Improving Personal Home Pages to Support Learning as Becoming and Belonging

Jochen Rick, Mark Guzdial
College of Computing / GVU Center, Georgia Institute of Technology
Tel: 404-385-1105, Fax: 404-894-2970
Email: {jochen.rick, guzdial}@cc.gatech.edu

Abstract: Recently, *communities of practice* has emerged as a useful framework to go beyond the cognitive view of learning to incorporate the social (or situated) aspects of learning (Wenger, 1998). It moves us beyond learning as doing and sense making and into learning as becoming and belonging. In order to study issues of becoming and belonging, we must focus on the role of identity in the community of practice. If we are interested in tools that reify that identity, then personal home pages, particularly for the academic community of practice, are a natural place to look. To better understand how current home pages meet the needs of the community of practice members and how these needs can better be served, we conducted a survey to assess the state of current home pages, in a potentially informative community of practice.

Towards Collaborative Personal Home Pages

While (in theory) personal home pages have the potential to support an academic community of practice by enabling learning as becoming and belonging, (in practice) conventional personal home pages fail to serve this function for the vast majority of users. Browsing home pages, we find that few academicians use their personal home page for more than posting contact information and distributing publications. While this kind of use does have a significant role in academia, it only scratches the surface of the potential that personal home pages can have. To go beyond this surface level, we must understand the reasons why the use of personal home pages normally stops there and what the potential is when users get beyond this surface. In particular, from a research perspective, it is important to be able to link those reasons to issues of becoming and belonging. We believe that the reasons for the lack of adoption are largely technological—they are based on the features of current tools rather than the underlying concepts. Since we are concerned with studying the underlying concepts, we should try to eliminate these technological reasons. This approach falls squarely within the design experiments framework for learning sciences research. In this study, we concern ourselves with the current state of personal home pages and finding a trajectory for improving that state by removing the purely technological problems.

To investigate the current state of personal home pages supporting a community of practice and establish a trajectory for how that state can be improved, we surveyed 24 Ph.D. students at the end of their first year. At this point in their program, these students are still on similar trajectories from the periphery to the core. Analyzing the surveys by adoption rate, the study revealed four important findings. (1) Personal home pages were primarily used to participate in the academic community of practice. (2) Regardless of adoption rate, audience awareness for conventional home page users was low. (3) Non-adopters and adopters alike wished that the publication cycle was easier. (4) In contrast, only adopters showed significant preference for adding collaborative features to their personal home pages. So, it is doubtful that collaboration can be a method to entice non-adopters to adopt. Yet, there is evidence that collaboration is actually something that adopters would want as part of that medium. Based on this work, we created *AniAniWeb* (a system for creating collaborative personal home pages) to address these technological shortcomings. We believe that the possibilities for learning as becoming and belonging will emerge for a larger group of users with AniAniWeb than standard home pages. So, we will also have the opportunity to see why users do not adopt home pages for social rather than technological reasons. More about this project and this study can be found at the first author's AniAniWeb: *http://home.cc.gatech.edu/je77*.

References

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge University Press.