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Characteristics of virtual community building in an international context - The Virtual International Women's University (vifu)

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Introduction

In the summer of the year 2000, about 1000 women scholars from over 100 countries (with over 60% coming from African, Asian, Latin-American and Eastern-European countries) accomplished a postgraduate study program offered in six interdisciplinary project areas Body, Water, Information, City, Work, Migration. For these scholars, coming from diverse backgrounds such as researchers in natural or social sciences, engineering, journalism, NGO-activism, community development, governments, health care, etc. the Virtual International Women's University (www.vifu.de) was shaped to provide a medium of support for their work and especially their interactions and exchanges. The vifu server was developed by a team under guidance of Heidi Schelhowe at the Universities of Berlin (Humboldt) and Bremen.

The main goals of the vifu are:

- Establishing international communities for learning, research, networking
- Offering possibilities for situated learning
- Supporting activity-oriented, cooperative, self-organized learning and research
- Relating the global and the local
- Giving an underrepresented group (women from disadvantaged countries) self-determined and self-assured access to technology and to the public

The description and analysis of the vifu project in this article aims at describing virtual women's communities as tools for transferring knowledge and information, as tools for international mentoring and support, and as tools for transferring and acquiring technological competence.

An additional purpose of the article is to introduce a discussion about how the experiences of the Vifu virtual community can serve as implications for the design of internet based communication in a certain intercultural community.

Virtual Communities

Basically, a Virtual Community (VC) is a community like any other community, too. Except that it consists of digital or virtual communication and “meetings” (Rheingold 1993). VCs are digital connections between people through electronic communication. These people feel then that they are part of a group or community where common interests are shared and information is exchanged. This changes the concept and implications of communities being characterized and constrained by location. Traditionally, people belonged to place-based communities. Because a virtual community is no longer place-based, some diverse concepts easily evolve.

Often VCs only meet virtually. This implies for example that written-only communication and anonymity are some of the key concepts. New possibilities for access, control (and especially not being controlled by colleagues, relatives, family, and your local community), knowledge, power, identity, and roles emerge. Usually VCs are organized rather democratically and non-hierarchically among users with common interests who start building a group identity. These communities usually are a pool of important information, a source of mutual support and help in manifold aspects, i.e. there are learning communities, health communities, IT-developer communities, communities for certain professions, self-help communities, communities supporting political activities, etc. As the group meets virtually via the internet, a specific potential for VCs is their internationality and their possibility for diversity of its users. Class, age, location, gender, race may be (but are not always!) smaller barriers to participation than in “real” life.

Despite their interesting potentials in international and intercultural communication, such as bringing people from different cultures and regions together, VCs face a variety of constraints. To name a few: Many international VCs are not truly international but dominated by one region or nation, which is often the USA. Often the communication style of the dominant culture is determining normality and may keep users from other cultures silent. Culture here refers to both geographical cultures as well as gender cultures. Additionally,

many VCs are dominated by a male culture and often internet applications are designed neither culture-sensitively nor gender-sensitively.

Even though VCs may offer potentials for democratization, they are often promoted for economic interests of IT companies, but also commercial interests of online shops. Data security should be considered, as in some communities people's opinions can be made searchable via search engines, which can damage someone's reputation when applying for a job or for a visa to a formerly criticized nation.

Challenges of building virtual communities in an international context

Building and maintaining virtual communities is not so much a matter of technical possibilities but of applying technology appropriately to the needs of diverse users and of initiating social events and communication that keep the community active.

The success of the vifu-project can be related to the principles of consideration of cultural diversity, interaction, participation, transparency.

In regard of the intercultural communication happening via the server, several aspects have to be looked at such as

- the design of the platform which should meet diverse users' habits and interests,
- moderating communication in discussions including intercultural perspectives (private vs. public, silent voices vs. open arguments, etc.)
- offering diverse help and support possibilities
- the mechanisms of including or excluding users by the design of the communication (both verbally and technically)

The challenges that the team had to keep in mind were those of planning a communication environment for an intercultural context. Important aspects that arose were designing the server for a very heterogeneous group and reducing access barriers for these group members. Different communication styles had to be expected and therefore kept in mind when designing the technical structure for communication. Diverse people's needs had to be met without seeing these people and not even knowing them. Users' reactions were important signals but how to understand them correctly when they were not expressed explicitly and when almost all communication is written or lack of written communication? Diverse IT competencies and hardware access had to be assumed.

Suggestions from the vifu development procedure

Resulting from building the vifu platform, some practical suggestions can be summarized for the procedures of ICT design.

The procedures of the technological design should be given more attention.

Putting users first was an important principle. And how can developers learn about their users' preferences?

We found open planning workshops a very helpful way to start development processes. Many potential users and a diverse group of people should be invited to these workshops expressing their needs, ideas, constraints and ways of using the virtual community.

In addition to these, and when f2f workshops are not possible, we found transparency regarding the development process the most important characteristic of the development procedure. All new actions and developments and future plans were communicated to the users in order to give them a chance for intervention, for feedback and comments. This transparent procedure enabled them to intervene when something seemed unappropriate and it established the notion of technology being a manmade tool constructed in a certain environment and culture as opposed to being a stiff non-changeable artefact.

For the design of such applications, it is important to keep in mind the diverse technical infrastructures in different regions. This may mean the reduction of technical high-end features and implementation of efficient low-tech rather than glittery high-tech. Usability and easy-to-find technical support are highly important as many users may not have enormous technical skills. Technical support should be as personal as possible, and it is worthwhile for motivation of many diverse users to think about creative solutions. For example a support aid does not have to be an impersonal email address like "support@webmaster.com" but can be a friendly sentence like: "If you need help with any task or have questions and ideas, please contact Ms. <Name> (including a photo if possible) under the following email address: <name>@vifu.de".

Help buttons are hardly clicked; it seems that women rather ask a person than try out help buttons. However, when the vifu support person sent back a friendly informative e-mail suggesting a specific help link, then the help instructions (hidden behind the help button) were read and used.

Technological competence needs to be raised. A well designed platform offers the possibility of raising users' interest and curiosity in technological issues. And thus the use of the platform for individual benefits may lead to an increase of a user's technological skills.

Beneficial strategies of raising these skills are described as follows.

The availability of a simple community tool such as a mailinglist offers the possibility to always come back to the community with questions.

Diverse, culture-specific strategies should be kept in mind. This can mean diverse concepts of privacy and public communication, they may affect diverse search strategies, or diverse concepts of content structures. When designing the virtual library we offered both a hierarchical structure and a facette classification.¹

Constant attention should be given to reduction of barriers. In vifu, due to technical requirements (and diverse software components) it was necessary to install several different user registration processes for the expert directory/ webmail access, the chat, the information oasis. This proved to be a huge barrier for many participants. If registration is needed than only one should do it – if at all. It does make sense in some contexts to allow as much functionality as possible without any registration.

Face-to-face meetings, even of just some of the participants, help to keep the community spirit alive. Before, during and after f2f-meetings, much higher activity on the server could be observed and new ideas for activity were born.

Sustainability of a web project and virtual community is an important aspect. Many web projects die after funding ends. In order to assure sustainability for the vifu server, community, and network even after funding for server development would end, the development team started handing over more and more administrative rights to users. Some women are responsible for password changes, others for new registrations, someone else administrates the information oasis and organises content, someone else put in data into the virtual library, etc. Thus today in June 2003 the server keeps running well even half a year after funding has ended.

¹ Büschenthal et. al 2003

The list of suggestions mentioned is of course not complete.² But they may offer an inspiration on how a certain philosophy of a technology project can change small technical details with huge benefits. This may influence (hinder or further) the social interactions possible on the platform.

Conclusion

Our understanding is that design and structure can influence users' activity, but even more weight is given to the ways of the technological development *procedures*. We believe that a cooperative and transparent process of technology development with the continuing possibility of user-developer interaction helps to further not only users' activity but also their loyalty and tie to the platform and virtual community. This seems a suitable way to address users from diverse cultural backgrounds and give them a stake in the development of the communication environment and prevent that the environment is designed solely with cultural standards of the developer team.

At the same time technological understanding and skills can be furthered. The principle for this procedure is to transmit the notion of a technology that is alterable and can be adapted to the people rather as opposed to the notion of dumb users who do not understand the logic of "intelligent" technology. "Make the server your own" characterizes this open and transparent collaborative procedure.

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² More information on gender-sensitive design can be found in the manual for Gender Mainstreaming in multimedia projects. (at the moment available in German, but soon also in English) Wiesner et al (2003)

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