

## **Exue** - Online Conversational English Learning Community

### **Introduction**

The idea “online communities” has captured popular, as well as scholarly, attention. Numerous websites and dot.com companies advertise their “online communities.” There is confusion, though, about the definition of an online community. According to Brint (2000), communities are aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common values, and/or personal concern (i.e., interest in the personalities and life events of one another). Under this generic definition of communities, online or virtual communities can be defined as communities in which members interact through the medium of computer technology. Online communities are usually activity-based with little or no face-to-face interaction.

Many educators are participating in this movement as well, exploring the educational value of employing a community model for supporting learning. The idea is that through participating in a community, novices can learn through collaboration with others and by working alongside more experienced members and gradually begin to adopt the practices of the community. This social view of learning treats learning as a process of constructing practice, meaning, and identity all in relation to a community of practice. Learning is conceived as a trajectory in which learners move from legitimate peripheral participants to core participants of a community of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991).

Another hot issue related to online communities is web 2.0 technology. Web 2.0 refers to a set of principles and practices that use the web as a platform for services that enable users to control their own data and media, and with a central focus on participation so that collective intelligence can be harnessed from distributed user communities. Web 2.0 applications demonstrate one or more of the following key principles/features, but may miss others.

- ◆ As a platform – the collection of pages still look like documents but are actually interfaces to full-fledged computing platforms
- ◆ Provide services not products
- ◆ The network effect: the service automatically gets better the more people use it. User adds value as a side effect of use.
- ◆ Architecture of participation: It is a community emphasizing participation, sharing, and collaboration.
- ◆ "We, the media," a world in which "the former audience", not a few people in a back room, decides what's important.
- ◆ Not places to go but things to do, ways to express yourself, means to connect with others and extend your own horizons – where we live.
- ◆ Two-way communication with the user: reading and writing.
- ◆ User-generated content – with enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow
- ◆ “Live” Web – continuous changing
- ◆ Organizing the content by user tagging or folksonomy – a naturally created classification system which arises as a result of user-based tagging. A user tags an

object such as a bookmark in order to remember it later, that information is then added to the global tag cloud and helps to create a folksonomy.

- ◆ Harnessing collective intelligence (using the wisdom of crowds) – turning the web into a kind of global brain. A collective intelligence is achieved when a critical mass of participation is reached within a site or system, allowing the participants to act as a filter for what is valuable.
- ◆ Can be administrated by just a few people (thousands of people not on the payroll actually building the thing)
- ◆ Data as building blocks for Web 2.0 applications
- ◆ Control over data may be their chief source of competitive advantage
- ◆ AJAX is also a key component of some Web 2.0 applications to enable rich user experience as rich as local PC-based applications: interactive, participatory, as well as social.
- ◆ Easy to use. The entry bar is low.
- ◆ End of the Software Release Cycle: there is no need to install programs and patches; software is delivered as a service. Upgrades and future versions happen seamlessly, most without the user's knowledge.
- ◆ Spreading by word of mouth – "viral marketing"
- ◆ The Long Tail: Web 2.0 applications are designed to serve not only popular but fringe interests.

Some current popular examples of Web 2.0 applications and practices include blogging, vlogging, wikis, social bookmarking, photo uploading and tagging, video uploading and tagging, and podcasting.

Based on the above definition of communities in general and online/virtual communities in particular as well as those identified features of current web 2.0 applications, online Exue.com.cn can be classified as an online community for learning foreign language using some web 2.0 features. The language groups on this online community include English, French, Japanese, and Germany. Users are Chinese who are interested in learning foreign languages. Within this big community, a sub-community called “Spoken English Dedicated Zone” is for a group of users who want to improve their spoken English. My analysis will concentrate on this sub-community:

<http://bbs.exue.com.cn/forumdisplay.php?fid=40>.

### **Learning Needs and Community Features**

On the highest level, the users’ need in this community is to improve their spoken English. Reading and writing are also important as English language ability. However, this community is solely dedicated to spoken English. The community is basically a forum with some other complementary tools or services. It is a very common business model of building online community now in China, which is referred as BBS. It is like a message board but with some enhanced functions or Web 2.0 technologies. Next, I will

analyze the system's services and content generated and how it addresses the user's needs in the context of web 2.0 technology.

<Insert a screen shot for the first page here>

The community provides a thread discussion board for members to post ideas and comments. Generally, users can post any ideas they are interested in and make comments. But most postings focus on three areas: sharing learning strategies/reflections on learning, recommending/presenting learning materials in the message body or as attachments (will address this issue later), and making request for learning materials/learning strategies.

The web is not only readable but also writable in two levels: users can read and post message and the postings are editable and can be modified later. But only message owner can edit their own postings or comments. There are some postings regarding how to effectively improve spoken English and members' reflection on learning experience. But most of them are not in-depth and intelligent discussions. One thing worthy to mention is that users are allowed to insert multimedia files into the message body. In lieu of web 2.0 technology, the thread discussion board is a service and read/write web. It does use collective intelligence. But, the postings and comments do not reach a (tentative) final product based on collective intelligence, while in online communities using wikis technology such as wikipedia, there is usually a tentative final product at one time based on collective intelligence. Therefore, spoken English users need more efforts to make decision on which learning materials and strategies to use than in the situation that there is a consensus based on collective intelligence. Under this general discusiion board, there

are three sub-forums/aggregators: Downloading Center – holding links pointing to postings with downloadable attachments (will discuss it later), Highly Recommended – holding links points to postings highly ranked by the administration team (still not clear how they rank the postings), and English Pronunciation – dedicated to English pronunciation topics (not sure it is sub-forum or aggregator collecting pronunciation related postings from the general forum).

This online community also provides uploading and downloading service. It was mentioned previously that one way for users to share information is through attachments. When users post message they can attach various types/formats of files including text, audio, video, graphic, and software, actually any type/format of files. Most of attachments are learning materials which are usually officially published and either have an electronic version or digitalized by users. Only a few of them are really created by users themselves in a strict sense. The uploaded materials have been divided by the administration team into different levels with each level having different access restriction. More actively users participate in the community activities (will address how the community determine activeness of participation later), more levels they can access. There is a downloading center for users to download available information. It is actually an aggregator to hold all posting with attachments – the links to the postings which have attachments. Users can also locate these postings on the general discussion board themselves but it requires more efforts.

The community provides a chatting room (both text and voice) for members to practice spoken English (one to one or many to many) with a dictionary tool. Most of real online learning happens in this chatting room. Members are allowed to chat in English only, either publicly (many to many) or privately (one to one). The idea of a community of learners is based on the premise that learning occurs as people participate in shared endeavors with others, with all playing active but often asymmetrical roles in sociocultural activity. However, there is evidence that more experienced members seems not willing to chat with less experienced ones. One member said that: “good English speakers usually do not want to speak with us less competent speakers.” There is another problem associated with the chatting room. Base on my observation, the learning happened in the chatting room is not effective. The common scenarios are that two members meet and start chatting; then two minutes later they stop. The part of the reason is that, in most cases, they are not pedagogically trained, therefore do not know how to effectively teach and learn from each other.

The community provides several online dictionary tools to assist learning: Online Dictionary (kind of mash-up between two free web applications), Grammar Dictionary, and Idiom Dictionary. Another service provides by the community is short message/email by which users can communicate to each other privately to exchange ideas, share information, and build friendship.

There is a ranking mechanism to put the best contents on the top, but the rank is decided by community administrators. There are some mechanisms to encourage participation.

For each posting and uploading, members are rewarded e-money and points. The amount of e-money and points awarded depends on the quality of postings and uploading which are determined by how they are ranked and whether they recommended to be put on the top positions. With the e-money and points, members can access some restricted and core contents. Users can subscribe to the site. There is RSS feeds listed on the website.

Based on the above analysis, this online learning community does demonstrate some web 2.0 features. First, the community is a platform providing learners services to share learning materials, reflect and comment learning strategies, and to practice spoken English through the chatting room. In a sense, it harnesses collective intelligence, though there is much room to improve. Although most of learning materials are just electronic version of officially published books, video, and audio files, they are provided by members and therefore user-generated. It is two-way communication with the user: both read and write. It uses RSS for subscription and mash-up to take advantage of online free web applications.

### **Recommendations for Improving the Community**

To master conversational foreign language:

First, the learners should know how to use appropriate vocabulary and sentence to express what they want to express – using wikis with each entry based on a real life scenario: use collective intelligence to contribute to how to use the appropriate vocabulary, sentence, and grammar to express a specific idea within a specific scenario.

Second, they learners have to speak them correctly – pronunciation: using audio dictionary.

Third, the learners have to speak it fluently and even effortlessly – practice, practice, and practice: multiple ways to practice; not only limited to chatting room, for example, Gaming and video/audio annotation and commenting. Also, the learning should be guided in the chatting room. More learning aids should be added in the chatting room to guide the learning and pedagogical principles should be built into the learning environments so that the learning outcome can be maximized.

#### Attract Native English Speakers to Join

From my observations, there is no native English speaker in the community. Provide conversational Chinese practice opportunity to native English speakers so that they can benefit from each other.

#### Use E-portfolio for Assessment

There is no assessment in the community. Learning needs feedback.

#### More User-Friendly Interface

The current user interface can described as messy. It is not easy to find the information you want.

A successful online learning community is one that achieves its purpose. Some goals are measurable and some are highly resistant to quantification. We can use the amount and quality of participation as the primary indicators of success.