




LEARNING IN PERSONAL NETWORKS: COLLABORATIVE KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION IN VIRTUAL FORUMS

What are we interested in?

- innovative practices performed in four types of virtual forums: collaborative virtual workspaces, social networking software, newsgroups and weblogs;
- particular role of information exchange and social networking as key learning practices.

What are our conceptual tools?

Complex ecologies of informal personal networks

Project networks	Sociality networks	Connectivity networks
Social logic	Social logic	Social logic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ task-related relationships; ■ professional relationships; ■ weak ties. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ career-oriented relationships; ■ professional and private relationships; ■ weak ties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ theme-oriented relationships; ■ professional and private relationships; ■ weak ties.
Empirical focus	Empirical focus	Empirical focus
Microsoft and SAP project networks (enhance project-related information exchange).	Social networking software LinkedIn and Spoke (systemize the maintenance and extension of personal networks).	Microsoft and SAP technical support newsgroups and developer weblogs (dedicated to technical information on Microsoft and SAP software applications).
		

What are our hypotheses?

■ The strategic use of contacts can electronically be enhanced by means of social networking software in professional networking. When using contacts in this systemized form, the number of contacts in the individual network rises, whereas the nature of ties becomes less personal and reliable.

■ Although virtual co-presence is an important factor in rationalizing work flow processes and significantly reduces the time spent for face-to-face encounters, it cannot completely substitute face-to-face meetings in building up reliable ties. We assume face-to-face and virtual co-presence to mutually reinforce each other in terms of intensifying personal relations.

■ Sociality and connectivity networks as self-organized and informal webs can only to a certain degree be integrated into formal processes of knowledge production. Strategic instrumentalization will undermine the innovative potential which essentially relies on the informality of knowledge production in informal networks.

■ We assume that sociality and connectivity networks provide potential actor constellations for future project networks. Members of project networks on their part will strategically use sociality and connectivity networks for extending their know-whom and know-how.

■ The personal learning networks overlap and mutually support each other, but we assume that they also generate tensions and conflicts. In particular members will maintain sociality and connectivity networks at the expense of project networks.

Which methods do we apply?

Analyses of collaborative workspace, newsgroup and weblog interactions

We analyze content and interaction structures of collaborative workspace, newsgroup and weblog interactions. Interaction data are either displayed or archived on the websites of the respective virtual forums. We conduct quantitative and qualitative social network analyses of posting behavior and posted contents.

Co-present virtual group discussions

We conduct co-present virtual group discussions with members of collaborative virtual workspaces by using the chat tool (Microsoft and SAP workspaces).

Analysis of personal networks and request chains

In addition to quantitative and qualitative analyses of the personal networks of social networking software users, our analyses target request chains between LinkedIn and Spoke users.

Explorative interviews

with LinkedIn, Microsoft, SAP and Spoke experts, and members of sociality and connectivity networks.

Which contributions do we expect from our research?

Moving beyond the 'community of practice'

- challenging the coherence, homogeneity and persistence of the notion of 'communities';
- challenging the function of communities as complements of formal organization.

Appreciating innovation in weak-tie networks

- exploring the creative potential of weak-tie networks of different intensities;
- exploring learning dynamics that are defined by rivalry, tension and dissonance.

From single technology to ecologies of virtual forums

- highlighting network members' simultaneous involvement in various virtual forums, and cross-forum movements regarding the observed interaction technologies;
- highlighting social and organizational potentials resulting from the interdependent usage patterns of the focus technologies.