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Design of an Online Community

Introduction

Community and technology have united and from this union comes the term *online community*. Wenger (2009) and his coauthors in the book, *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities,* recognized that this union arose because "much technological innovation and development has been stimulated by the needs of communities" and likewise "many of today's technologies and practices are the result of the innovative thinking that first occurred in specific communities of practice" (p. 171). Online communities develop in stages and provide common ground for people with common interests or goals—even the concept of "social presence" is not a new one (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 30). Such communities exist for many reasons, usually to cater to a specific need, perception, or belief. For this assignment, the focus will be on Caribbean technology educators (CTE). Teachers always need support, whether for training, for resources, and for preparation for the classroom environment. This online community is designed for and will cater to such educators. It can be found at the following link http://appinder.wix.com/cett. The purpose of the community is to provide Caribbean educators with information about job opportunities, community updates, teaching news, and professional resources. The impetus for this site rose from a subtopic of the researcher's dissertation, which focuses on professional development for educational technologists. In an attempt to reach teachers in a meaningful way using a community dedicated to them, and as a result of "austere economic events" and limited technological infrastructure within the Caribbean, in many ways this can be a "high quality, cost-effective solution" to providing professional development (Geiman, 2011, p. 15). It could also serve as a resource to unify in one space the engagement of

teaching professionals (especially those living on remote islands) and can be a tool to provide background analytics for future decision-making or research in Caribbean educational technology. In this paper, the researcher will discuss the decision-making process for the design of the community, conduct a comparative analysis between this site and existing sites, and demonstrate through reflection how the finished product has met the objectives of the course.

Design and Methodology

The student researcher chose Wix.com as a website platform to create and design the community. Wix is a free platform and provides a quick and affordable means to create and develop the site. The CTE site is in the beginner stage -- it will not yet feature many pages—no fewer than two, no more than six. The content for this page will have a Caribbean spin and will be intellectually stimulating, informative and engaging for teacher participants. For instance, the site will feature an island feel with images of the sea, the colors of the sunset. Martin (2003) states "color plays a critical part" in how participants "will judge the site because it communicates imagery more efficiently than most people realize" (p. 9). Also, the site will become an avenue to communicate to this audience the value that technology brings to the classroom by either reacting or uplifting their classroom or technology story. Wenger et. al (2009) suggest that content should be easily accessible, and that technology educators should be guided by an expert, someone who is knowledgeable about the field and is able to consult and answer questions (p. 84). The layout will follow the basic elements of web design and the site manager will ensure that all links are fully functional when clicked. The site will be accessible to all teachers because the researcher will seek to add it to the Ministry of Education's homepage, the homepages of public libraries and other major sites that teacher's traffic. A needs assessment or survey will be administered to determine what topics or information the users' want to

experience beyond the initial rollout. Research will have to be undertaken to appropriately inform this decision. Part of the guidance facilitated by the experts that Wenger (2009) and the other authors spoke about also involves solving problems and mentoring professionals to improve teaching outcomes (p. 85).

The showcased information will be cutting-edge, accurate, and relevant for participants and it will correspond with the fifth orientation that focuses on "Access to Expertise" (Wenger, White & Smith, 2012, pp. 84-85). Information that will be available on the site, will include updates on educational apps, latest copyright rulings, emerging technologies, and outreach opportunities. Also, school technology policies or implementation of school technology plans are also possible considerations for discussion forums. On the other hand, Millington in the text *Buzzing communities* (2012) suggested that successful online community building, when done well, should give participants "the feel that they are part of something phenomenal by improving the community platform and participation experience" (p. 1-2). An example of this within the online community will be when more than 50% of responses on the site are geared toward other participant comments (Lytle, 2013). This community will forge a strong relationship with participants using "the eight elements of community management activity: strategy, growth, content, moderation, events & activities, relationships & influence, business integration and user experience" (Millington, 2012, p. 1) as their input and recommendations will be sought and passion for the brand is built.

Decisions for the Design

The design of this community will be focused on developing the site to attract educational technology teachers as members. Millington (2012) suggests "increasing the membership of the community and aim[ing] to convert newcomers into regular participants" (p.

18). While this online community will not begin with any members, the target group of

educational technologists exists already, and they will be the key group to attract when building

the community. Another factor for consideration is the "creation" and "facilitating of content for

the community" (Millington, 2012, p. 18). The designer used the Wix template, and changed the

headings to reflect the content that the researcher wants the participants to view. The new

headings are *Home, Resources, Community Blog, News,* and *Jobs & Training*. Additionally, after

viewing a number of sites such as (*Care Space, Teacher's Connect, The Student Room and

Teacher Square*), it is evident that the design of the online community should focus on more than

just look and feel and should consider why people want to join —what "drives" them states

Millington (2012, p. 18). A major goal of the site will be to share updates about educational

technology, and showcase technology educators to motivate Caribbean Technology Educators.

     Kim (2000) highlighted that, to attract members and keep them coming back, the online

community must serve a clear purpose in the lives of those members, and, in the same vein, must

deliver a satisfactory return on investment for the site manager of the online community. The

organization or layout of the site should be about the interests of the participants. The goal of the

community is to direct participants to appropriate teaching resources, strategies and tools. It will

assist in keeping them current with the latest technology trends; provide opportunities to gain

advice about their careers; and encourage them to reflect on and discuss classroom experiences

or upgrade their teaching qualifications. Another goal of the community is for participants to

share information and find out who are the leaders in the field; it should spread like jam so that

other people want to join the discourse and be part of the unique flavor of the community (Falk

& Drayton, 2009). According to Millington (2012), the site has to be centered on the interests of

members of the community with a laser focus on primary concerns that could range from

workplace dilemmas, classroom teaching, preparing to teach (in the primary, secondary, tertiary classroom); and other topical options such as content-area teaching when associated with technology (p. 8). Getting participants to connect with topics that affect them can promote relationships and gain influence in the online community (Millington, 2012, p. 18). One element that will also be a critical design decision is the development of the blog—this can help significantly improve the participation experience for members as they are able to add content and view other perspectives (Guskey, 2014). For the site manager, a return on investment could be driving the conversation and/or positioning myself as a leader within the educational technology community within the region. Another decision could be to develop brand recognition for the site manager's expertise. It will be necessary to add the relevant plug-ins to ensure that members interact and are able to share information through popular sites such as Twitter, Facebook and to provide a forum to empower the participant to give voice to concerns.

Alternate Designs and Comparison to Existing Sites

The community manager viewed a number of relevant sites to ensure that the design of the site would meet best practices in online community design. Kraut and Resnick (2012) suggests conducting an evaluation of what other site developers have done (Howard, 2010). For example, the TES site (https://community.tes.com/) reports forum statistics, the number of messages posted, the total membership and the username of the newest member. This online community has set themselves apart and arose organically. Using the TES site as a benchmark will be important because while it may not be as aesthetically appealing as other sites viewed, it is a good example of the value that the online community offers for participants. The community can act as friend (by engaging people), recruiter (persuading people to join), enforcer (keeping away the trolls, tracking naughty content, and keeping things clean), or editor (implements the

community strategy to participants so that needs are met) and the entrepreneurial role looks for opportunities to add value to the community (Millington, 2012, p. 31).

Guest posting is a viable option for adding value. Members can share their own perspective or can re-post interesting content from existing sites in order to stimulate discussion and get participants invested in community building. The blog can be used to facilitate discussions and sustain relationships. Millington (2012) suggests that ownership is increased when referral growth tactics are used to encourage members to invite friends. Other "promotional activities that stimulate growth could be outreach to bloggers/magazines" and "hosting events" that promote participant interest, so that this stimulating factor is not left to chance (p. 30). This feature will be added in the future.

Reflections on Objectives

The Caribbean Technology Educators online community will operate as a learning tool for practical training and professional growth for all its members, especially in resource-poor environments. The blog will showcase topics that can improve professional development and provide opportunities for participants to learn from peers and the site manager. The site will also provide the researcher with a technological avenue upon which to network, to keep participants informed, and to contribute by filling a gap among the Caribbean technology teachers' community. At the conclusion of this paper, the researcher feels that the objectives of the course were met and would like to determine and test whether recommendations and suggestions made about designing and managing online communities will also prove true for the Caribbean region of educational technology teachers.

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