Creating the eXtension Family Caregiving Community of Practice

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Abstract: The Family Caregiving Community of Practice, part of eXtension, provides a national one-stop site for Extension's caregiving educational resources. The developmental process of this community's creation is discussed within the "expansive learning" framework. Negatively, community members found too much emphasis on process and a lack of criteria for academic credit. Positively, they experienced increased knowledge, improved networking, and innovation. Recommendations for others creating communities are to: 1) promote the benefits of networking; 2) seek out others with similar passions; 3) provide graduated opportunities for learning; 4) help members transition from an individual perspective; and 5) provide systems for academic recognition.

Extension and Collaboration

As more learners use the Internet to access information, researchers and educators seek ways to support collaboration among learners and collaborative knowledge construction (Monahan, McArdle, & Bertolotto, 2008; Suthers, Vatrapu, Medina, Joseph, & Dwyer, 2008). Most research on online collaboration has been done with students, rather than educators (Karakaya & Şenyapili, 2007; Miers et al., 2007; Miller & Benz, 2008; Yang, Wang, Shen, & Han, 2007). Both social and individual factors require consideration when building technologically based communities and supporting participation among its members (Cho, Gay, Davidson, & Ingraffea, 2007).

Within Cooperative Extension, a growing number of interstate, regional, and national multidisciplinary collaborative groups are forming and growing. To enhance these collaborations and to bring together in one place learning materials created and distributed by Cooperative Extension, eXtension was created. eXtension, an online learning community, is possibly the largest collaborative effort in the history of the Cooperative Extension System (CES) and is intended to promote shared development and reduce duplication of educational materials and resources (Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service, 2008, April 18). Given shrinking budgets and reduced capacity for service delivery, eXtension assists Extension professionals in providing quality programming in states where little exists (eXtension, 2007, October 31).

eXtension requires Extension staff to utilize a technological tool called a "wiki," which may be used for online teaching, research, and collaboration (Moore & Barber, Jr., 2008). A wiki is defined in the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* as "a web site that allows visitors to make changes, contributions, or corrections" (2008). Wikis are adaptable to collaborative, open-ended environments and provide process support for group writing (Carr, Morrison, Cox, & Deacon, 2007). Through the use of a wiki, Extension faculty and other experts, within and outside the field of family caregiving, are able to collaborate on educational resources such as fact sheets, learning lessons, and frequently asked questions. Ultimately, family caregivers benefit from information and resources provided by experts crossing traditional academic domains, which may not have otherwise existed save for the use of a wiki for collaborative development.

In the *2007 Return on Investment Report*, eXtension reported several developmental milestones, including a doubling of contributors and a quadrupling of eXtension content (2007, November 26). This complex work moved ahead in a relatively short period, in part due to its capacity to bring together collaborators on the wiki to address a great breadth and depth of issues. This mirrors the experience of other online learner/educator groups (Schroeder & den Besten, 2008; Carr et. al., 2007). Learners develop collaborative, educationally oriented social networks when they work together and use online collaboration tools. Factors such as communication styles and pre-existing friendship networks significantly affect the way the learners develop these networks. Communication and social networks should be central elements in an online learning environment (Cho et al., 2007). Those in a supporting role must help each partner find interesting tasks and assist in keeping interest levels high (Minnaert, Boekaerts, & De Brabander, 2007).

One explanation for these types of experiences may be found through the application of a theory of expansive learning (Engestrom, 1987), which includes five main principles. Two of these principles are *multi-voicedness* and *contradictions*; Carr et al. (2007) added *transparency*.

Multi-voicedness refers to the creation of shared meaning, and with the utilization of a wiki platform, the diverse participants, their communication, and the relationship among them are vital components of the process (Carr et al., 2007):

> The use of wikis opens up a new realm of collaborative sharing and creation of knowledge through learning conversations, where the process is as important as the product, the audience is involved in the process, and notions of control over the product may be relinquished by the individual (p. 268).

The use of wikis may also create tensions, uncertainties, disruptive changes, or *contradictions* for participants. Although these may be opportunities for learning, they may also create obstacles such as a perception of an imbalance in the return, effort, and value of what has been created, initiation of anxiety from learning a new system, an increase in feelings of discomfort, and creation of limited participation in the process. The openness or *transparency* afforded by the work within the wiki means that these or other tensions become evident to all who participate and engage in the process and may create negative emotions for participants (Carr et al., 2007).

The concepts of multi-voicedness, contradictions, and transparency serve as the framework for outlining and discussing the creation of a collaborative work group within eXtension focused on family caregiving. Several members of this work group outline key points related to their experience in creating a multidisciplinary community of practice with an emphasis on collaboration and team development. It is anticipated that a frank discussion of these issues will provide insights for those exploring the possibility of creating their own eXtension work group. It is hoped that this discussion will add to the growing literature regarding lessons learned and evidence-based practices for eXtension communities of practice (Harder & Lindner, 2008; Moore & Barber, Jr., 2008; Pankow & O'Neill, 2008; Sobrero, 2008).

CoP Collaboration

eXtension organizes collaborative work groups of professionals into communities of practice (CoP). A CoP consists of Extension individuals and external partners who come together to address a particular issue. The *eXtension Community of Practice Guide Book* (2007, May 24) states that CoPs require a shift in traditional practice:

> For higher education, the shift for content providers and creators is from educational products and programs created by individuals to educational products and programs created, revised, and maintained over time by a community of content providers. It is a move from a "me" environment to a "we" environment (Chapter II).

There are a number of CoPs, including Family Caregiving, Beef Cattle, Agrosecurity and Floods, Cotton, Horsequest, Imported Fire Ants, and Parenting. All of the CoPs operate differently, due to the diversity of topical areas, operational structures, and number and fluidity of CoP leaders and members. Similarities include (eXtension, 2008, June 17):

- A commitment of the members to work together to meet the needs of those they serve and to be actively engaged,

- A willingness to put aside state and regional differences and to make knowledge available to all,

- An excitement about creating new content and delivery methods, and

- A vision of developing best practices "because of" the collaboration, not "in spite" of it

The gathering of Extension professionals from across the nation in an organized forum provides consumers with a more comprehensive and rich reservoir of information than would be available in any one state, while preserving and enhancing the community-based history of the local Extension office (eXtension, 2008, January 31).

Family Caregiving CoP

The Family Caregiving CoP (FC/CoP) strengthens and enhances Cooperative Extension family caregiving programming and provides a national one-stop site for Extension family caregiving educational resources. Faculty and staff at Cooperative Extension's 130 land-grant universities are increasingly aware of the growing number of older adults in the communities they serve and are interested in obtaining information about caregiving and other aging issues (Nichols & Howard, 2002). Extension professionals help families address needs such as:

- Caring for aging parents,

- Living with chronic diseases,

- Accessing services,

- Preparing for retirement,

- Creating supportive home environments, and

- Parenting grandchildren.

However, the number of Extension specialists with expertise in aging is small. Many Cooperative Extension programs have no dedicated position within gerontology or adult development. Few county staff programs address aging-related issues and concerns. From the 30 respondents to an email survey of 50 Cooperative Extension statewide units in 2001, only nine states had staff or teams who worked on gerontology-related projects or collaborated with a family/consumer science department and/or the gerontology center at their university (Nichols & Howard, 2002). The consequence of this lack of attention is a current dearth of family caregiving research-based materials and few local Extension educational programs for caregivers.

The mission and vision of the FC/CoP are grounded in a foundational philosophy that the needs of caregivers cannot be met within a paradigm of "business-as-usual." Members of the FC/CoP recognize that the ability to reach large numbers of older consumers and their families requires innovative thinking, a willingness to change the nature of the work of Extension, and an exploration of Web-based programming (Brintnall-Peterson, 2008, July 21). Because eXtension provides confidence to the end user that the information presented truly is the best of the best, created and reviewed by academic faculty/staff with expertise across domains, the FC/CoP has the opportunity to fully realize its mission and vision.

Gathering feedback from CoP members was essential for the steering committee to move forward in working in collaboration within a technological environment. CoP members have to move from an individual single voice perspective to one that is *multi-voiced*. Instead of promoting individual expertise, *contradictions*

needed to be explored as they ensure better educational resources, and FC/CoP member's work needed to become *transparent* to all who log on to eXtension.

To help the FC/CoP gage its effectiveness, a process evaluation was conducted in the summer of 2008. An online survey was sent via email to all members of the steering committee. In the evaluation, members were asked to evaluate their experience with the FC/CoP in terms of the effectiveness of the steering committee, content groups, and recruitment of new members. Members were also asked the pros and cons of working within the wiki and other technological platforms supported by eXtension and working with eXtension staff.

Generally, the tensions articulated by CoP respondents included:

- Uneven participation by members;

- Uneven skill level of members, particularly with regard to technology;

- Imbalance of process and activity work accomplished by CoP steering committee;

- Lack of information needed from eXtension and from each other;

- Lack of understanding of content components;

- Difficulty recruiting new workers;

- Misfit of CoP work with individual work plan; and

- Limited academic credit for participation.

Team Development: A Structure of Multi-Voicedness

Within the FC/CoP structure, content group *leaders* from a variety of disciplines manage the expansive family caregiving subject area, because the resources that meet the needs of caregivers are housed in numerous fields. Content groups in the FC/CoP include caregiving and disasters, employed caregivers, financial management, health, housing, nutrition, relatives as caregivers, relationships and psychosocial well-being, and rural family caregiving. Active group members participate in content group meetings, identify content needs, create educational materials, and develop online learning resources. Content group members also serve as reviewers and synthesizers of online resources (Brintnall-Peterson, 2007, October 16).

Initial leaders were drawn from a pool of colleagues who had previously worked together informally to address aging issues. However, to increase the diversity of the work group, those initial steering committee members invited other individuals to become active collaborators. Members of the steering committee sent requests for participation to members of listservs in which they participated. Email messages, with a link to an online survey, were sent to those who expressed an interest in the CoP, and the responses were sent to group leaders for personal contacts. Steering committee members also actively recruited within their own

states through formal presentations and staffed displays at Extension and non-Extension national meetings and conferences.

The FC/CoP was initially overwhelmed with requests for affiliation; as of September 2008, 224 individuals have affiliated with the FC/CoP (eXtension, 2008, September 12). However, it became clear through these various efforts that while many individuals were interested in watching the progress of the CoP and in utilizing the finished product, few were willing to become active contributing members. The current estimate of active and engaged individuals is 30. Although smaller than anticipated, the collaboration that has taken place is vital and innovative, and contributes to the multi-voicedness of online collaboration.

New Ways of Doing and Thinking: Managing Contradictions and Transparency

An additional challenge for the FC/CoP involved the collective creation and data management of family caregiver content for the eXtension Web site. The FC/CoP struggled with the inherent contradictions and transparency. One way that FC/CoP members decided to manage these issues was by allowing content group members to craft work individually, with the knowledge that their materials would be critiqued and edited by other members of the content group. Thus, a compromise between a fully collaborative process and one that was individually driven was reached.

Members of the FC/CoP understood that anyone with an interest in that topic (among registered users) had access to that page and could provide content or edit the materials. This procedure provides for a certain level of collaborative work within the wiki platform, guards against errors, provides ideas from more than one expert and more than one state, and prevents needless duplication of subject matter. As members adjust to the technological platform within the eXtension paradigm, a more expansive and in-depth coverage of issues will evolve.

The survey revealed that the FC/CoP experienced negative and positive aspects of multi-voicedness, contradictions and transparency. A discussion illustrating these aspects follows.

On the Negative Side

Emphasis on Process Rather Than Information Quality

Researchers who have studied a large collaborative work such as *Wikipedia* have wrestled with what is research-based and evidence-based information and have found that information quality is context- sensitive and cannot be described, measured, and assured with a single model (Stvilia, Twidale, Smith, & Gasser, 2008). FC/CoP members had varying definitions of information quality and initially spent large amounts of process time in face-to-face meetings crafting a workable definition for the CoP.

FC/CoP members said the process was laborious:

- "Too much emphasis on process and not product, at least at first."

- "A lot of time was spent on process in the beginning and it might have been better to just dive in and work."

Lack of Criteria for Academic Credit

Another finding concerned the need to receive academic credit for work on the wiki. Many members worried about the worthiness of contributing to a project where authorship was unclear and that one's efforts might not be recognized by their institutions' promotion and tenure committees. The CoP's steering committee and eXtension continue to address the following questions:

- How will I know who has been editing my article?

- What if someone makes a change to my article that I don't like?

- What if so many people contribute to my original article that my initial efforts are lost?

- How will I cite efforts on my CV?

- What does this mean for my promotion and tenure package?

FC/CoP members felt the status of participation in eXtension needed to be raised:

- "Right now [my work] doesn't count for much of anything."

- "Not sure how much administration values participation."

- "We need to lobby with eXtension and others involved for contribution reports, etc., that will be vital to P&T for those involved and use as a recruitment tool for new members."

On the Positive Side

Increased Knowledge

One finding illuminated the CoP members' increase in knowledge as a result of their work within the FC/CoP. A community of practice structure assumes that learning takes place through social and informal interactions among individuals who have come together because of a common interest (Laru & Järvelä, 2008, March). The comments reflect the broad base of this knowledge gain, from the technological platform itself, to subject matter content, to self-reflection.

FC/CoP members said they gained new knowledge and skills:

- "Once I became more comfortable in working in the wiki, I realized it was an effective tool to work with colleagues on material for eXtension."

- "Increased my knowledge of family caregiving."

- "Made me think about what's important to the consumer."

Improved Networking

The ability to engage with other professionals from various disciplines to collaborate and complete needed tasks is "inevitable" in today's world (Karakaya & Şenyapili, 2007). The use of the wiki allows for a national and even international opportunity to network with colleagues interested in a specific topic or issue. FC/CoP members saw this as a positive result of their participation in the FC/CoP.

FC/CoP members said that participation improved their ability to network with colleagues:

- "Being involved allowed me an opportunity to know what individuals are doing at other institutions. Prior to my becoming involved, I had no knowledge about how extensive the total eXtension system actually is."

- "I have appreciated getting to know experts from around the country who deal with this issue. It has greatly expanded my knowledge and access to resources."

- "Established relationships that are helpful in many areas, across aging issues and beyond."

Innovation

Participants in the FC/CoP appreciated the opportunity to be seen as a part of something that is progressive and technologically advanced. Members of the FC/CoP see direct and concrete benefits to being involved with the community of practice and in being seen as representatives of cybergogy, defined as engaged learning (Yang et al., 2007) or even cyberscience, which refers to Web-based academic endeavors (Schroeder & den Besten, 2008).

FC/CoP members said that participation allowed them to be a part of an "up-and-coming" field in Extension:

- "My involvement and leadership within eXtension is recognized in the state and has been included in my annual performance review process and post tenure review. I have been asked several times to promote eXtension and am considered one of the "go to" people on it within the state."

- "Halfway through the process we got a new [administrator] who is very enthusiastic about eXtension. Because I am working on this project, I have been to several meetings with him and normally I would not be on his radar."

- "[eXtension has provided] the opportunity to help write the future of Extension work and collaboration."

Implications for Development and Nurturing of CoPs

The work of the FC/CoP provides insights for others interested in forming a CoP. Suggestions for future

CoPs follow.

- Promote the benefits of networking, expanding subject matter knowledge, and becoming part of an emerging innovation in recruitment efforts.

- Seek out individuals who have a passion for the subject matter and/or individuals who have worked together on previous projects as the CoP is created. Leverage both interest and past working relationships to create educational resources.

- Provide opportunities for CoP members to learn from each other and to produce quality educational resources online in a step-by-step process. Start with an individual's current knowledge level of Web-based tools, gradually increase the comfort level, and help him or her to move forward into a collaborative e-learning environment.

- Spend time helping CoP members understand that working in a wiki demands a transition from an individual perspective to one of multi-voicedness. Demonstrate how the wiki and online environment become a transparent resource as authors manage the inherent contradictions that ultimately result in quality educational products.

- Provide systems for CoP members to recognize members for their contributions to a collaborative creation/work process. Discover each CoP member's individual needs (i.e., who is tenured, in line for promotion, etc.) in order to develop ways for each individual to be viewed positively within their state's tenure/promotion system. Help to create reward and recognition processes.

The Cooperative Extension System has provided education to the nation for more than one hundred years. Throughout that time Extension professionals have embraced new delivery methods to reach constituents. Today, Extension's clients are engaged in a global society and often rely upon electronic resources for their information. eXtension is transforming Extension education through the creation of an integrated and innovative knowledge center. The resources of eXtension will eventually become transparent and multi-voiced, and will have been tested by contradictions.

The final outcome will enable Extension clients to benefit from the combined efforts and knowledge of the best of the best within the land-grant university system. This process and vision facilitate the sharing of Cooperative Extension resources with faculty, staff, partners, and clients on a national level. The Family Caregiving Community of Practice invites interested individuals to join eXtension as it continues to chart the way for the future.

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