

Networked professional learning

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Title of the presentation: Networked learning for professionals

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Abstract

Networked learning utilises the affordances that the Internet provides to foster learning. Much work has been done in the context of formal, school-based learning (cf. series of Networked Learning Conferences: www.networkedlearningconference.org.uk), but the opportunities for professional learning are only beginning to emerge. The emphasis there is not on formal bouts of training by expert teachers, but on the ability to learn informally, on sharing and creating knowledge while working on the complex and authentic problems that arise in the work context. How does one support such informal learning by professionals, is the key question here. An elaborated instructional design with carefully arranged tasks of increasing complexity, accompanied by bits of information that are made available just in time, won't do, simply because the problems that the design is supposed to address are not known yet. So, no design instances can be created. Conversely, a 'design' that leaves professionals to their own devices is possible, but would fly in the face of any serious designer, whose efforts should consist in making learning more productive. This contribution discusses aspects of peer collaboration, as a means of flexibly and adequately improving the efficiency and effectiveness of knowledge sharing and knowledge creation by networked professionals.

Extended abstract

Aims

Networked learning uses the Internet's affordances to support learning. Originally mainly focused on formal learning [2], more recently it has taken on professional learning [6,7]. Networked learning for professionals is about the ability to informally share and create knowledge [13] while working on complex and authentic problems [3]. To support informal learning by professionals, an elaborated instructional design with carefully arranged tasks of increasing complexity, won't do. But leaving professionals to their own devices hardly makes professional learning productive. We have carried out several studies in an attempt to resolve the instruction predicament just sketched. They all focus on design for peer support. One focuses on question answering by peers [12]; another on the dynamics of ad-hoc, transient communities [5]; a third on the dynamics of coalition formation for innovation [11]; a fourth on systems for recommending content [4]. The study reported here looks into trust as a key factor affecting collaboration [9,10]. Students with experience in online team work indicated which elements in a scheme of trustworthiness antecedents mattered most to them and explained their preference. The study built on the TrustWorthinessANtecedent schema (TWAN), developed in earlier work [8].

Methodology

226 Bachelor students, enrolled in a research course in the Educational Sciences Programme at Ghent University (mean age 18,2; SD 1,85; 93% female), all filled out a questionnaire (built out of tried and tested components). 95% of them had first-hand experience with working in virtual project teams, using such tools as chat, email, texting. Beforehand, the students were asked to imagine they were participants in a European project, which required collaboration in a virtual project team. They were told to form a first impression of their team members' trustworthiness and to select the 10 information elements (out of the TWAN's 152) which in their opinion mattered most. Explanations for their choice were coded and rated by two people (Cohen's Kappa 0.73).

Findings

Respondents selected 106 different elements. Personality, work experience, personal motivation, education, age, availability, being recommended by others, project work experience, language proficiency, photo were the 10 elements most frequently mentioned (by 54% down to 29% of the respondents). Elements such as stress resistance, computer skills, and meeting skills the respondents added to the predefined list of 152 elements. Respondents mentioned competence (40%), commitment (26%), responsibility (17%), availability (12%) and communality (7%) as explanations for their preferences (percentages are relative to the total number of explanations given).

Theoretical and Educational Significance

Quite in general, our research addresses the question of how a situation can be created in which networked professionals can productively collaborate with minimal or no support by experts. Trust matters to such collaboration. The research reported here indicates what aspects of trust matter most in the eyes of experienced, virtual collaborators and why they think so. Obviously, this is only a first step. However, it does show what elements should be part of virtual collaborators' online profiles: the customary photo is useful, but it is much more important to detail task related information. Such information will allow potential collaborators to assess whether it makes sense to get acquainted and to invest in joint knowledge sharing and knowledge creation.

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