. Thus, we are convinced that ICT networks are valuable links to connect people, resources and activities.

Method

Firstly, there was a training activity developed during a three-month period, with sessions of 4 hours per week/group, according to the availability of users and their timetables; also the age, the relationship (parents, friendship) and other issues of compatibility (skills, interests). There were four training stages: (1) Welcoming: profile creation and inviting relatives and friends; (2) Skills Development: posting and communicating with contacts; (3) Interaction: participating in forums and groups; and (4) Dissemination: recommending links and resources of interest and in-person meeting. Secondly, users were interviewed by an online scale regarding limitations and potentials for socializing in virtual networks. Data collected were analyzed according to several categories: type of digital user (interests, needs and background), development of a digital identity, fluency and ease of communication between users, sharing experiences and contents, extension or generalization to similar social networks or inclusion of new partners. Finally, once the users were empowered, the control of the activity in the process of information, communication and support was transferred to the group (Craig and Marjorie, 1995; Erickson and Anderson, 1997).

Expected Outcomes

Among the most important results: users manifest an increase in the fluency and ease of communication between users, who learned to express and convey their ideas properly regardless the new language. A positive digital attitude was observed, specially at the end, aiming at continuing the initiated project autonomously sharing new experiences. Several potentially directions for future research are indicated by the study. Firstly, creation of an online communication environment is an investment in time and attitude, rather than financial. The positive attitude and desire for change is essential. Training is based on the users level of needs, interest and expectation with reliable targets to respond to their intercultural reality. Secondly, community culture needs to be internalized by different members on the social network, so that they can create their digital identity and sense of belonging, by means of a process of content democratization in sharing news and sources. Thirdly, the use of ICT tools in this type of organizations should be applied progressively. Scalability in the protocols institutionalization is necessary. The presence of the Organizations of the Third Sector on the Internet leads to reinforce their public image, as well as their visibility for the users information and involvement.

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