

Community Cultures: Differences Between Online Communities and Real-World Communities

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Abstract

Three years ago I began a project to implement a radical transformation of PhpFox, a popular social networking (SN) platform, adapting it to the needs of Japanese university English language students. My goal was to create a conversational knowledge (CK) community, facilitating information sharing between members. The community was not specifically intended to be an arrangement for English "conversation practice", but rather the means for the exchange of useful information, either in Japanese or in English. It was hoped a great deal of the exchange would be in English, but students were not restricted to that language.

The success of the network depended, of course, on the active participation of students, each of whom would bring unique experiences and perspectives to the network, enriching all members with their information. The experiment initially failed, however, and in this paper I would like to examine the reasons why the network was unable to develop into a vibrant and useful medium for information sharing. What I have found is that networks have their own cultures, which tend to be recreations of the real-world cultures of their members. Although networks can amplify certain aspects of real-world culture and focus the online culture in a particular direction, the network is not able to totally reshape an existing culture, turning it into something it has not been in the real world. This was an important issue when dealing with what I characterize as the "inhibited" learning culture that exists in Japan.

1. Introduction

When students enter our classrooms, they bring with them their personalities, belief systems and cultures. They do not shed these when they join an online community, though their identities may become more plastic in a world where factors such as race, nationality, and first language do not immediately define who they are. In fact, in this paper I wish to argue that identities are not so much re-defined as amplified in an online community. Few online participants are truly able to leave their real-world culture behind

merely as a consequence of joining an online community. Basic cultural assumptions continue in the online world, perhaps because we feel most at ease while operating within the parameters established by the culture in which we were raised. Although there may be a momentary feeling of freedom within an online community, as there is for some people as a result of foreign travel, few people are prepared to leave behind the comfort of the world they know best and actively participate in a community where the culture is radically different from their real-world culture.

I would also like to argue in this paper that this is particularly the case for cultures that emphasize their uniqueness and isolation from the world, as does Japanese culture. Cultures that readily embrace change and emphasize their similarities with other cultures prepare their citizens to feel at ease in the broader world, while cultures that stand apart from the outside world and emphasize differences with the rest of humanity prepare their citizens to feel at ease only in the local culture. When confronted with another culture these products of cultural isolation experience uncertainty in negotiating within the new culture and a great deal of unease with an unfamiliar situation.

These were not conclusions I arrived at easily, or that I originally expected to develop. I had expected students would make the transition to an online culture that differed perhaps quite radically from their own rather effortlessly. I had expected technology would in some sense erase cultural biases, and make all participants equally comfortable within communities that are often biased toward Western norms of behavior. The truth is that English-language-based chat rooms, blogs and wikis are essentially online versions of communities and modes of expression that exist within Western real-world societies. Although they are certainly capable of existing, and do exist, within non-Western communities, they will probably not take the same form within these cultures. There is, it would seem, a Japanese chat culture that is quite different from an American chat culture, for example. Merely conducting the chat in an English-language environment does not change the participants, any more than a real-world conversation between a Japanese person speaking English and an American speaking English changes the beliefs, personalities, or cultural expectations of either of the two speakers.

Consequently, online communities will necessarily create and nurture cultures that are comfortable for members who would feel at home in a similar real-world culture, but perhaps rather unwelcoming for members from a different real-world culture.

2. Assumptions and Results

Without the benefit of this knowledge, I am sorry to say, my attempt to establish a vibrant online social network at a Japanese university was initially a failure. Students participated in the network, but they were reluctant members, entering the community when required, but not remaining once obligations had been met. I was able to discern this pattern as a result of my own membership, which allowed me to view only what other members saw as a result of their participation within the community. At no time did I invoke administrator privileges to learn more about a member than other members were able to know. I felt this was important in order to establish the integrity of the network, and guarantee the privacy rights of the students. As a result, I also needed no special permission from the students to conduct this research, as all information accessed was open and available to the membership public. This is an important issue for anyone conducting research on network use.

I was able to compare and contrast the activities of my Japanese students with exchange students from Australian, American, and British universities as a result of a simultaneous membership in another community I had established to serve the needs of these students. These foreign exchange students were to be my "control group", and the yardstick by which I measured the activities of my Japanese students. Once again, I exercised no special administrator privileges on the network to gather information from the eleven foreign students. These eleven foreign students were given the same introduction to the network and explanation that the one hundred and twenty-eight Japanese students were given, and so any differences between the two groups would be a result of previous exposure to the genre and a willingness to explore on an individual basis.

My first mistake was a failure to realize the genre of the online social network itself might be something unfamiliar to young people in Japan. Social networks such as MySpace and Facebook have become part of the cultural fabric of the youth in English-language communities, and networks such as Mixi have become popular even within Japan. Mixi boasts a membership base of 19 million people as of June 2008, which would mean approximately 15% of all Japanese hold accounts (though it is likely this number is exaggerated due to the inclusion of closed accounts or multiple accounts held by individuals). This compares favorably to a US MySpace population of 76 million members as of December 2008, representing 25% of the US population. I therefore assumed that most Japanese young people would have some understanding of the concept of a social network, and would easily adapt to the structure imposed by the network.

It would seem, however, that the English-speaking population of social network users in America and other Western countries has a deeper understanding of the genre than Japanese users, probably due to a longer and more varied exposure. Although only one-in-four US citizens have MySpace accounts, it is likely a much larger population has some exposure to the genre due to the presence of other networks such as MSN Spaces, Facebook, Classmates, or Xing. Mixi would seem to be the only game in town in Japan, if observation of my Japanese students has been reliable. Therefore, many Japanese students struggled with the very idea of what a social network was, and what it made possible.

This was a surprise to me, as Japanese society is in many respects an extremely networked society. Communities are a part of everyday life in Japan, and one cannot, in fact, effectively live completely outside of them. (Sugimoto) However, Japanese communities tend to be extremely local in nature, and as such are limited in their membership and network reach. While it is possible to belong to more than one community, in practice there will inevitably be one strong community that places such heavy demands on the member that holding competing memberships is difficult. (Nakane) This is quite different from societies in the West, where memberships might be weaker, but allow time to be devoted to other communities, interests, and obligations.

Japanese society is often described with the term *marugakae* - completely engulfed - and all communities seek to make their embrace so tight that other memberships become practically impossible. (Davies) Even religious memberships in the US, certainly some of the tightest and most restricting forms of community, seldom achieve the total embrace demanded within Japanese society.

Perhaps the most common network membership outside of work obligations is facilitated by, and in some senses even formed by, the mobile phone every Japanese person must possess in order to be connected with other Japanese. As of May 2008 the total mobile phone population had exceeded the 100 million mark, approaching the total population of Japan, and even one-third of Japanese elementary school students had a "keitai", or mobile phone. In the past I have argued that the mobile phone has in some ways been a detriment to Japan, as it has focused interest away from the Internet and broader networks. One of the reasons the Internet has become so important in places such as America is that mobile phones have, until recently, allowed people to do little more with them than land lines allowed. Access to rich media or hoards of information required an Internet connection. This has not been true in Japan, and has made the broader, computer-accessed Internet still somewhat of a novelty for many young Japanese who are not proficient in IT.

Unlike the Internet, however, mobile phones create networks that are restricted in their membership and diversity. Most people call people who share similar views, who are of a similar age, and, importantly, who are members of the same culture. The mobile telephone isolates the individual from the larger world, and protects them from the diverse ideas, personalities, relationships, and cultures available on the Internet. The mobile telephone is, in fact, perfectly adapted to Japanese society precisely because it creates self-contained communities that do not reach out to the larger world. The result of this reliance on and devotion to the mobile telephone is a large population of young people who have little acquaintance with the genre of Internet-based social networking.

The mobile telephone is also an obstacle to broader knowledge sharing because

it produces transient knowledge. Internet-based knowledge has the very important property of being archived. Information someone posts on the Internet remains there, conceivably until the end of time. It may then be replicated, mashed, and Googled to expand its reach and influence. This is something that voice networks, and even VOIP networks, have yet to achieve. Knowledge that is merely spoken can soon be forgotten, and seldom spreads in the viral form that is common to the Internet. It usually influences only the immediate receiver of the information, and is seldom passed on to a network larger than the caller's immediate acquaintances, as defined by the caller's mobile telephone address book. Until automatic transcription and recording of voice become a reality, the mobile telephone will remain an inferior network for the broad-based dissemination of information. I believe we will someday achieve this, and it will be made possible by speech recognition and translation technologies being developed today, but as of this time participation in the mobile telephone network isolates Japanese people from the rest of the world. This is true in other countries, of course, but reliance on the mobile telephone network at the expense of familiarity with the Internet creates real problems for Japan's integration with the rest of the world.

The social network I was attempting to create among the students at my university was, of course, more than just a means for friends to stay in touch with each other. My intention was to create a learning community, characterized by conversational knowledge exchanged within the network. Conversational knowledge involves, of course, information sharing as the result of a conversation between two or more people. (Wells) This conversation would probably be in the form of a written conversation, rather than a verbal conversation, for the reasons I have just spoken of.

The exchange of conversational knowledge was, therefore, to be facilitated by the ability to post blogs, video and audio resources, and profile information via the social networking software. The degree to which the network could function as a vehicle for the exchange of conversational knowledge was directly related to the quantity of information published, and its relevance to the lives of the members. I was, unfortunately, extremely disappointed by the failure of my Japanese students to embrace the network as a means to

post and exchange information. Most students apparently believed their mobile telephone networks effectively met all of their information needs, and therefore saw no need to post information to blogs, forums, or other available network channels. This effectively denied the students the opportunity to experience the serendipity of stumbling upon information contained within the network they had not sought or believed they desired, but which nonetheless enriched their lives in some way.

This was, in fact, perhaps the major reason I judged the network a failure, and the reason for the failure relates to what I refer to as the "learning culture" (or actually its lack) created by the Japanese school system. One of the strengths of the American educational system, among a host of weaknesses, is its ability to nourish inquisitive minds that question "known" facts, accepted authority, and commonly held beliefs in a constructive manner. These are, for the most part, entirely lacking in the Japanese educational system. As a result, textbooks are accepted as unerring, teachers as authorities, and questions as signs of either disrespect or ignorance. These factors all work against the sharing of information and knowledge.

As for the type of information available on the social network, we can classify it as basically public information or semi-private information. Japanese students were not particularly inclined to post public information, such as forum postings about upcoming school events, job vacancies, or advice about school or everyday life. This may have been due to the fact that students have traditionally required authorization to post "official" information, and they may have been uncomfortable with a freedom they did not yet entirely understand. Likewise, students were not totally comfortable with the idea of posting opinions in the form of rating the pictures, videos, music or blogs of other students. As a result, it can be said that the amount of "information" on the network was meager.

The paucity of information created by the Japanese students compared quite unfavorably with the richer environment the foreign exchange students had created on their network. These students, probably familiar with Facebook profile pages, were

especially active in their attempts to design a profile page that would be appealing to other members. They posted a great deal of textual information, and also uploaded pictures that would inform members of their activities, friendships, and interests. They were also quite interested in changing their personal login picture. Initially, I had provided the pictures from the class roster we had created on the first day of class. These pictures were set in the classroom, and provided only the headshot needed to remember the students by name and face. The Japanese students seldom redefined their images, but the foreign students almost invariably uploaded new login pictures to complete their image transformation. Clearly, the foreign students saw the network as a chance to increase their network of friendships and present themselves to the world.

Social networking platforms excel, of course, at facilitating the formation of new friendships. In fact, a primary reason for joining a social network might be to initiate new friendships. However, social networking platforms also make it possible to retain and expand previously-existing friendships, and in Japanese society this function may take precedence due to the perceived need for introductions. Even when the Japanese students made their personal information available online, as they were able to do with the social networking software, this information seemed to supplement other sources of information, rather than provide the basis for instigating new friendships based on shared interests. Students might browse the personal information of people who were personally unknown to them, but they were still reluctant to initiate contact based solely on this information. Consequently, sharing of personal information was undertaken more for the benefit of deepening existing relationships rather than broadening friendships beyond pre-existing relationships. The number of friend links between students thus remained low, and seldom expanded beyond the initial number created at the beginning of the semester.

3. Conclusions

Japanese students are known to be passive learners and submissive toward authority, creating what I call the “inhibited learner”. The virtual environment of the

online social network can help to ease the inhibitions of the Japanese student, but it cannot erase them entirely. Likewise, the power structures of the real world do not disappear into total insignificance in a Japanese learning community. In my experience the students were as likely to look to the teacher for direction and “expert” knowledge in the virtual world as they were in the real world. They were also as likely to accord respect (or at least avoid confrontation) as they were in the real world.

For these and other reasons, my Japanese students remained directive-motivated. They were not motivated to explore the network and its possibilities on their own, and did not actively use it as a means to engage in information sharing. Little conversational knowledge was created on the network unless it was produced as a result of an assignment required by the teacher. Blog pages remained empty until themes were assigned, forums were deserted, and postings were for the most part absent. In short, the network failed to sustain itself and would doubtlessly have failed in the absence of direction provided by the teacher.

Malhotra and Galletta have noted that networks that are poorly planned and technologies that do not meet the need of users will inevitably fail. In my experience, however, it was not the software that was at fault, but the culture. I believe it is nearly impossible to create and nurture a successful online community without a deep understanding of the culture of the members, and how that culture might either contribute to or handicap the creation of a vibrant online community. Like species, cultures become dominant or fade into extinction as a result of their ability to adapt to the environment. In a world of global networks and information exchange it is essential individuals and nations examine the degree to which their own culture and personality contributes to global information exchange and internationalization, or fails to embrace emerging trends. It has become, in fact, a strategic necessity for nations and a survival imperative for individuals that they nourish a "learning culture" and seek out lifelong learning opportunities. Cultures that have become insular and closed, as has Japanese culture, will need to transform themselves if they hope to survive in the globally networked society of the 21st century.

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