

Blogademe: How a group of academics formed and normed an online community of practice

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This paper examines a blog-based community of academics that developed during summer 2004 and has experienced continuous growth. It seeks to explain how true community – community that extends beyond a mere place of congregation or co-writing – has developed among this collection of blogs.

Keywords blogging, community of practice

1. Introduction and Background

Blogs have become a popular form of self-publishing on the Web, but a perhaps unanticipated outcome of blogging has been the spontaneous development of informal communities [1]. One such community is Blogademe (so named by a blogger called kfluff [2]), a collection of interlinked blogs written by people in higher education, including faculty, graduate students, and administrators. Blogademe has evolved into an informal network of participants who are bound by mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise; their interactions fit Wenger's [3] description of trajectories within a community of practice. This paper presents the results of an ongoing longitudinal study of these blogs, exploring factors that have enabled the formation of community and providing insight into (a) how the community formed; (b) norms within this community of practice; and (c) why these bloggers engage in this practice.

The use of blogs in higher education has taken a variety of forms. Blogs written by academics have been used to discuss subject matter areas, to exchange ideas on teaching practices, and to support class communication. Within classes, students have been asked to blog as a class activity. Undergraduate students are known for social networking via online forums such as myspace, which include blogs. None of these are particularly surprising uses of the technology. And then there is Blogademe.

The Blogademe blogs have become a forum in which the authors and commenters discuss issues affecting academic life, integrating both personal and professional elements of their daily lived experiences. In a sense, it has become an informal support network in which friendship and advice are freely exchanged. The bloggers represent diverse subject matter areas and types of institutions, but as a common thread they share experiences in teaching, research, service, and trying to juggle personal and professional lives. Through the blogs, a picture of academic life that is not otherwise commonly seen has emerged. Graduate students learn what it might be like to be in a tenure-track position, and tenure-track faculty learn about what is on the road ahead. Most bloggers readily share their thoughts on topics such as teaching innovations, dealing with challenging students, fighting writer's blocks, workload organization, and new tools and technologies. Issues are much more freely raised and discussed in this forum than they are in face-to-face academic environments.

2. Methods

2.1 Participants and Data Collection Methods

Participants are bloggers located in North America who claim an academic affiliation, whether as student, faculty, or staff. All are bloggers and/or commenters within a loosely-formed community of prac-

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tice. This community is defined by (a) a collection of interlinked blogs and (b) participation via posting and commenting. Twenty-four participants were interviewed, selected because they represent the diversity of the community. The participants include 21 women and 3 men, all but one of whom blogs under a pseudonym. They range from an undergraduate who mostly lurks on graduate student and faculty blogs, to graduate students, post-docs, faculty, and even a dean. Additionally 150 blogs, including those written by the participants who were interviewed, were read regularly.

This naturalistic study used two primary sources of data, the blogs themselves and interviews with bloggers. Blog posts and comments were monitored via bloglines (www.bloglines.com) and technorati (www.technorati.com). Field notes were kept by the researcher via an additional blog, noting trends among the blogs and interviews as they occurred. Noteworthy posts and comments were downloaded and saved in case they would later become deleted or edited.

Interviews were conducted with bloggers via telephone and skype (www.skype.com) during summer and fall 2007. Individual bloggers were contacted via email and asked if they would be willing to be interviewed. The participation rate for interviews has been 100%, with no bloggers refusing a request. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol that asked bloggers to discuss how they got involved with blogging; their blogging identity; their blogging habits (e.g., posting, reading, commenting, linking); and ways in which blogging has impacted their lives.

2.2 Data Analysis Methods

Data were analyzed thematically using two frameworks, following the model set by Josefsson [4] in her study of patients' online communities. The first framework looked for evidence of community structure [5], defined as external context, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes, and participant characteristics. The second framework is the four categories of social dynamics [4], forms of expression, identity, relationships, and behavioural norms. Both of these frameworks represent complex, interrelated elements that, when found together, are indicative of community. Triangulation was done by data collection method and participant, and findings were consistently confirmatory except in instances that reflect individual differences and preferences.

3. Findings and Discussion

It was during July 2004 that a small group of bloggers, including Bitch Ph.D., Dr. Crazy, and New Kid on the Hallway, independently started new blogs. Within a week of starting their blogs, they had found each other, creating links to each other and commenting. Although this might not be considered community formation in a formal sense, it is clear that there were some critical connections made then. As the rest of the summer passed, the core group grew larger, with additions coming from two main sources: (1) existing bloggers who found and linked to this community; and (2) new bloggers who stumbled up on the community. The existing bloggers generally were part of other blog-based communities (e.g., knitting bloggers, mommy bloggers) or had been blogging alone or among a small group of real life friends.

As time passed, the number of bloggers and commenters grew. Commenters often were encouraged to start their own blogs, thus further expanding the community. Community growth was facilitated by bloggers inviting real-life friends to read and blog; articles about academic bloggers that appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* [6]; and links to blogs from *Inside Higher Education* [7].

3.1 External Context, Group Purposes and Participant Characteristics

The conditions were ripe for the formation of an online community, given that the bloggers of Blogademe were already active Internet users and fully comfortable and sophisticated with text-based communication. The external context here is directly intertwined with group purposes. Many of the bloggers were at pivotal points in their lives and careers at the time they began (e.g., finishing a dissertation, starting a new job, moving, working toward tenure), and their decision to blog is evidence of some-

thing they were looking for – either something missing from everyday life or of which they wanted more. That something varies by blogger, but common reasons for beginning include the desire to interact with people who have similar experiences; to read about experiences that are on the road ahead (e.g., graduate students reading about tenure-track life); to help alleviate the isolation caused by moving for an academic job; to get advice and validation; and to write and reflect on life in general. Many bloggers began by reading others' blogs, but did not necessarily anticipate an audience for their own.

Within the Blogademe community, female bloggers tend to outnumber men. Most of the bloggers are graduate students and assistant professors, but also participating are undergraduates, adjuncts, lecturers, tenured professors, administrators, former academics, and people who are contemplating higher education – along with assorted friends and family members, too. Although at times the community has discussed its own composition and pondered why there seem to be more women engaged in this particular form and forum, no conclusive reasons have been reached.

3.2 Temporal Structure and System Infrastructure

Blogging is a flexible form of communication for many academics. It allows one to interact with others without the need to reply to every message as is the case with email. The efficiency of blogging appeals to many academics [8]; some even use it as a way of keeping family and friends informed about their lives. The technology, at its most basic level, is simple and easy to use. Blogger is the most common tool used in Blogademe, with typepad a distant second. Most bloggers develop increasingly sophisticated technical skills as their blogs evolve, often with the assistance of other community members.

3.3 Forms of Expression

Although types of posts vary widely within this community [9], certain trends and unique forms have emerged. For example, on days when bloggers have many small things to say, but not one cohesive post, they tend to create a "Random Bullets of Crap" entry. Other forms include open letters or secret messages, in which the blogger tells a story about a recent experience through writing as if the post were a letter to someone else involved in that experience; to do lists, which are used for public encouragement and accountability; self-destructing posts, which include temporary disclosure of more personal information that will shortly be deleted in order to preserve pseudonymity; and writing about lost items in the hopes that they will shortly turn up. Memes also travel from blog to blog, with some becoming community staples (e.g., Friday pet blogging and Friday random shuffle). These memes are not substantive in nature, although some are a mechanism for sharing a fair amount of personal details. They serve as a unifying act when many bloggers take part. A more formalized form of expression that has developed is the blog carnival. Posts that have been tagged or identified as teaching-related ones are collected and linked to from a master blog post which serves as a central location for identifying posts with teaching ideas, triumphs, struggles, and trends.

3.4 Identity

Many of the bloggers use pseudonyms, not only for themselves but for their universities, friends and families, and where they live. People outside the community have often confused the use of pseudonyms with the desire to be anonymous. These bloggers most definitely are not anonymous, and under their pseudonyms they share a great deal of information about certain aspects of their professional and personal lives.

The rationale for using a pseudonym varies, as does the degree to which individuals go to conceal their identities. Some bloggers give few details about their geographic regions or work, whereas others refer to themselves as "crappily pseudonymous" (Kate, Interview, 9/11/06) or state that "pseudonyms are not impervious" (Mel, Interview, 10/28/06). In making these statements, they acknowledge that their pseudonyms do not truly hide their real-life identities. "Googleability" is the main issue of concern for

most bloggers; they do not want others – especially colleagues and students – to be able to enter their names into a search engine and find the blog. Others who are in difficult work situations or on the job market tend to be particularly protective of identifying details.

Within the community there are norms that have developed around identity. If a blogger pieces together another's identity, typically nothing is said unless the initial blogger has accidentally slipped unintended identifying information on blog and should be warned. This norm seems to be centered on not creating cause for alarm, and it is considered a generally benign form of internet sleuthing because the intent is merely to satisfy one's curiosity. However, many bloggers indicated that while they at first would try to figure out who people were, this practice became less interesting with time.

Real-life identities are shared in behind-the-scenes interactions. It is not unusual for bloggers to take conversations off-blog, via email or instant messenger. Most bloggers post a pseudonymous email address on their blog to facilitate such contacts. Identities typically are shared with other bloggers or long-time commenters. The sharing off real-life identity is dependent on trust; a random email from an unknown person generally will not result in such disclosure.

3.5 Relationships

Blogrolls, located in the sidebar of a blog, initially were community indicators of the blogs one reads, but as more and more bloggers have moved to RSS-based systems such as bloglines (www.bloglines.com) many blogrolls have not been regularly updated. Also, bloggers vary in the level of discrimination used when adding people to blogrolls; some rolls may include anyone who gives a reciprocal link whereas others may be a selective group. A review of comments on a given blog is a far better indicator of relationships among bloggers.

Relationships within the community develop based on shared interests and experiences. There are clusters of sub-communities, such as psychology graduate students, women in science, and medievalists. These clusters are not exclusive groups, but rather indicate areas in which connections have been made. Off-blog communications are fairly common among those who have developed deeper relationships, allowing blog and real-life identities to blend and more personal details to be shared than in would be in a public forum.

3.6 Behavioural Norms

The community is a generally friendly and supportive group, and membership is an informal but nonetheless important endeavour. Being accepted by the community is not as simple as just creating a blog and making a few links, nor is it a formal process. However, there are ways in which one becomes known to the community, gets the acceptance of fellow bloggers, and then is accepted by them. One way is for a newcomer to begin reading blogs, then gradually start commenting on them, and finally start one's own blog. Initial comments generally need to be supportive and sharing in nature; although disagreements are accepted within the community, when they come from unknown people who do not have their own blogs they are not well-received. If the newcomer chooses to start a blog first, then she might create a blogroll with links to other blogs. Again, comments are a powerful mechanism for gaining acceptance, and other bloggers will click through links to read a commenter's blog.

3.7 Community of Practice

Blogademe has developed into a group that readily fits Wenger's [3] definition of a community of practice. Those who are involved share common interests and work together to further their own professional development. Further, the various positions played by bloggers and commenters fit the parts of the community of practice trajectory; lurkers and commenters may be considered legitimate peripheral participants, whereas new bloggers are inbound and more experienced ones are insiders.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The term community has been used frequently to describe online interactions, with varied practical meanings. Kling [10] criticizes casual use of the term community to describe places people congregate and communicate online. He suggests that to truly have community there must be more elements at play than just communication in a shared venue, such as trust and risk. Within Blogademe, there is evidence of both taking risks and developing trust, the two in many ways being intertwined acts. The member-bloggers treat each other with a great deal of respect, generally avoiding conflict even when disagreements may arise. As they get to know each other, they tend to develop a sense of trust that mutual confidentiality will be maintained, and real-life identities frequently are shared in off-blog interactions. This trust somewhat defies claims that pseudonyms lend an air of anonymity through which names may readily be changed and participants lack accountability [11]. Even when pseudonyms change and blogs move (a relatively infrequent event), one does not start with a fresh identity. Prior identity is tied to the formation of the new one, and community members are aware of the change which typically marks some form of personal event (e.g., graduation, new job, new outlook) or the need for greater or lesser privacy.

In my own experiences as a researcher it became clear that my inquiry-oriented requests and actions were accepted because I am a trusted member of the community. Various bloggers who I interviewed indicated receiving similar requests and said that they granted mine because they “know” me and because I have established a reputation as someone who is trustworthy.

In closing, it is clear that community, albeit loosely structured and informally maintained, has developed in this corner of the Internet. It arose from the various needs of some academics to participate in a community of practice that is focused on academic life rather than research and teaching areas. Blogademe serves as an example of organic virtual community development, and although intentional community replication and development based on Blogademe likely would not be successful, insights may be gained from these bloggers as to the types of struggles that academics readily experience on the job and the types of mentoring and supports that they would find helpful in their local, face-to-face settings.

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