

“Virtual Real Communities” and Cooperative Visualization

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Abstract. In a global world we face the necessity for worldwide collaboration and long-term co-creation. We know different kinds of internet platforms and examples of successful remote team work within projects for a limited time but we do not have much experience about computer sustained communities working successfully beyond projects and generations with different cultures and conflicting interests. The challenge is to build and to maintain a very specific kind of virtual community realizing a successful mix of “real” (face-to-face) and “virtual” (remote) qualities creating a platform for successful dialogue between diverse points of view. The contribution describes key qualities for creating such communities. It is about how to build the bridge between technical potentials and human qualities for establishing cross-cultural and long-term processes beyond face-to-face work. The presented experiences are based on the creation of an open and frank dialogue culture consequently using cooperative visualization from the first step of the collaboration process.

Keywords: Community, network, networking, virtual, real, visual, cooperative visualization, intercultural, change, “Virtual Real Community”.

1 Introduction

In a global world, decisions and actions of companies and organisations often have impacts beyond continents and beyond generations on a larger scale. This makes worldwide collaboration necessary as well as dialogue between stakeholders in different places around the globe. Building and maintaining virtual communities as a platform for dealing with conflicting interests is the basis for facing this situation.

The challenge is not only to establish long-term co-creation processes working beyond face-to face meetings (where people come together in a physical space). We also need the successful participation of a large number of people and groups located in different places all over the world, coming from very different cultures (i.e. not only different nationalities and languages, but also different social levels, professional fields, having different roles, opposite points of view and conflicting interests).

For facing this challenge we need a new form of communities. We know different kinds of web platforms. What we are talking about here are not internet structures for the distribution or the exchange of information or goods. We are dealing in this article with the transfer of ground-breaking and sense-making personal and group experiences created during workshops, events or projects which could first be small

seeds for new, long-term “cross-cultural” and “cross-interest” change processes. It is difficult to realize the transfer of such insights into reality and to assure their long-term further development, however, these experiences emerge more and more often from innovative project work groups and current corporate personal development programs.

We also are conscious of many examples of successful remote team work within projects for a limited time but we could not find many experiences about computer sustained communities working successfully beyond projects, beyond cultures and beyond generations dealing with conflicting interests. Very often projects of remote collaboration come from the technical side, driven by IT experts who sometimes concentrate on technicalities, but successful solutions first need the development of human collaboration processes which can be realized in a personal way even on a technical platform.

The author’s processes focus on the following concerns:

- We have to build and to maintain a very specific kind of virtual community realizing a successful mix of “real” (face-to-face) and “virtual” (remote) qualities creating a platform for successful dialogue between people with very different points of view.
- The key for creating this kind of community is to find successful ways of building the bridge between technical potentials and human qualities for establishing cross-cultural and long-term processes beyond face-to-face work.
- Cooperative visualization has turned out to be an important tool for the creation of an open and frank dialogue culture in the collaboration with small groups as well as with a large number of people. It is important to use this means consistently from the first step of the collaboration process and in all different phases for establishing a visual dialogue culture.

2 “Virtual Real Communities”

Looking at the terms “real” and “virtual” is helpful for creating new forms of communities:

By “real” we understand being physically together in a face-to-face structure. Here we are able to touch each other, to look into each others’ eyes, to use our different senses for communicating and for being present with each other. All interactions are based on natural perception and communication. This strongly involves human and personal experience. Soft factors, feelings, beliefs, values and emotional qualities are creating an atmosphere “between the lines”.

In “virtual” settings participants are located in different places. They are part of a remote structure. For communicating they need technical tools for the exchange of information, experiences and feelings. This sometimes makes it difficult to share qualities which in “real” situations are “automatically” present.

At first, personal settings and “virtual” work seem to have contrasting, maybe even opposite aspects. They seem to represent very different fields of experience, organized and facilitated by different professional experts. Looking closer we see that