

Book Reviews

Digital Habitats – Stewarding Technology for Communities

E. Wenger, N. White & J. D. Smith

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I read this book to inform a piece of development work in the field of continuous professional development (CPD) in Community Learning & Development (CLD) - to create a community of practice (CoP) whose members would be able to interact primarily through an on-line medium.

The authors' purpose is, "...not a shoppers guide to technology products...not a roadmap to technology selection...rather, this book is about the identification, description, and practice of an emerging function...to build a useful repertoire of concepts, models, tools and practical tips for those who undertake the role of stewarding technology for communities and its complex set of activities" (p xvii). The 12 chapters are presented in four sections: Introduction - to "the notion of technology stewardship intellectually, historically, and practically" (p xviii); Literacy - proposing "models...to help tech stewards 'read' situations and propose courses of action" (p xviii); Practice - which focuses "on the evolving practice of stewarding technology" (p xix); and Future - thinking about "how we can advance the practice of stewarding for communities" (p xx). This is not a book that you need to read from beginning to end. Readers should pick the sections of interest and are directed to different parts according to their needs (for example "just-do-it-ers" should go straight to Chapter 10 which is a step by step guide). Each chapter is summarised at its end and interspersed with e-links that signpost a wealth of on-line components to complement the text.

Wenger's theory of learning based on the concept of communities of practice forms the theoretical basis of the book. Learning can be seen as a component of on-line communities, just as it is for other communities, and the 'steward's' role is to create a space for 'learning together'. Communities of practice theory is presented clearly and simply in a few pages within the introduction and is sufficient to inform any reader who is unfamiliar with Wenger's earlier work.

A key point re-iterated in the book is that it is essential to focus on the needs of the community first and then find the products to support it, rather than starting with products and trying to fit the group into them. This will make sense to readers coming from a community or group development perspective but it is a warning everyone needs to heed because of the temptation to be seduced by the novelty and capacity of new technology.

The book is accessible and helpful for 'non-techy' readers (like myself) and overall fulfils its remit to support and inform the new role of stewarding technology for communities. I like the use of the word 'steward' as it fits and is consistent with concepts like facilitation, non-directiveness, networking and informal/opportunistic learning that are part of community development practice.

The term steward (and hence stewarding and stewardship) has at its root a concern for the interests of those being served and the implication of acting in the best interests of the organisation. It also encompasses a variety of roles ranging across leader, broker, representative, facilitator and perhaps even motivator. It is a role that is neither directive nor non-directive. As such it fits well with the roles and responsibilities of community workers, teachers and tutors who may be supporting a community of practice. Its novelty (in this context) may remind and encourage us to reflect on how we intervene and how we facilitate learning drawn from ongoing professional practice. The text contains much advice on how the steward can encourage (and avoid deterring) participation in an on-line community; a challenge that will be very familiar to anyone who has run a Virtual Learning Environment or similar.

In my own case, the CPD community of practice has fallen foul of local authority ICT security rules that block social networking sites. This illustrates both my failure to undertake the steward's responsibility to fully research the technical side and the challenges we face to fully realise the potential of ICT. But Digital Habitats will continue to be a resource to help me exploit the potential of new technologies to support learning and development.

