

DO ICT CREATE ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTAL IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY? : NAVEL GAZING

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*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Abstract:

Most universities have access to information communication technologies (ICT) that enable the professoriate to interact beyond hallway discussions and faculty meetings. Professors have access to ICT for conducting their duties: research, instruction and service. Our challenge is how to use ICT to improve our practices and create identity and social community as an academic departmental community (administration, faculty, students, staff and alumni). It is often said with respect to technology that "if we build, it they will come," or as university administration hopes: "if we supply them, they will be used." Are ICT being used?, how are they being used?, and are they being taking full advantage of to enhance our real communities? This paper aims to address these questions, and discuss the use of ICT to support research, instruction and service, but more specifically, the use of ICT to enhance a sense of identity and community across all members of a department. The authors draw from their observations of having had academic exchanges in different university social science departments in North America, Western Europe and Latin America. Although different versions of hardware and software, languages, university systems and extent of economic development exist in university departments across the Atlantic, the authors' combined experiences and observations revealed very similar limited uses of ICT in academic departments. Web based community strategies are proposed in the form of best practices and represented in a model to assist in the strengthening of academic departmental identity and community as a whole. As a result learning and intellectual engagement becomes a two-way communication process and decision-making is informed by the participation from the department as a whole, whether physically, virtually or both. In an economically, politically and technologically integrated, information-intensive world, the proposed democratic web based academic departmental community model takes into account that local practices need to respond to global needs and challenges.

KEYWORDS

Academic Department Identity and Community, University, Web Based Community, ICT

Article:

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, I was working late at the office when the phone rang. I heard a colleague's desperate voice on the other side of the line. He said: "I am very sorry, I am blocked! I can't generate my grade sheets and they're due in a couple of hours. Can you help me, please???" Of course, I did. I got my documentation and walked him through the document creation process until we finished setting up the grade sheet for the first student group. During the process we dealt with extraneous matters like choosing the right printer on the network and changing the paper tray for the corresponding type of paper for this job. Happy with the first group done, he wanted to continue (by telephone) to the next one, but I stopped him in order to apply the teaching strategy of showing how to fish instead of doing the fishing. Before leaving him to his own devices I pointed out where the help documentation was and the University grading guidelines. I wished him well and promised to be right by the phone in case any new troubles arose.

Computer technology has become an integral part of academic life as demonstrated in the above example of course management. Our challenge is how to fully tap Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) to improve our practices and create identity and social community as an academic department. It is often assumed that “if we build, it they will come,” or as university administration hopes: “if we supply them, they will be used.” These assumptions beg certain questions: are ICT being used?, how are they being used?, and are they being taking full advantage of to improve our real communities? This paper aims to address these questions, and discuss the use of ICT to support research, instruction and service, but more specifically, the use of ICT to enhance a sense of identity and community across all members of a university academic department. The authors draw from their observations of having had academic exchanges in different university social science departments in North America, Western Europe and Latin America. Based on these experiences the authors have identified salient uses as well as under utilization of ICT, and thereby propose an academic department web based community model.

2. ICT USE IN AN ACADEMIC DEPARTMENT

Most universities have access to information communication technologies (ICT), which enable the professoriate to continue to engage beyond the hallway discussions and faculty meetings. Professors have access to ICT for conducting their duties: research, instruction and service. How are they using them to move beyond physical interactions to improve their work? The authors have encountered different versions of hardware and software, languages, university systems and extent of economic development in university departments, albeit our combined experiences and observations revealed very similar limited uses of ICT in academic departments. The above scenario is not so unusual and many of us could imagine ourselves playing out either one of the two roles and relying on older technology to learn newer technology. In as much as the assistance needed was obtained and the task was achieved, what would have happened if the colleague had not been within a no/low-cost phone call? This example reveals that:

- people do not know how to fully use the technology at their disposal, and
- people tend to rely on older technology and accustomed methods (low technology or face-to-face) to communicate.

These challenges are faced by all members of an academic community in an Information Society; for example, staff to remain productive in their respective supportive roles, students to learn and conduct research, administration in decision-making, and alumni in staying updated and supporting their alma mater. Strategies need to be implemented to support each other’s learning and use of ICT to assist a departmental community in its mission.

2.1 From Replacing to Enhancing Communication

With basic ICT tools in place, could our professor’s grading dilemma have been solved using only ICT? Both counterparts had e-mail and chat but did not have “push” technology (software that helps deliver or push information directly to someone’s desktop) nor the ability to directly access each other’s computer. Using e-mail would have been time-consuming as a message would need to be received before a response could be typed and sent back, and clarification of any message would also need to wait. Text-chat would also slow down the process as typing is again required. Voice chat resembles hands-free telephony as it allows two-way communication while computer and other activities can be performed simultaneously as a conversation. Video chat can additionally provide a visual image of each correspondent’s actions, which, depending on the activity, can add or be of no consequence to the interaction. However, voice chat and video chat require additional equipment, headset or microphone & speaker, and web camera, respectively. In short, we have access to technology but are at the same time limited by it because we do not know how to fully harness it. Technology organizes, entertains, and fascinates, but it is also associated with changes (learning anew, changing ways of performing tasks, etc.), and when not fully utilized, it can also lead to depersonalization and isolation.

As more technology is introduced into our daily lives and in the confines of the “workplace,” its use is a matter of job survival. ICT is forcing people to adjust to a rapid and continuously-changing environment. In academia

older staff and faculty did not anticipate the fast pace of the learning curve and some are not functioning effectively and feel disenfranchised. In many cases, the necessary training has not been made available as new technologies are introduced. Our experiences or interactions with ICT have either spurred us to try out advanced functions and new product releases or forced us to create mental walls so we only use them for the most basic of activities, such as e-mail. For faculty and staff who are keeping up with technology we still tend to use it to replace information transmission rather than enhance communication during traditional physical interactions, such as faculty and committee meetings. However, for teaching ICT have been applied to both replace and enhance course delivery and management, as appropriate to an institution's goals. Students who are overcoming the digital divide are using ICT, including cellular telephony, in studying and research.

It is clear that much technology (hardware and software) is becoming inexpensive and freely available and in some cases easier to use. However, many parts of the world and even early adopters, such as universities, still experience a digital divide, either in access to hardware and software by faculty and students, in access to relevant content as it is still predominantly Anglo-American, in bandwidth and running electricity as a result of infrastructure which affects cost and availability, or in use/training as technology use is not always self-evident and new versions and formats are constantly being introduced. Other factors that present continuous challenges when using ICT are issues of security and authenticity of information and many ethical issues (e.g., piracy, plagiarism, intellectual freedom, privacy, etc.) Regardless of one's technological accessibility (current generation or earlier generations), ICT are necessary for effective functioning of large departments and departmental members who collaborate (research or academic programs) or share support services beyond a physical location.

2.2 Developing a WBC Academic Department: Virtual and/or Physical Worlds

ICT in the workplace is changing the way many people do their work. Because of the speed and possibilities of communicating using the new ICT tools, it is likely that in the future more people will be able to work from home. Furthermore, the development of web communities as a complementary form to the original real/physical one will enable faculty to collaborate more in research, retrieve information more effectively, teach beyond our immediate physical reach and reach quicker consensus as a result of extensive virtual discussion prior to decision making. Communication 24/7 can either create a stronger identity and a more cohesive community among administration, faculty, staff, students and alumni of a department or due to the ease of belonging virtually to many communities, it can decrease our sense of belonging and loyalty to any one group/organization.

Like many companies and organizations, academic departments should have developed strong Web Based Communities (WBC) supporting in a complementary way our regular activities as we have been among the first in most countries to have ICT access and have incorporated it to facilitate some of our tasks. For a WBC that fully utilizes ICT tools, that has access to community information, and has well established practices and policies, instead of spending time and money traveling to physical on-site meetings, its members can now communicate with each other by going to video conference centers or telecenters or they can connect from their own computers at their offices, homes, or other site with Internet connection. We use e-mail instead of paper notes and letters, but we have not improved on established practices, like taking a coffee break with others in the department or building a database or webpage from the independent contributions of members of an academic department or university unit.

Preece (2000) defined online communities as parallel to community building, thus, as a way to shape social interaction and provide a common foundation for connectedness among its members. They represent people who interact to satisfy their own needs or roles, have a shared purpose, act within a determined set of policies and guidelines, and are supported by a "computer system" which facilitates interaction, information sharing, and social connectedness (Gregory & Austin, 2004). Researchers study these online or virtual communities (OC or VC) that have only been created in cyberspace or are extensions of "real" communities.

In reality, most physical communities co-exist with the creation of their own online or web presence. WBC could be considered as an infrastructure that coexists with the physical community in a temporary or permanent way. It can provide a virtual place as a copy of the real place coexisting in an intelligent way for its members and citizens to participate in meetings and contribute ideas that would otherwise be impossible to attend physically. It could be supposed that it's a duty for faculty to attend all the meetings and for that reason none want to provide a virtual parallel infrastructure that supports/enhances the physical one, but times have changed and none can attend all the important things that are taking place around them locally or globally. Thus, our discussion of a web based academic department community recognizes the co-existence of a physical community, as well as the inclusion of all its membership: administration, faculty, staff, students and alumni. Communication between these departmental sub-groups, whether physical or virtual, has been hierarchical. The proposed model of a web based departmental academic community will open up the channels of communication, based on democracy of community participation.

2.3 Applying ITC for Civic Participation, Education, Work and Social Life

Miller (1998) suggested that the purpose of our lifelong pursuit of education should be to learn how to sift through mountains of facts and ideas to find the few that are most useful and worth knowing; we need to be wisdom seekers, not information vessels. All of us need easier and cheaper access to relevant information in order to minimize the Opportunity Cost. Economists think of cost as the value of sacrificed opportunities and time as the most important element. Indeed, this philosophy requires a firm commitment to learning how to think critically. Sharing information and creating an intellectual commons are difficult challenges to manage in a traditional physical community and in our increasing globalized society. It takes more and more time and money to collect and identify relevant information in an information society, and furthermore, to filter it to one's community for its well-being and survival.

The limitation of physical encounters and meetings among delegates and representatives seem a bad practice in our actual democracies and globalized economy. Even if democracy is literally government "by the people" through elected officials and representatives, the main thrust is not just to emphasize representation when participation by civic society is feasible with the use of ICT. In the case of a university or academic department, we could apply the same rules as for regular democratic government. Lobbies and some groups don't necessarily represent the whole community and its ideas, so participation should be always welcomed in whatever way ICT can now make possible. We want to reduce the alienation of participants and to keep the face-to-face encounters when possible. Digital platforms can provide their users with more open, multi-access and less hierarchical forms of engagement with each other while enabling them to keep the same roles as in physical/real life in decision-making and information sharing, while adding more voices in pre-decision deliberations (a non-hierarchical democratic process).

2.4 Observations of ICT Use and WBC in Academic Departments

Experience in academic social science departments across the Atlantic revealed the following patterns of limited ICT use:

- Communication software:
 - ✓ Electronic distribution lists to send announcements, reports or other information (organizational, intellectual, instructional, social, etc.) of interest to the academic department members. Membership on these lists may be organized by group (all university, all department, faculty only, student only, etc.) or by purpose (academic information, social or miscellaneous issues, etc.). In some cases these lists also function as a form of asynchronous discussion.
 - ✓ Bulletin boards for announcements or instructional purposes
 - ✓ E-mail for communication with selected others in the department.
 - ✓ Text or voice chat and discussion for instructional purposes and in some cases for research
- Non-communication Software (e.g., presentation, spreadsheet, word processing, statistics, publishing, database management, internet browser, web design, etc.) for teaching, research and service duties as needed
- Computer supported cooperative work (groupware) may be used within an institution but has tended to be more quickly adopted by research groups which are geographically distant

These ICT uses in academic departments are reflected in web based communities created by sub-groups of an academic department, and thus far, not encountered to create a WBC of the department as a whole. The research literature describes ICT use by online knowledge communities (OKCs), communities of practice (CoP) and educational virtual communities (EVCs). OKCs are virtual communities that “are meeting places for continuing professional development, a social network of members, who are organized by making use of an online meeting place, having an adequate group culture and are involved in appropriate information processes to develop and exploit a certain knowledge domain.” (de Vries and Kommers, 2004; p. 115) Faculty, students and research associates can constitute an OKC within a department, can open it up to non- departmental members, or can join one created outside the department (regionally, nationally or internationally). Communities of Practice (CoP) are “social learning systems, where the learning is very much grounded in practice.” (Bell and Heinze, 2004; p. 22) They are further defined by being “an emergent rather than organized form of interaction, characterized by the mutual engagement of its members, the negotiation of a joint enterprise, and the creation of a shared repertoire.” (Bell and Heinze, 2004; p. 22) DeSanctis (2003) demarcates them as voluntary rather than formal and as having no economic interests, except to advance the interests of their membership. In universities, CoP can be constituted by any member of the academic community. The prevalence has been for CoP to be created from research groups but they can be as readily established to address the interests of other academic department sub-communities, such as student groups, community service learning groups and departmental task forces. Educational Virtual Communities (EVCs), on the other hand, tend to be created by formal organization. The authority is created by an institution, such as a university, which establishes the governance structure and the constitution of its membership (e.g., students in a course or program of study), and provides for the computer-mediated communication (CMC) technology and digital library resources that create the virtual learning environment (VLE). EVC are often the first type WBC to be established in universities as the offering of distance education to increase educational access has become a priority and is made feasible by ICT.

Universities, and to an extent many academic departments, have a sense of identity and community, especially those of smaller size or with a longstanding community culture, which on a website are expressed through design (e.g., logo, colors), and information on traditions (e.g., lecture series, homecoming, etc.), programs (e.g., first Asian American Studies Department) and research (e.g., breast cancer research, center on poverty and the law). However, an academic department website that provides uni-directional, static information serves to reinforce identity, it is not as effective in *building* community. This is best done through a web portal that facilitates open democratic participation and contributions by members. The proposed academic department WBC model offers a digital environment for the engagement and multidirectional communication by not only faculty and administration, but also by students, staff and alumni.

3. BUILDING A MODEL OF ICT USE IN ACADEMIC DEPARTMENTS

Community members should have access to bulletin boards, forums, conferences, virtual meetings, among other forms of web based departmental engagement and information sharing. In short, participation is participation but it should no longer be localized. The creation of an academic commons that allows physical and/or virtual participation can only serve to strengthen a sense of identity, community and ownership within the department as well as when members represent the department in extra-departmental interactions.

3.1 ICT Use in a Web Based Academic Departmental Community

The proposed uses of ICT (see Table 1) by a university academic community creates a WBC that is open to the whole community (administration, faculty, staff, students and alumni) and any of its sub-communities. In order to create departmental identity and cohesion, the department as a whole should set up a virtual/web departmental commons and modes of exchange so information is shared and added to by all and communication can take place with/amongst each other. However, departmental sub-groups should also have the opportunity to interact and address their own specific sub-interests because they also have to perform their own particular duties respective of their particular role in the departmental community.

Table 1. Academic Department Web Based Community Model

Note: This model includes the elements that demarcate an academic department as a WBC that can exist only in cyberspace or co-exist in physical mode. The features of a co-existing physical community include diverse means of communication (face-to-face [verbal and non-verbal], telephony, fax, written, typescript, etc.), print and non-print resources, human resources, etc. All members of the academic community may participate in all aspects of the WBC, with exceptions stipulated by the community.

LEGEND:

OKC_x = Online Knowledge Community

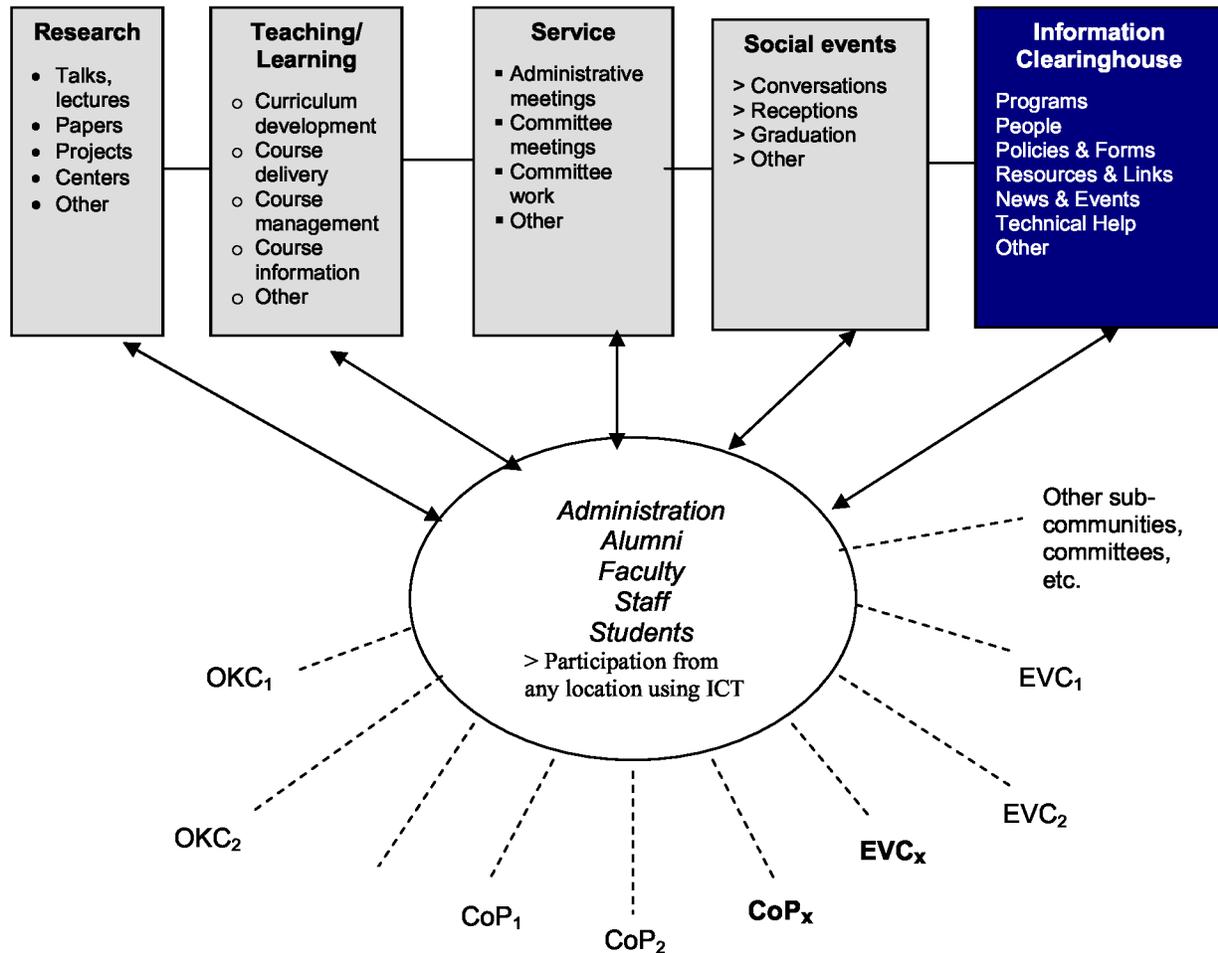
CoP_x = Community of Practice

EVC_x = Educational Virtual Community

----- = interaction within or outside academic department

□ = *Modes of communication:* electronic bulletin board (one-stop information commons), electronic lists (information alert service), chat (real-time synchronous communication), discussion (asynchronous threaded communication) and e-mail (targeted communication)

■ = *Modes of communication:* wiki (open, community-wide contributions and updates) and read-only information (official descriptions and documents)



An academic department web based community (virtual or co-existing with its physical community) facilitates the following types of activities:

- Increase participation at faculty meetings by enabling those who can join the meeting virtually to do so. It will increase ownership of departmental concerns and directions.
- Create a departmental communication mechanism (e.g., discussion list, bulleting board, chat group, etc.) which enables (1) discussion of issues before they are voted on at faculty meetings, (2) airing out (reading, posting, discussing) internal and external problems concerning the community, and (3) sharing perspectives on intellectual or research issues in the field
- Create a closed departmental digital archives for depositing and retrieving documents of interest to the departmental community
- Stream talks, conferences and other forms of public intellectual discourse over the web “live” and also be recorded and available for subsequent access
- Support voluntary and formal participation by individuals or sub-groups
- Create a departmental community web portal/commons for public (extra-departmental) access that is maintained by democratic participation and contribution
- Offer on-going training and personal assistance so unfamiliarity with ICT use should not be an excuse for non-access/participation and ineffective work/learning practices

The concept of a participatory departmental community web portal/commons is based on the “wiki” concept. As demonstrated in the creation and maintenance of the *Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia*.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page, a Wili or wili (pronounced "wicky" or "weky" or "viki"; *Wiki wiki* comes from the Hawaiian term for "quick" or "super-fast") is a website (or other hypertext document collection) that allows any user to add content, as on an Internet forum, but also allows that content to be edited by any other user. In this case, the contributor or Wikipedian would be limited to a departmental community member. Although, one might think that this form of open participation may lead to chaos and abuse, it is based on the principle of connectedness amongst its members, and the expectation that contributions will be authentic, authoritative and respectful of its members. In some cases, there may be instances of fun, but in all, the community should be able to monitor itself to ensure equity and civility in participation. To guide the means of engagement, a governance structure may be set up or it can be germinate as an organic process.

4. CONCLUSION

In an information society we find ourselves mired in information and cannot see the forest for the trees. However, to perform effectively and lead our daily lives, we need to be able to have the right information at the right time. To deal with the overabundance of information, we can use ICT to organize, reconfigure, filter and communicate/distribute relevant and needed information. Now with this technology quite readily available in academic communities we cannot simply continue to function in the same manner in our traditional physical communities. Moreover, in an economically, politically and technologically integrated world, local practices have to change according to the new global needs and possibilities. The proposed WBC model should assist in the strengthening of academic departmental identity and community as a whole. Teaching/learning, intellectual engagement, work and social life need to be a two-way communication process and decision-making needs to be informed by the participation from the department as a whole. Going back to our professor who needed computer assistance, he will have more forms of assistance and can tap the full range of ICT tools at his disposal. However, from a holistic perspective the creation of academic identity and building of community, as proposed by the academic department WBC model, can't succeed unless it builds on the existing esprit de corps or departmental members take ownership of creating community culture using ICT. These uses include those that are mandatory, such as generating/submitting electronic grades, or those that are voluntary, such as collegial chats and non-faculty input on curriculum development.

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