

Conference Report:

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Abstract: This report summarizes the efforts of the working group coordinated by the authors titled "Learning Communities around Virtual Forums," linked to the II Online Congress for the Observatory of the Cybersociety: Towards what Knowledge Society? First we analyze the gestation process of the congress and of the previously mentioned working group. Next, we focus on the specific goals of the working group and on the conclusions of the discussion that focused on qualitative methods applied to virtual communities. Basically, the working group attempted to address the following issues: (1) instructional design influencing learning groups in cyberspace; (2) dynamization strategies in communities of practice with a training character; (3) influence of moderators-tutors in the negotiation of meanings; (4) the process of decision making and problem solution in forums; (5) promotion of collaborative learning in forums; (6) communities of learning with an open character (informal) versus closed ones (formal): educational derivations. We also present discussions about qualitative research applied to virtual communities. The special types of interaction in the working group, according to the cyberspace, defined the debates about communication dynamics in the context of virtual communities. Finally, we summarize the conclusions regarding the suitability of the qualitative approach in virtual forum analysis, the required definition of learning communities as a framework to analyze it, and the qualitative strategies centered on the participation and the textual data to be used in interaction process in cyberspace (specially the ethnography, netnography and content analysis).

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1. Context

During the second quarter of 2004, the [Observatory of the Cybersociety](#) called for the "II Online Congress for the Observatory of the Cybersociety: Towards what society of the knowledge?" This call included papers from different knowledge domains to create working groups (WG) that tried to answer to the central question of the congress: towards what society of the knowledge? There was an incredibly high response from the international scientific community; thus allowing for the establishment of 92 WG with a heterogeneous thematic content. [1]

Once WGs were accepted, the congress organization incorporated the coordinators of every WG to manage the operative subjects of the congress in a dynamic working way. One of the first initiatives taken as a result of this collaboration was to restructure the WGs into supra-groups that represented the major thematic areas of the congress. The supra-groups aimed to answer towards "what society of the knowledge" from areas such as psychology, sociology, education, town planning, economy, and cyber-culture. Altogether 10 supra-groups were organized:

1. Toward new ways of learning: consisted of 10 WG
2. Toward new ways of communication: consisted of 8 WG
3. Toward new forms of production: consisted of 4 WG
4. Toward new paradigms of knowledge: consisted of 9 WG
5. Toward new social paradigms: consisted of 11 WG
6. Toward new territories: consisted of 4 WG
7. Toward a critical use of the technology: consisted of 9 WG
8. Toward a new culture: consisted of 8 WG
9. Toward a new democracy: consisted of 8 WG
10. Toward a participative society: consisted of 6 WG

(For a relation of the working groups included in every supra-group, see [Appendix 1](#)). [2]

The community of coordinators-organizers oversaw the event that ultimately had 4,181 participants. Another task was structuring and giving contents to the working areas during the congress. For that, it was decided to support the participation of two types of contributions and the debates that arose from them. Congress members could send communications to the WGs closer to their area of research. Or distinguished researchers were called to defend plenary communications in the fields represented by the supra-groups (see the [Appendix 2](#) for the list of the plenary communications). Every WG had a website where congress members could discuss the contents of the communications through virtual forums. The forums maintained discussions associated with every communication accepted by the WG, and it was also possible to open new discussions not included in the communications. The same system of virtual forums was applied for the discussion of the plenary conferences. Authors could

defend their points of view and submit them to the judgment of the congress members through deferred (asynchronous) textual exchanges. [3]

In addition, during the last days of the event new thematic forums were set in order to carry out an evaluation of the congress by the congress members themselves. The information of those forums is currently being analyzed and it will be the basis in configuring future congress organized by the Observatory of the Cybersociety. [4]

2. Communities of Learning Around Virtual Forums

The WG on "Learning Communities around Virtual Forums" we—the authors of this report—coordinated was placed in the supra-group "Towards new ways of learning?" and it had as a main goal to analyze and discuss the training possibilities of learning communities created in cyberspace. For this task it utilized numerous theoretical approaches:

1. Communities of practice (WENGER, 2001) that, applied to learning communities, take as a preliminary point the social learning theory of BANDURA (1987) and the cultural-historical approach of VYGOTSKY (1978); on a second level it was influenced by the theories of socialization of PARSONS (1968) and the organization theories of SENGE (1993).
2. Adequately structured communities of practice—that, at first, contradicts with the layout of this theory—can be a space of learning (learning communities) adapted to the training processes in cyberspace.
3. Cyberspace makes possible the processes of education and socialization that require specific methodologies, different from the ones developed in the context of face to face instruction. [5]

As an initial reflection, we can consider that the WG itself had been configured as a virtual community of training informally defined; which grouped together 533 interested subjects in the same thematic proposal. [6]

The main idea of the WG was to analyze learning communities configured around asynchronous tools of communication, and more specifically, around virtual forums in cyberspace. However, communications and debates centered on the possibilities of other tools of synchronous communication, as chats or video-conferences via Internet Protocol, were also accepted (see the [Appendix 3](#)). Altogether, there were 8 communications accepted that dealt with aspects of using online working communities for career development, collaborative learning communities, or theorizing about approaches that sustained proposals of online training. Each communication had its own thematic forum where the congress members could discuss ideas presented in the articles. [7]

Besides the thematic forums of the communications, we as the coordinators of the WG, set new conversations with different thematic proposals. The goal of those forums was to deepen the analysis of the tool "virtual forum" with those

groups of individuals who interact using virtual forums with an educational purpose. At the end of the congress the WG gathered 21 forums on many other different subjects. [8]

3. Virtual Communities and Qualitative Analysis

"Virtual Communities and Qualitative Analysis" was the title of the forum of the WG that dealt with qualitative analysis of virtual communities, construed very broadly. The initial questions suggested by the coordinators of the WG were set off from the discussion of MAYANS' book (2002) and GARRIDO's work (2003), intending to obtain answers to the following questions:

1. What other qualitative methodologies, besides ethnography, can be adapted to the analysis of virtual communities?
2. How powerful is the process of content analysis in understanding the dynamics of communication out in a virtual forum?
3. What ethical issues arise from the participation of the investigator in interactions between groups? [9]

From those premises, it was articulated a discussion that had as central spots the following ones:

- *The qualitative approach as an adequate frame for the analysis of virtual forums.* According to the participants in the debate, ethnography is the methodology with the greatest potential for the analysis of "Social life in the Network." In the qualitative frame, ethnography seems to be the most convincing methodology to deal with relational processes, behavior and dynamics in virtual communities. However, choosing a specific way will depend on the purpose and nature of the object of study in all research. In that sense, the differences related to the different typology of virtual communities were exemplified: structured versus unstructured, opened versus closed, formal versus informal, moderated versus un-moderated.
- *Defining virtual communities.* To specify the previous point, the debate continued defining virtual communities with a training character. First of all, learning communities as specific types of virtual communities were defined, mainly using for this purpose the definitions of RHEINGOLD (1994) or SMITH and KOLLOCK (2003). Therefore it was confirmed that online learning communities are also heterogeneous, which requires different ethnographic approaches. The implicit (or non implicit) design of the instruction and the structuring degree are two criteria that allow the description of different types of learning communities. So far these communities represent higher levels of informality and social opening phenomena as the negotiations of meanings and the exchange of roles make the ethnographic approaches become more efficient.
- *The netnography.* As a methodological procedure that aids in the study of the characteristics, practices, and usual opinions of social networking groups on different subjects of interest (generally on business), the netnography may

reduce some of the doubts of ethnography in cyberspace. Until now, this approach has been highly applied in market research, therefore contrasts are lacking in its potential for use in education, sociology, and anthropology. In the same way, other approaches usually linked to the qualitative area (and close to the critical paradigm), as participatory-action research, were also submitted to debate in relation to its possibilities in cyberspace.

- *The most valued analytic techniques were the analyses of contents and speech.* In this way, some items were dealt with as those related to the recovery of textual data contained in the forums; to the different levels of intervention in a virtual forum as a significant structural phenomenon; the interpretation of the chains of messages in the general analysis of a forum; the profiles of the participants and the identification of significant roles in the group.
- *Combination of methodological approaches.* Some ideas were provided on the suitability of including other perspectives to complement the results of the qualitative analyses. In this way, virtual forums follow the logic of networking communication, so that the Analysis of Social Networks (ARS) seems to be a suitable approach, especially considering a spatial representation (geodesic) of the relationships between the members of a virtual community. [10]

4. Discussion

The organizers of this congress value the event as a great success, not only because of the high number of participants, but also for the quality of contributions. Although the congress has yet to become an established annual event, future scientific meetings developed in cyberspace and organized by the [Observatory of the Cybersociety](#) are foreseen. [11]

Given the possibilities of qualitative approaches applied to the analysis of virtual forums, there are some points to discuss:

1. the potential of ethnographic perspectives in the field;
2. new definitions of ethnography or complementary fieldwork (netnography);
3. techniques of analysis of textual contents and analysis of speech in such an inflexible scenario, as it is the one that determines the online tools of communication (synchronous and asynchronous);
4. the ethical implications for those researchers who take part in a process of communicative exchange adopting different roles: e.g., moderating investigator, lurker;
5. the need for complementing qualitative approaches with other paradigmatic approaches to face the relational processes in cyberspace. [12]

Appendix 1: Supra-groups and Work Groups

Toward New Ways of Learning

- Metacognitive Orientation for Training in Companies with Web Environments: Affecting Professional Competence vs. Bureaucracy
- E-Learning: Technologies, Exclusion and Tendencies in Integral Formative Environments
- Learning Communities around Virtual Forums
- Knowledge Society and Reinforcement of Strategies of Comprehensive Reading and Critical Reading of Texts of Technological Convergence and Telematic Interaction
- Dimensions of B-Learning
- Learning with ICT: An Educational Challenge for the XXI Century
- New Media in Education: New Educational Messages?
- University Policies and the Knowledge Society
- Higher Education and Open Distance Education
- Interaction Between ICT and Learning: Advances, Future and Its Role in the Evolution of the Information Society

Toward New Ways of Communication

- Marshall McLuhan: Contribution to the Development of the Information Society
- Rhetoric and Persuasive Communication in the Digital Society
- Weblogs, a New Communication Gender?
- Toward a Society of Dialogue
- Digital Media: From Local to Global
- Thinking About the Media, Thinking Through the Media
- The Utopias of Digital Journalism

Towards New Ways of Production

- Neurowork. Mercantilization of Intangibles in the Direction and Management of People in Lucrative Organizations
- Internet as a Tool for the Management and Marketing: New Forms to Communicate and Make Business
- The Question of Asymmetry between Costs And Benefits in Knowledge Management Projects
- Contributions of the Management Accountability to the So-called "Knowledge Society"

Toward New Knowledge Paradigms

- Intellectual Property Rights and the Internet
- The Technological Agitator in the Knowledge Society
- (In)Materiality of Identity in the Knowledge Society: Theoretical and Methodological Problems
- Digital Technologies and Anthropology—Culture, Knowledge, and Media
- The Impact of ICT in Bureaucracy. From a Bureaucratic Organization to an Organization that Learns and Recognizes Competence
- Ownership of Knowledge: Values, Conflicts, and Social Inequalities in the Knowledge Society
- Freedom of Knowledge
- Knowledge Devices and Tensions in Cyborg Societies
- Shared Knowledge and the Semantic Web

Toward New Social Paradigms

- Youth, Technical Issues and New Forms of Social Participation: The Construction of New Forms of Being Together (Networked and Online in Latin America)
- From Chat Channels to Instant Messaging: Methodological and Socio-Cultural Approaches Toward the Computer Mediated Individualization Processes
- Transition Towards a Society of Information and Knowledge
- Cyber-Psychology. Cognitive and Emotional Events when Online
- Transformations of Power in the Information Era
- Indicators of the Knowledge Society
- Gender, Women, and the Knowledge Society
- E-Merit: The Role of Confidence (Trust), Individual Differences and Equal Opportunities in the Stratification of the Knowledge Society
- Interaction and Relational Quality on the Internet
- Social Networks Analysis and Online Communities: Distribution Lists, Networking Platforms of Peer-To-Peer Networks
- Inclusion, Diversity and Gender Equality: Hispanic NETWORKING for Development

Toward New Territories

- Cyber-Geography: Territories and Territoriality
- Digital Cities: Reviewing the Concepts of City and Citizenship
- Intelligent Digital City
- Counter-Geography of the Knowledge Society

Toward a Critical Use of Technology

- Multi Media Modules
- Publicity: Creativity and Technological Reason
- ICTs: Power and Social Control
- Creative Commons and its New Regulative Art: Towards a Digital Environmentalism on the Internet
- Intellectual Ownership on the Internet: Software Patents
- Modernization Strategies in Local Administration: Knowledge Management and ICTs as Development Engines of a Local E-Culture
- Free Software
- Digital Media and the Analogical Black-Out Of 2012
- Public Information in the Knowledge Society

Toward a New Culture

- Music, Networks and Changes in the Entertainment Industry
- Communication, Society and Production of Sense in the Knowledge Society
- Theoretical Sources of Cyberculture
- Science, Fiction and Postmodernity: Technocultural Metaphors in the New Cybersociety (from "I Robot" to "Matrix")
- The Power of Sight: Audiovisual Technologies in the Utopia of a Transparent Society
- Digital Art
- ICT and Management of Culture
- Catalan Language in the Knowledge Society

Toward a New Democracy

- Digital Divide: Towards a Dual Cybersociety?
- Data Protection in Public Administration
- e-Administration
- Access and Citizen Participation: Possibilities and Influences of a Civil Society
- Reflection and Interchange of Experiences about ICTs as Tools for Inclusion: Electronic Government and Citizen Participation
- Correct Use of Resources to Reduce the Digital Divide in Latin America
- A Knowledge Society Accessible to Everyone

Toward a More Participative Society

- Social Movements and Public Intervention
- Municipal Portals of Town Halls
- Digital Networks: Potentialities of Collective Actions in the XXI Century

- Science, Knowledge Society and Public Opinion: How Do We Create Militant and Critical Attitudes towards Environmental Conservation?
- Pacifists in the Net: New Forms of Political Resistance Towards War
- Knowledge Society and Answers by Spontaneous Social Organizations

Appendix 2: Plenary Conferences

Knowledge: Basic Axle for a Proposal of Indicators of Local Development in the Society of the Information

Susana Finquelievich

Spain in the Society of Information: The International Context

Jose Manuel Cerezo (Foundation Auna)

Is the Internet Entering in the Spanish Enterprise with a Shoehorn?

Sea Monsoriu (Latency, SL)

The Web as Virtuous/Vicious Ecosystem

Alejandro Piscitelli (Educ.ar)

The Technological Transfusion: Old Institutions, New Blood, Renewed Hearts.

Distance Education in Change

Tiberio Feliz Murias (UNED)

The Century of Abundance: Economy, Sociology, and Policy of the Intoxication Era

Jose Cervera (El Mundo—Navegante)

The Government in Practice: The Open Administration of Catalunya

Ignasi Albors—(AOC)

Treatment of Cyber-crimes in the Spanish Organic Law 15/2.003, the Reform of the Criminal Code

Carlos Sánchez Almeida

The Internets in the Face of the Society of the Information

Víctor Domingo (Association of Internautas)

Toward a Society of Innovation

Artur Serra (Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya)

Appendix 3: Accepted Papers for the Working Group "Learning Communities around Virtual Forums"

Design of Collaborative Working Spaces into the Colombia National University of Manizales

Alonso Tamayo Alzate & Johnny Tamayo (Colombia)

Learning into Virtual Environments

Natalia Garzón Rodríguez (Spain)

Virtual Forums to Improve the Teaching Function of Teaching Communities

Angel Emilio Castañeda Hevia & Lidia Ruiz Ortiz (Cuba)

Dynamic Interaction in a Virtual Forum of a Teachers Practice Community Given Online Courses

Juan Pablo Torres Herrera (Mexico)

Competences and Collaborative Learning Development: Rur@lnet, the Offer of the Oviedo University to G9's CVC

Esther Del Moral & Lourdes Villalustre Martínez (Spain)

Teachers' Virtual Community to Training in Learning Informatics Environments

Bettina Steren Dos Santos (Brazil) & María del Pilar Vidal Puga (Spain)

Collaborative Development Processes in Research Projects as a Student Behavior

Alexandre Sousa & Alexandre Miguel Dos Rios Paulo (Portugal)

Learning Communities for Monitors Training

Julieta Mónica Hernández Hernández (Mexico)

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