



Becoming a blogger: Trajectories, norms, and activities in a community of practice



Vanessa P. Dennen*

Florida State University, USA

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ABSTRACT

This naturalistic study of a blogging community examines the norms and activities that govern the establishment of a community of practice. Activity theory and communities of practice are used as frameworks to guide the analysis of this study. Six brief cases are used to illustrate the paths of blogging newcomers, as they shift from peripheral to inbound paths, and in some cases to insider positions within the community. Findings show that the community values newcomer practices such as engaging in legitimate peripheral participation via observation of norms. Further, although the community is welcoming of newcomers, the burden is on the newcomer to learn about and interact appropriately within the community.

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1. Introduction

Blogging, at first glance, may seem like an individual activity, but for many bloggers it is anything but that. They often begin writing online out of the desire to communicate with an audience and may not persist in maintaining a blog if they fail to find the desired audience. However, many others find more than an audience and become fully engaged members of online communities. Bloggers who are active within a community of blogs are simultaneously author (on their own blog) and audience (on others' blogs). Their fellow community members include other bloggers as well as individuals who merely read and/or comment on blogs without authoring their own.

Starting a blog is quite easy for most people, but gaining an audience and becoming an acknowledged member of a community is more complex. The relationship between blog author and audience may vary in its interactivity and intensity, but we might say that community has formed when certain criteria, such as trust, reciprocity, and ongoing relationships (Ellonen, Kosonen, & Henttonen, 2007; Kling & Courtright, 2003) are present. Bloggers often communicate their community affiliations via sidebar links and share a number of communication, interaction, and identity norms with their community (Dennen, 2009). Following these norms provides a key mean of gaining acceptance within a blogging community.

This study is situated in a loosely bound community of practice consisting of bloggers who identify primarily as academics (e.g.,

graduate students, professors, researchers, and administrators). This community emerged during 2004, and has sustained since that time with a revolving membership that reflects individual discovery of the network and desire or personal need to engage with both blogging and a community. Typically, the community discusses a variety of topics, both professional and personal (Dennen & Pashnyak, 2008), although members tend to not substantively discuss the topic of their research, having other professional outlets for such discourse. Blogging in this genre does not occur without risk; academic bloggers may be distrusted in the workplace (for discussion of this distrust of bloggers in academic environments, see Tribble, 2005a, 2005b), although this distrust may be lessening as blogs have become increasingly mainstream.

2. Background

The practice of seeking support in online environments has been well established for over a decade (Drentea & Moren-Cross, 2005; Josefsson, 2005; Orgad, 2005b; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Rodgers & Chen, 2005). Blogs merely provide a specific platform – one in which individuals may control their own spaces – through which support communities can be established. Homogeneity is common among blogging networks (Kumar, Novak, Raghavan, & Tomkins, 2004), which have been established for sharing around hobbies, lifestyles, and conditions as diverse as knitting (Minahan & Cox, 2007), science (Kouper, 2010), parenting (Morrison, 2011), and Deafness (Hamill & Stein, 2011).

Although many blogs are authored by individual people, those individuals tend to build a community around themselves and their blogs. That community may take multiple forms. In some

* Address: Instructional Systems, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306-4453, USA. Tel.: +1 850 644 8783; fax: +1 850 644 8776.

E-mail address: vdennen@fsu.edu

instances, it centers on a single blog; the blogger leads the community and readers and commenters engage with the blogger and each other. In other instances, community may encompass many blogs, with bloggers who read and comment on each other's virtual platforms, generally aggregated by mutual interest and, over time, friendship and familiarity.

Boundaries are more difficult to define in this second type of community. For each individual blogger, their sense of who belongs and who does not may differ, based on awareness, interest, and prior interaction. There are no membership criteria, nor do they all use a common blogging platform. However, they connect their blogs via hyperlinks (e.g., sidebar blogrolls, comment signatures) and enabling and providing each other with indicators of mutual awareness.

Blogs can be simultaneously public and private spaces (Lieber, 2010), particularly for diaristic bloggers. Personal stories are shared via a public platform with the intent of finding likeminded others, not to broadcast them to the world. To that end, factors such as interpersonal trust and sense of belonging to a community are important contributors to the desire to share with others in an online environment (Tseng & Kuo, 2010). Still, for some the use of pseudonyms and informal nature of blog posts challenges their trustworthiness (Goldstein, 2009). However, one study found that blog credibility is not predicated on presenting an authentic identity (Chesney & Su, 2010). Further, pseudonymous identities that are performed consistently over time are perceived as trustworthy (Dennen, 2009). It is truly anonymous and one-off presentations that offer greater room for identity skepticism.

3. Frameworks

In this study, two analytic frameworks were used to examine how bloggers begin their practice and become members of a blogging community: Communities of Practice (CoP) (Wenger, 1998), and Activity Theory (Engeström, 2000, 2001). Communities of practice are groups of people bound by a shared practice who interact and learn from each other. In contrast with class-based groups, learning may not be their primary reason for interacting, but it occurs as they share their experiences and seek assistance from others in the group. Within the analysis, both Wenger's (1998) definitions of the CoP trajectories (e.g., peripheral, inbound, or insider) as well as his descriptions of the key elements of a community of practice (mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and shared repertoire) are used to identify and classify new bloggers' actions (e.g., development of identity, cultivation of audience) and paths (e.g., from reader to commenter and from new blogger to key blogger) within the community.

Activity Theory is grounded in the work of Vygotsky (1978) and Leont'ev (1978). It takes a cultural-historical approach to examining human activity, noting that an activity system, and thus human outcomes, represents the mediated interactions of individuals and groups along with elements such as rules and signs (Engeström, 2001). Activity Systems Analysis, a method for examining these types of mediated interactions, built on Activity Theory and thoroughly described by Yamagata Lynch (2010), is used in this study to further explicate the way in which new bloggers engage with the interrelated elements of the community (e.g., rules, tools) with both a specific object in mind as well as other, unintended outcomes in some instances.

4. Approach and research questions

This study uses an ethnographic approach to elucidate the manner in which one joins and becomes an established member of a blogging community. The specific research questions guiding this naturalistic case study are:

- How do individuals become bloggers within a community setting?
- What role does community play in their decision to blog?
- How do they come to identify themselves as insiders within a blogging community?
- How do insiders influence and react to the actions of peripheral and inbound members?

5. Method

5.1. Participants and data sources

The primary participants in this study are forty individuals involved in a blogging community as bloggers ($n = 34$), commenters ($n = 3$), lurkers ($n = 2$), or characters ($n = 1$). Table 1 fully explains the key roles people may play within a blogging community. Passersby were not included because although their possible presence affects the community they are not members of the community. Participants were recruited via email, using the address provided on their blogs or in their profiles. In the case of the lurkers and character, each made their presence known on a blog via a comment at one point, enabling recruitment.

Within the larger blogging community, there were more than 200 blogs, and countless commenters, only some of whom were bloggers themselves. Purposive sampling was used after prolonged observation of the blogging community, with a focus on both typical cases and maximum variation (Patton, 1990). Typical cases were bloggers whose key demographics reflect the majority of the blogging population (e.g., women, graduate students, assistant professors). Individuals filling other roles, as well as non-typical bloggers (e.g., men, administrators), were included in the sample to help determine if their blogging experiences were similar or different.

Each individual was interviewed via Skype or telephone, and the interviews were recorded. Additionally, the participants' blogs were observed over an extended period of time; specific length of time varied by blog and ranged from two to five years. Field notes were based on these observations, and posts identified as relevant were archived for future reference since blog archives may be volatile, (hidden, edited or deleted). Relevant posts were those that focused substantively on the bloggers' shared practice or that provided evidence of their trajectories and relationships within the community.

This study was conducted with the approval of Florida State University's Human Subject Committee and all interview participants provided their informed consent to participate. There were no incentives provided to participants, and no one who was asked to participate declined. Observations included other bloggers and commenters who interacted publicly with the primary participants. Those other bloggers and commenters helped develop a richer understanding of the phenomenon via their posts and comments. However, the reporting of individual details and quotes in this study is limited to those participants who signed informed consent forms, and all names used here are pseudonyms developed explicitly for this study.

5.2. Data analysis

The data analysis focused on determining the key ways in which individuals both became aware of the community and began their blogging practices, following them up to the point where they were clearly headed toward being insiders within the community. The first phase of analysis examined the community as a whole, seeking to identify the key elements of this community of practice as defined by Wenger (1998), mutual engagement, joint enterprise,

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