SHORT CIRCUIT:
How an orkut-based environment is improving the communication between the different levels of a Higher Education Institution

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Institutional Quality Issues related to aspects of Distance, Flexible and ICT-based Education

II - Post-Secondary or University Education

Abstract: The paper discusses the threats and opportunities of a platform developed at Anhembi Morumbi University (Sao Paulo, Brazil), named *Tubarão* (Shark), which generates open communication among students, professors, university staff and the high administration. It was planned as an orkut-like environment, with the intent that the students would quickly and easily accept and adopt it as an online tool. The paper investigates the vision of the system, the history of its implementation, and the current testing phase, previewing its potential problems as well as its breakthrough applications, including distance learning. It also presents a monitoring research of the platform during two months, analyzing data as the growth of the number of communities, number of users, number of files deposited at the system, and the number of posts, as well as the major subjects of interest, selecting specific threads of interesting conversations established by the different levels of members at the institution.

Keywords: distance learning; distance education; communication; higher education; university; informal learning.

The purpose of this article is to discuss, for the first time, the development and implementation of a platform named *Tubarão* (Shark) at Anhembi Morumbi University (São Paulo, Brazil). It also helps to fill a gap on literature of collaborative work and   online communities, one of the largest challenges in the field of online education (CARABAJAL et al).

The system was planned to create a friendly orkut-like interface aiming that the students, in great part already habituated to this kind of tool and also with the idea of communities, would immediately accept and start using it, without the pressure from the professors. A system with no need of a manual of instruction, where the students could feel at home. Where the student is learning without realizing it. It was also planned to create environments where students, professors, staff, and administration, are always welcome.

It is open to all the university community. It also permits contact with the external audience, through the presence of 'guests'. The idea is that it will, in a near future, also allow access to other members of the Laureate International Universities, which includes several institutions around the world.

The platform started to be implemented, in a testing phase, at the second semester of 2005. New features were added since then, but the system is still in a beta version, having not yet been adopted as the official platform by the university. The idea, in the beginning was to research the platform to check possibilities of using the system as an alternative Learning Management System, however, Blackboard is still used as the distance learning and face-to-face classes supporting system.

Because of that, it is still not possible to deeply study the issue of group development at the platform, as it is both in its beginning and not being used as an official tool by the university. But it is possible to note some group features developing and interpret them, what we will do.

The system has today basically two places were the user can be: profiles and communities. They are divided as follows:

a) Profile, including:
- Messages (not instant)
- A list of communities owned by the user
- A list of communities to which the user belongs
- A list of friends
- A list of contributions (files) added to the system by the user
- Statistics, including the number of users, number of users online, communities and files on the repository
- A tool for searching people, communities or files on the repository
- A catalog of communities, divided by categories
- Options to create a community, add a contribution, and invite a member to the system

b) Options inside a community:
- Name of the community
- General text of the community
- Photograph of the community
- Owner of the community

- Material (files and links) available to the community
- Option to add or arrange files
- One forum
- Announcements
- Next Events
- Members of the community

As the platform can still not be characterized as a learning group, its dialectics involving emotional relationship and instrumental goals (or tasks) is still in the beginning. Most of the communities were opened taking into consideration much more socioemotional than instrumental goals, with the mission of discussing live issues like what is going on in our city (São Paulo), music, movies etc. It seems that art is a bonding force at a university environment. The communities opened with specific tasks purposes have had less success than the ones opened for socioemotional perspectives, as we will see, at least in terms of interaction.

Up to now, the system does not allow instant messages, so it is only possible to have asynchronous communication, although some users have sometimes converted forums on almost synchronous tools, as we will see.

The platform also allows the figure of one (or more) moderator, which can perform all the tasks of the owner of the community, except changing its defining words and photograph.

On June 2006 there are around 260 communities opened, 3,500 users and 600 files deposited at the system. It is important to say that the university has about 25,000 students, 1,000 professors plus staff, that is to say, there are a little more than 10% of the potential number of members using the system.

Less than half of the communities are really active, and probably less than 20% of these users regularly access the system.
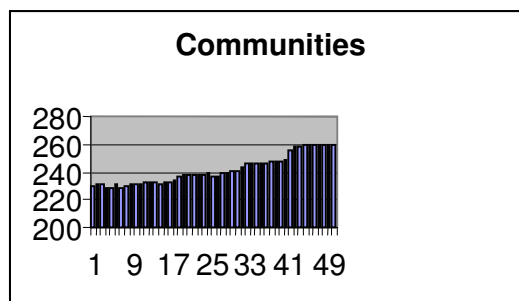
The communities with more users are:

1) Traineeship and employment – 180 (it works much more as a space for posting messages than a real community; it is one of the most growing communities)
2) Pets – 162 (this is a typical socioemotional community centered on an interesting subject, pets; full of interaction)
3) A professor's community – 105 (some interaction)
4) A video festival community (related to the Soccer World Cup) – 101 (task oriented, mainly to receive videos competing for prizes – should die now that its task is completed)
5) Computer Science – including students, professors etc. (some interaction)
6) A professor's community – 86 (some interaction)
7) São Paulo city – 84 (the most growing community and one of the most active; an interesting conflict showed up at this community, as we will see; different events at the city are posted and discussed here; and it was very active during the recent attacks of criminal gangs to the city)
8) Movies – 77 (one of the most growing, interactive and live community)

9) Marketing – 75 (a little bit quiet during the last weeks)
10) Digital Journalism – 75 (an interesting community)
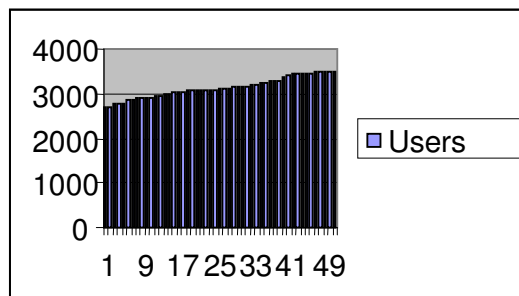
More recent but growing communities are:
- I love my profession (professor)
- Crazy for soccer
- Music (a very active community)

The below graph, indicating the growing of the communities, shows a strange growth at the end, due to the creation of several communities by the same professor. As the system is still not popular at the university, we can preview that the number of communities created will increase a lot in the near future. At the present moment, for reasons of copyright and server capacity, students are now allowed to create communities, but professors can create and transfer them to students, what have already happened in some cases.

Communities

Graph 1: communities

The number of users grew in a regular way, as the following graph shows, growing a little more than usual at the beginning because of the Web World Cup promotion (including prizes etc.), growing again at the beginning of the Cup and the deadlines of some promotions, and slowing down a little bit at the end because of the weeks of final exams:

Graph 2: users

Short Circuit:

One of the interesting outcomes of the implementation of the system is that is generates a short circuit in the institution. There are opportunities and threats in this short circuit, as we will analyze.

On one side, the platform allows contact among persons that would probably never meet in the institution. It is important to note that the institution has four different campi, some of them with more than one building, and even many professors do never meet because of that physical obstacle. Students of different courses, even on the same building, do not meet regularly, because usually there are no common disciplines for different courses. And staff and administration do not usually meet students and professors. So, the system introduces a short circuit in communication, virtual channels that link everybody in the institution.

Besides that, many of my face-to-face students, who I would probably not have perceived as different in the classroom nor on our closed virtual classes using Blackboard, had a special and unique participation at Shark, what created a different special in classroom and, also, a sense that we communicated in a different layer, somehow higher and spiritual, besides the physical class and the virtual closed classroom at Blackboard.

Besides this socioemotional sense of belonging to many communities, and consequently to a higher one (the institution), the system makes possible some task oriented communities which had faced, or would have faced, many obstacles to be implemented in any physical way. For instance, a community to help the students (from different campi and courses) organize its social and educational activities was recently created. A community to discuss quality in higher education, specifically at the institution, was created by the president of the university, establishing a unique space were professors, staff and even students can interact with the higher figures of the university, and where quality can be equally discussed between all the levels of the institution.

In a certain way, we can see the dynamics of the system as a great laboratory for testing how the market of university students, with specific profiles and income, react with more or less interest to different subjects. Some professors have realized that and have been opening different communities, with testing purposes, to watch how they grow (or not!) and, so, what subjects are more or less interesting to this segment of the market.

A very significant variable will probably soon be added to the platform: students, staff, professors and administration of the other Laureate owned institutions will be allowed to access the system. There is undoubtedly a problem of system capacity to be faced, but the opportunities this opens are immense. Maybe Shark, leaving all the naïveness behind, will make possible what the technology optimists believe in, an intercultural and democratic dialogue, helping to build cultural *polibrids*, trained for different and many times irreconcilable views of the world; trained in critical thinking, that is to say.

One interesting issue is that as the tool is not yet institutionalized or it is not the official tool for interaction between the university staff, people feel free in creating their own environment and invite others to participate, with no compromise with "who are who" in the institutional hierarchy.

The predominance of the socioemotional aspects over the task and instrumental ones, in the platform, is clear if we analyze the posts that generated the higher number of reactions.

A post named "Virtual Lunch", in which some of the most active users of the system, in a small community called "Virtual Human Relationship", generated 62 reactions. Its initial purpose was to schedule a real lunch, so that these users, which in many cases did not even know each other, could meet. It already generated some real lunches, a night in a jazz club, and will probably generate more face-to-face meetings.

An interesting conflict was generated when a student, at the community dedicated to the city of São Paulo, posted a comment saying that the real problem of the city was its people. This was immediately interpreted by another student as a racist comment (the post was referring to the part of the people coming from the poor North of the country), and, as a moderator of this community, I was able to solve the conflict by opening another community, to specifically discuss racism. But the post generated, in few hours, more than 50 comments, being the forum somehow transformed into a chat, as some of the users were interacting in a synchronous way.

The other post that generated more than 50 reactions was a question at the Pets community: "What are your pets?" As we already said, the most interaction in the system happens on socioemotional issues, not tasks, although this emotional virtual relationship might be carried on by interesting questions, like this one

If you follow up all the threads of conversations in the system during a period of 2 months, you will certainly not forget some delicious carpaccios of conversation, which show that informal (but serious) learning is already going on at the platform.

In a small community called Artificial Intelligence, a very interesting conversation was established over the issue "Threat to our individuality". With the progress of artificial intelligence and mainly the development of techniques of cloning, maybe we are watching the end, or at least the reducing, of the importance of the originality and individuality of human beings – this was the provocation of the first comment. A psychiatrist/philosophy professor, and different students, reacted building a very nice virtual discussion around the subject.

A community about Death also generated an interesting conversation, specifically exploring the frontiers between sedation and euthanasia.

As already said, the attacks to the city of São Paulo were deeply debated in the community of the city, as violence and other important political issues directly linked to the attacks.

In the Pets community, a topic on how to choose the more appropriate dog pet turned into a dangerous conflict: "Stop buying pets", shouted one student, "you should adopt the ones abandoned by the owners". This conflict was wisely managed by another student, who was somehow conducting the initial discussion, without the need of any moderator or professor, as he accepted that this was an interesting issue and, at the same time, showed the different sides of the problem.

Conflicts lead us to the discussion of the potential threats of the system.

One of them is the possibility of different kinds of treatment between the different levels of the institution, what can open up more gaps than unite these separated levels. This was somehow visible when the president opened the community on quality on education, and a special kind of treatment, as well as an attempt to establish a direct channel of communication with the owner of the community, became visible, what was not usual in other communities.

Virtual racism, as virtual sexual harassment, is another threat. As already mentioned, an interesting conflict took place at the community of São Paulo. The starter of the topic proposed that the immigration to São Paulo created non-educated people. A second student immediately reacted, affirming that discrimination was a crime. Then the temperature went up in many comments exchanged in a matter of minutes. As already said, this conflict was somehow managed by the monitor, but is registered. It is always a risk to store, inside a higher institution system like Shark, public to the whole community and even, as said, to some external guests, racists' comments.

Censorship, then, becomes a serious issue in such a system. More than one student, in different communities, posted aggressive comments against the North-American politics, its people etc. The Laureate group, which owns the university at this moment, is located in the US. How should freedom of expression be faced, in these cases? There are already communities opened to discuss politics, and we are near the Brazilian elections for president and other positions. Should everybody be allowed to say what they want, against and in favor of the current government? Should campaign marketing material be allowed in the system? It is good to remember that we have about 30,000 potential members of the platform.

The level of language is also a critical issue. Should inappropriate language be allowed in the system? What about general writing issues? A higher institution official communication system should allow constant mistakes on writing? Should this not work against the own marketing of the university, if, for example, somebody copies from it parts of conversations to show that there is no academic rigor in these communities, and in the university, as an extension?

Copyright is also another threat, and this is one of the reasons why students are not allowed, at the moment, to create communities, nor to deposit files on the repository. As we know, copyright is an insolvable problem to the virtual world, so insolvable that it became precious food for an interesting field of study recently born, Philosophy of Computing and Information. Copyright became a philosophical problem, even more that a legal one, essential part of the interesting sub-field called Ethics of Computing. What should be considered unfair use in such a system, devoted to study? To deposit a short story, still protected by copyright, for discussion and study purposes, should be considered against the law? What are the frontiers? A Code of Ethics will probably be needed to sustain, in its near future, including orientation on copyright and fair use issues.

How should the institution deal with negative critics to its professors, or even to itself? If a student offends a professor, because of his bad grades, for example? And if a student offends another one?

Rejection by the group is another serious issue. Some communities, mainly the technical ones, do not accept newborns who do not understand their

language. This must make the student, who ultimately enters the platform to become feeling part of a bigger world, much bigger than his classes or courses, to feel rejected by the institution as a whole, affecting negatively his behavior.

Another threat in the same direction is what Feenberg (apud CARABAJAL et al, 2003, p. 222) calls 'communication anxiety', or 'the feeling of speaking into a vacuum', which happens when a group member receives no immediate reaction or response to his comments. Unusual delays, especially when other members of the community are very active and post several comments to other topics, or even in other communities, must sign like rejection by the group. One Computer Science student, shyly, started a topic placing a 5 line comment on Sartre's ideas, in a Philosophy community, which were the result of his long and hard reading of an article written and deposited in the system by the owner of the community, a Philosophy professor. The comment had an implicit question, which was answered by the writer/owner in half a line. This sounded rude to the student, but even though he continued, days later, after the suggestion of another reading by another professor of the group, the famous lecture 'Existentialism is a Humanism', by Sartre himself. The student's first comment was to explain that he could be wrong in his reading, as he was not a professional philosopher. After that, a second comment, 8 lines, about the meaning of freedom to Sartre. This subject had already been discussed by the article of the owner of the community, which originated the topic, and there was also an implicit question in the student's comment. Only 2 months later there was a reaction to his comment, but during that long period of time, the student kept checking the system, day after day, probably increasing his feeling of speaking into a vacuum, or the vacuum itself!

The consciousness of our own ability as writers ends up also inhibiting many members not to participate in the discussions. How should a higher education institution act, in this respect? Should participation be encouraged, without any feedback on language? As already asked, should writing mistakes be fought in the platform? If so, publicly (so that everybody can read the corrections) or privately (in messages directed only to the writer)? Should corrections be made in what has already been written? Wouldn't this inhibit participation?

Speaking about language, Shark is to be transformed into a Babel! Members of the whole Laureate International Universities, including French, Spanish, English, Chinese and other languages speakers, are soon expected to join the community, posing new strategic questions: will there be an official language for the system? What will happen? Will Shark become a great living being, multicultural, reflective and inclusive? How will the previous discussed threats be amplified, in such an international academic environment?

Technology progress carries with itself a threat of homogenization of cultures. If we can imagine 'a' world culture, that means too much should be destroyed. Computer mediated communication threats deleting cultural values and local ways of communication. The image of a Disneyfication, dominated by the North-American culture and language, is much different than the idea of the McLuhanian intercultural global village. And one of the responsibilities of a higher education institution, of an education institution, is to maintain the diversity of such a group, while creating patterns allowing communication flow. One of the challenges of education in the age of globalization, we could say.

Shark will need to develop two skins, a thick and a thin one. Two cultures, the thick (preserved) and the thin (global). In this sense, Philosophy, and the humanities in general, have a great contribution to give, in order to avoid the cultural homogeneity. Shark might help the students and other members of those international communities to recognize their diversity, as well as their limitations. To recognize that reality is, after all, built, perceptual and rationally. That all reality is virtual, in some sense. To recognize the consciousness of our incompleteness, what might prepare us for the encounter with the other (TURKLE, 1997, p. 261). It might force an 'epistemological humility' (SANDBOTHE apud ESS, 2003, p. 233), that is to say, a perception that our most basic beliefs have only limited certainty and universality, what might, by its turn, transform us in more empathic, comprehensive and receptive human beings toward the 'others'.

According to Ess, "[...] philosophers may contribute to a specific sort of *education* for the citizens of an intercultural electronic village that is required to avoid the cultural homogenization of McWorld and the radical fragmentation of Jihad." (2004, p. 84), an education that makes possible the global communication and culture (but thin) without compromising the local and value preferences (but thick).

The platform also proves that positive interpersonal relationships can develop in online groups. As we saw, Shark seem very little like an impersonal environment, where we can only find weak human ties. Shark allows a feeling of being together, virtually, what might lead us to interpret our role in the physical classroom, in communities, in groups, in the university, in the Laureate global net, in life. And, in many cases, the communities established virtually at Shark already exist, at least partially, in the real world, and the virtual may also generate presential meetings (which would probably never happen), what have already occurred. Shark might also become the virtual space for international Laureat students both to prepare their meetings and preserve their face-to-face encounters.

One of the challenges of the managers of the system, from now on, will be to transform a system born, as showed, much more as a local socioemotional virtual space than an international study environment, even because of its origin and the use of another developed distance learning system at the university, into the official communication channel of international universities, that is to say, a system that will have to be both internationally task oriented (education) and an emotional net, which education after all is all about. The challenge will be, using Borgman's vocabulary (2000), to develop an international community both instrumental (to perform tasks) and final (associations in which we find life's meaning and goal), the later of which, at least, is not usually to be expected from online communities. And the callenge will also be to avoid a commodified solution, where education is simply packed and conveniently sold, as an international commodity, one of the risks of distance education, mainly in a global environment (See Borgman, 2004).

There is a most general challenge: to transform threats into opportunities. Does technology unite or separate us? Is a virtual community possible? Does technology really help education? The development of Shark will help to enrich this interesting debate. Initially short-circuiting a Brazilian university, Shark, in its

second phase, might be the virtual global space for a rich and interesting cultural short circuit.

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