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Homeschooling Community of Practice Project Proposal

Learning problem

Homeschooling nationwide is on the rise. While estimates of the number of homeschooled students vary, it is clear that the percentage of school-aged children who are being kept home from public school is increasing. One recent report conducted by the National Home Education Research Institute estimated that there are currently 2.201 million K-12 homeschool students nationwide as of Spring 2010 (Ray, 2011, p. 2). The report also estimated an increase in homeschooled children of 8% each year. Given that new families are entering the homeschool experience every year and home educators are not required to be formally trained in teaching, a central resource for the community to share best practices is needed.

In Virginia alone, approximately 32,000 school-aged children are homeschooled, which is 2.5 percent of the total population of school-aged children in the state. According to Capital News Service, in “25 school divisions in Virginia, more than 5 percent of all school-age children are home-schooled” (Landry, 2013). This includes Fauquier County, the county in which I live and plan to educate my children. Despite the increasing numbers, finding fellow homeschooling families can be extremely challenging, given that there are a variety of reasons why families choose to educate at home. This community of practice (CoP) will attempt to bridge the distance between homeschool families, both physical and cultural, in order to enable families to collaborate effectively to develop a set of educational practices to benefit their children.

Target audience and context

The target audience will be home educators in Virginia who have access to high-speed internet and are searching for a community of learners. The CoP will have tools to facilitate home educator collaboration. Given the availability of tools and resources on the internet in the Web 2.0 era of social media, the context will be online, with opportunities to plan in-person activities if desired.

The underlying assumption of the CoP will be that homeschooling families are seeking information about what and how to teach and are struggling to find a community of fellow home educators and learners with whom to collaborate. Even in an area in which 5% of all students are homeschooled, it can be challenging to find a group of like-minded home educators. This CoP will provide the opportunity for home educators to investigate their own values, assumptions, goals, interests and pedagogical approaches in order to create ideal matches for collaboration.

Shared practice

The general knowledge domain will be K-12 education, which is extremely broad and can take many forms. The specific practice for home educators will be teaching children how to learn. Some content areas will be laid out for educators in order to help focus their efforts. For example, content areas such as “English,” “Science,” “Mathematics,” “Social Studies,” “Literacy” and “Religion” will be designated their own discussion pages and broken down into approximate grade-levels for targeted resource sharing. Because of the freedom afforded by

home education, these content areas may not suffice. The discussion boards will need to be monitored and adapted based on the interests and needs of the community.

Learning outcomes

The learning outcomes for a CoP are negotiated by the community as it participates in the development of its practice. However, based on the provided context and presumed interests of the target audience, several learning outcomes can be predicted.

Home educators will learn:

1. to develop an understanding of their strengths, interests and skills
2. to improve collaboration skills
3. to ask questions to guide new learning about education
4. to communicate ideas about educational practices and content
5. to improve home education practice

Pedagogical model

Given the nature of the context and the needs of the homeschool audience, the best pedagogical model for an online homeschooling learning environment is a CoP. According to Wenger, White and Smith (2009), CoPs can engage in the following types of activities: exchanges, productive inquiries, building shared understanding, producing assets, creating standards, formal access to knowledge, visits (p. 6). Furthermore, Dabbagh and Bannan-Ritland (2005) point out that CoPs use dialogic and supportive strategies such as collaboration, reflection, articulation, multiple perspectives and modeling (p. 207). These are the types of interactions that home educators and homeschooled students need to improve their practices.

I will use the recommendations of Wenger, White and Smith (2009) in their guidebook, *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities*, to develop a comprehensive model and structure for the CoP. In their text, they define nine “orientations”, or “pattern of activities and connections” (p. 69) in which CoP can participate, including: Meetings, Open-ended conversations, Projects, Content, Access to expertise, Relationships, Individual participation, Community cultivation and Serving a context (p. 70). I will focus on developing tools for meetings, open-ended conversations, content-sharing, relationship-building and community cultivation for the CoP.

Learning activities

According to the *Community of Practice Design Guide* (2005), to facilitate a CoP, leaders should create a rhythm and a “sense of place” (Cambridge, Kaplan, & Suter, p. 2). The learning activities for the CoP will consist of opportunities to participate in structured, time-bound online “events” as well as unstructured and ongoing discussions. Members of the CoP will first participate in community building activities in order to orient themselves within the practice and foster relationships between like-minded educators.

1. Develop relationships with fellow home educators
2. Research, investigate and share resources for use in educating learners
3. Make decisions about educational practices and apply new strategies in home education

The tools for each of the components of the CoP will be:

1. **Meetings-** online collaboration both time-bound and ongoing, in-person event creation capability for all users with meetup.com membership
2. **Open-ended conversations-** discussion boards separated into content areas and topics (managed by leadership), liking-enabled, sharing-enabled only within the CoP
3. **Content-sharing-** File-sharing by email to the review board, posted to content area page and rating-enabled
4. **Relationship-building-** profile page with generalized interest survey results including a similarity metric to fellow users (prototype only, not functional)
5. **Community cultivation-** personality and interest survey for home educator, tied to their profile and used to recommend matches based on similarity of interest and orientation to educational values or practice (prototype only); chat-rooms by topic of interest

Finally, a leadership team will be established with the express goal of providing expertise and building relationships between community members. This is a recommendation of the *Community of Practice Design Guide*: to recruit a core team who represent the audience, can assist in creating a mission and vision statement for the community and can help define the topics for the community to explore (Cambridge, Kaplan, & Suter, 2005, p. 4). This leadership team will begin the formation of the CoP and begin participating in the above activities before membership to the CoP is opened to the public.

Assessment

Assessment in a CoP on education can take many forms and can be used at several levels. For each of the participant groups, an assessment or metric will be used to track participation and results.

1. **Educators:** Participation in discussion boards, chat rooms, and resource sharing boards will be monitored for number of participants, total traffic or number of views to evaluate level of participation. Website evaluation surveys will be sent to all users for the purpose of determining which tools are the most valued by the community and to collect suggestions for improvements or additions to the tools
2. **Leadership:** Number of members, rate of increase in membership, advertising revenue will be collected to determine overall effectiveness of the CoP.

Design Table for Prototype

Learning Outcomes	Instructional Strategies: Dialogic*	Learning Activities	Evaluation Criteria
Participants will be able to develop an understanding of individual strengths, interests and skills	<p style="text-align: center;">Reflection</p> CoP site will provide strength and interest assessments which will be required for profile completion. A profile template with suggested descriptors will be provided to help guide users to provide detailed descriptions of interests and skills.	Develop an individual and family profile to promote their interests and to explain what they hope to gain from the community.	Survey on the quality and usefulness of the strengths assessment will be provided. Users will be able to add descriptors to the profile template to improve the quality of suggestions.
Participants will be able to improve collaboration skills	<p style="text-align: center;">Collaboration and social negotiation</p> CoP site will provide and enforce a Code of Conduct for positive and respectful communication with violators risking restricted access and badges awarded for positive and effective communication. Communication tips will be provided in the introduction tutorial.	Develop relationships with fellow home educators through friending, chat room and discussion board participation.	Optional self-assessments on recommended communication and collaboration skills will be provided.
Participants will be able to ask questions to guide new learning about education	<p style="text-align: center;">Multiple perspectives</p> CoP site will help filter and organize questions topically to reduce redundancy and aid in finding information quickly.	Participate in discussion boards, online meetings, in-person meetings to seek information and new ideas.	Participation in discussion boards and online meetings will be monitored to track the number of participants and viewers and the number of posts.
Participants will be able to communicate ideas about educational practices and content	<p style="text-align: center;">Articulation</p> CoP experts will post about current educational trends, host synchronous discussions and manage discussion threads. Expert panels will review resources shared on the file-sharing to provide descriptions of resources. Users will rate	Research, investigate and share resources through file-sharing or topical discussion boards.	Number of resource shares or lesson description posts will be monitored to track participation level of users. Rating of resources will be conducted by peers

	resources and higher level of responsibility will be awarded to users who have shared highly rated resources.		and expert panel and will be displayed by the link to the resource.
Participants will be able to improve home education practice	<p style="text-align: center;">Application</p> CoP site will provide rating and liking capabilities for posts and comments in order to monitor the usefulness of materials and ideas shared on the site.	Make decisions about educational practices and apply new strategies in home education. Share the results of newly applied practices.	Survey to evaluate the effectiveness of the CoP to improve home education practice will be provided to users.

Scope of Prototype

The nature of CoP is that it is large in scope, encompassing all areas of a practice and providing various opportunities for active participation by members. This Homeschooling CoP is by design a virtual world, or a virtual school, which means that the site includes many components and features. For this reason, the prototype will focus in on one content area (early literacy, pre-kindergarten to 1st grade) and attempt to demonstrate how this single content area would fit into the larger CoP website.

References

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