
Editorial

Margriet Simmerling and Piet Kommers*

Department MCO
Building Cubicus
University of Twente
Room B102b, P.O. Box 217
7500AE Enschede, The Netherlands
E-mail: margriet@helix5.nl
E-mail: kommers@edte.utwente.nl
*Corresponding author

Biographical notes: Margriet Simmerling is a Peer Consultant/Senior Manager for R&D projects in the areas of E-society and Web-Based Communities. She participates in the Advisory Board for the Dutch Ministry of Economical Affairs and is active as an Expert and Reviewer for the European Commission. She designs and moderates e-learning modules and workshops in the domain of education technology and psychology at the PhD level.

Piet Kommers is an Associate Professor at the University of Twente, the Netherlands. His research concerns the way web-based communities develop. He is the initiator of the yearly conference *Web-based Communities* and chairs the conference *e-Society*. Currently, he is a member of the EU project 'Study on the social impact of ICT', which attempts to find sensitive indicators for the effects of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Its underlying question is whether ICT is just a catalytic trigger that speeds up the processes that are already inherent to a certain application domain or makes its own contribution to the orientation of societal sectors such as education, healthcare and community life.

This issue of the IJWBC presents the theme 'Freedom and Boundaries'.

The authors discuss web-based communities from three perspectives: the theoretical research approach, the development/testing of new tools and the case study of existing web-based communities and their opportunities. Two intriguing questions constantly emerge:

- 1 Why are some communities successful and why are other initiatives doomed to fail?
- 2 Are we well aware of the decisive factors? Can we learn from the experiences of others? Especially with regard to the factors that decide upon the mechanisms underlying blogging:
 - Why do people blog?
 - How can technology support the blogger?
 - What is the effect of blogging?
 - What is the best tool to support bloggers?

The naive apprehension of web-based communities still is its progress from static into dynamic websites where people can 'find other persons'. It is a misconception similar to typifying a house as a solid connection of bricks. A second misconception is to see web-based communities as 'virtual', lacking the real chemistry between real persons. The underlying premise is that human relationships gather more momentum as they manifest in more rich experiences and more visual, auditive, tactile and haptic senses. More decisive for the real effectiveness of mediated communities is its real-life consequence; leisure, learning, medical or professional career arguments decide upon the incentives for joining web-based communities.

In the article 'Determinants for success in online learning communities', Lin and Vassar address the challenge of building an online learning community. They present a research framework of the determinants that identify the motivating forces required to build online learning communities. The focus is on self-governance and the way it can be measured. Three motivational dimensions are identified and 11 hypotheses in which self-efficacy and human-technological expectations play a crucial role are outlined. In particular, in the case of web-based learning communities, the need to develop critical thinking skills in the social domain is mentioned. Quite obvious as one of the criteria is how learners can maintain themselves in future virtual teams. In summary, here, the community is both method and target skill.

The second article 'Sharing information across community portals with FOAFRealm' by Grzonkowski *et al.*, addresses an obvious problem with community portals. They propose a solution and describe the FOAFRealm and D-FOAF implementations, as well as three other components based on the FOAFRealm infrastructure. Typical for the chosen community-portal metaphor is the agora; an (open) space extrapolation of 'portal' anyway. The merit of the described project is a fresh view on linking social bookmarking with labelling and retrieving multidimensional attributes of image collections like photographs. Social semantic filtering is applied in the MultiBeeBrowse system.

Thirdly, 'An exploratory study of the functionality and business potential of a virtual community for artists in Greece' by Kardaras *et al.* investigates the potential of Virtual Communities (VCs) as a business model. In the conclusion, they list the functionalities grouped in five categories. As an example of an 'Independent Artists Network', they describe www.Artooth.com. The study is organised in such a way that it could be repeated in other art sectors. The results may be useful for practitioners and researchers designing VCs for the arts.

Blogging is popular. Some people benefit from sharing their experiences, sorrows and problems with each other. Can a collection of blogs play a role in a community and perhaps even be a community? Pashnyak and Dennen address this question in the article 'Seeking an online community for professional development discourse: a content analysis of teachers' blogs'. The article examines a sample of blogs written by K-12 teachers in the USA. It is a spontaneously developed blog-based community. The research focuses on the issues around community aspects, professional development and the tone and sense of connection in an informal blogging environment. The undertone of this article is that it is not particularly difficult to improve the learning between teachers. The novelty effect of media on educationalists may be opportunistic; any potential trigger of teachers' curiosity should be welcomed twice or thrice.

In line with this research are the next two articles.

Garrot *et al.* describe in 'Supporting a virtual community of tutors in experience capitalising' the design of a tool to give teachers the opportunity to develop a community. The aim is to support the new role of teachers. Two different interfaces are tested and as a result of the research, a new prototype is under development.

The other article is written by Petersen *et al.* In 'Sense of community among mobile language learners: can blogs support this?', the authors monitor a group of students in Norway studying the French language. The blog is an official tool with a clear goal: those students who have the opportunity to travel to France should communicate with their classmates in Norway and share with them the excitement of being in France and using the language in real life.

The interesting outcome of the experiment is that although the students believed it was a good idea, the blog was hardly used. Based on the evaluation, new plugins will be implemented.

Users want to participate in web-based communities using their mobile equipment. Kawash introduces a new interface and presents two prototype implementations. In his article 'A member interface approach to a mobile virtual community of practice', he proposes a complementary approach to the one described in the IJWBC special issue on mobile virtual communities (IJWBC Vol. 3, No. 4).

Finally, the article 'Fractures between an online and offline community (and the ethical responses)' raises important pointers for future research into web-based communities. Green and Bonniface demonstrate in their case study that miscommunication in the online world has the potential to deliver devastating impacts in real life.

Again, we are proud to offer you 8 articles coming more than 20 experts in computer science, business administration and instructional systems. They share with you a variety of research angles and new ideas. With research from three different continents describing the state-of-the-art in eight different countries, this issue focuses again on the international developments around web-based communities.

These provided exemplars will encourage you to refocus on reality-seeking humans rather than exuberant media modalities; it is the person-to-person value. Web-based communities have in common that the personal (and not the mediation) factor is at stake.