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A CHAT-based Case Study of Informal Adult Learning and Technology: BarCamp, the Unconference

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Abstract: This paper presents and discusses findings from a pilot case study about Bar Camps. BarCamps are an open technology movement collective learning event. They are gaining momentum as sites of resistance to the idea of ‘owning’ technology knowledge and known for cutting across boundaries to invite learners to learn through shared activities. The findings are organized and discussed based upon constructs of Cultural Historical Activity Theory, CHAT.

Introduction

This pilot case study originates in the authors’ interests in the open technology movement and in better understanding informal community learning. We selected Cultural Historical Activity Theory, CHAT, as the study framework. We envision learning as an outcome of everyday activities and believe that it is important to understand the ways that we learn collectively. Our research concurs with Youn and Baptiste (2007) in suggesting that it isn’t necessarily fruitful to separate individual learners or subject-object, and that a part of breaking apart that dualism is to explore how artifacts can serve as multi-directional conduits. The framework will offer a way to understand a collective learning event or activity as integrated individual learning, rather than separate learners fitting together to make a whole. Arguing, in a sense, that the sum of the parts is greater somehow than the finite vision we often have.

Our application of CHAT in this instance also draws upon Sawchuck’s paper regarding anti-poverty community organizing (2011). Open source gatherings such as a BarCamp are intentional acts of resistance – they are conceptualized to some degree as counter culture sites of collective, egalitarian learning though BarCamps do not claim an activist agenda. We believe that the framing of this pilot work with CHAT will allow both an understanding of the informal, collective learning that occurs in BarCamps and perhaps a richer understanding of the nuances of the theoretical framework itself.

Open space technology and BarCamps

Open space technology (OST) is one type of non-formal learning that began in the early 1980’s. The idea is: as few ‘formal’ rules as possible, create a collective agenda in the moment based upon the attendees, and share knowledge (rather than selling or hoarding it), use as much of it as activity or experience based as possible, and create an informal, collective learning community. OST was created as an organizational management tool, but the ethos was quickly picked up by technologists who wanted to freely share technology knowledge. The OST meeting style creates a non-formal, public pedagogical space in which participants can discuss technology issues in a democratic style that favors adult learners. In other words, it is an intentional way of being – rejecting the notion that knowledge is and should be ‘held’ by individuals and instead it promotes the idea that knowledge is co-created and shared. This way of being suggests that we should all routinely interact in ways that promote shared learning and knowledge creation without concern for knowledge ownership or top-down approaches to communities of learners. Open Space World describes open space environments in this way: “it’s been called passion bounded by responsibility, the energy of a good coffee break, intentional self-organization, spirit at work,

chaos and creativity, evolution in organization, and a simple, powerful way to get people and organizations moving -- when and where it's needed most" (About Open Space, 2012).

A BarCamp is a free or very low-cost event organized around the ideal of sharing and creating technology knowledge with all participants, and a format designed to encourage democratic consensus-based and experiential practices for deciding upon topics and learning processes. Anyone can attend, and participation and democratic experiential learning is highly encouraged. There is a notable unique learning culture, based upon forming or sustaining an identity as a media or technology user and as an informal learner. There is typically a venue and a theme, a public invitation, sometimes a registration process with either no or a very low fee, and that's enough to get started.

A typical BarCamp event begins with an opening forum during which attendees pitch their ideas, similar to a brainstorming session. The entire group votes on the sessions that they would like to see occur. The learning agenda is set, ad-hoc, and sessions begin. Those facilitating a session are encouraged to utilize experiential learning techniques and to share their practices, ideas or expertise and invite others to contribute to take the ideas further. A part of the BarCamp experience is that web-based tools such as blogs, wikis, twitter, and social bookmarking are used to document and share information as it evolves and participants can communicate across and within sessions as posts emerge in real time as well as after the meeting. (About Open Space, 2012; BarCamp, 2012; Open Source Initiative, 2012). The culture is grassroots – for example, see a current website for a “BarCamp Tour” featuring a road schedule for those interested in joining in (2012 BarCamp)

Research Design

This qualitative pilot case study was designed to be exploratory in nature (Yin, 1993) and as such it is intended to be a foundation to a larger future study. The preliminary questions which guided this study were: 1) What is the nature of a BarCamp event experience? 2) How can we understand participant BarCamp experiences, particularly in relation to collective, community organized learning? The pilot data was gathered through observations of BarCamp events, analysis of the supporting blogs, wikis, twitter or social bookmarking posts, and via individual face-to-face interviews with two participants. We used two approaches: a pre-selected coding structure based upon the five CHAT domains, and open thematic coding (Creswell, 2007).

Findings

The BarCamp meeting was held in the southeastern United States during November 2012. Most participants were white males between 25 and 45 with a “techie” orientation and the environment is informal and friendly or collegial in tone. A certain level of “geekiness” is expected among the participants even in their pop culture knowledge (mentions of science-fiction and fantasy worlds are thrown about as common knowledge). So there is an assumed language (jargon) among participants; however, the language will be explained if someone asks. An obvious openness or willingness to share information to help fellow participants learn about different tools is the norm. Facilitators were designated temporary ‘experts’ and appeared eager and open to audience suggestions, in other words, they are experts in that they know enough to lead the discussion but are also expecting all participants, including themselves, to learn from one another. There are some assumptions among BarCampers that attendees want to share their knowledge, that they are “digitally social” in their daily lives and that they share a love of technology. BarCampers communicate quite a bit through Twitter and are more likely to

share information in that forum rather than Facebook. In addition, presenters will often share their talks on shareable forums such as Google Docs so everyone can refer to the information as needed. The community is “online” during the entire day.

Of the 49 sessions 34 focused on various aspects of science and technology or STEM. All 34 of the STEM topics included a tools and practices or applied component. Some of the sessions include how CT scans work and how they reduce the radiation dose. Technology sessions include how to use Scrivener to “organize, write and revise a book” (Watkins, 2012) to aspects of Amazon Web Services cloud computing platform as a personal a business tool. These sessions would also include any specialized jargon or language or shorthand used by participants; it could include the democratic style of the session facilitation.

Topics include technology support and special interest groups.. Sessions also focused on *birds of a feather* discussions, which brings together participants seeking information on the same topic such as non-profit work or Google. There was also a participant who asked “*for someone to educate me an arduino...*” (Arduino!, 2012) which was a call to the community for help. For those with interests outside technology there were sessions on model railroading, modern roller derby and dating. Many of the sessions suggested hands on activities as a part of the presentation. For example, participants were invited to download SCVNGR, a mobile app that asks you to complete challenges in a scavenger hunt as a part of one session, thus learning a new tool and potential applications. Another example of a pitch for a session: “It is almost time for Christmas television sales. How do you compare HD televisions to one another? Most people know 1080 is better than 720. What about “i” vs “p”? What about dpi? What about LCD vs LED vs Plasma vs OLED? What about 3D? I can explain how all of this (and a lot more) relates and I can even explain how the quality of glue used to connect all the parts of the screen together makes a difference in quality. So, before you go blow \$1,000 on a television, you will know exactly what you are getting and what you are sacrificing for that big sale” (Wagner, 2012).

The rules for BarCamp are: “When you come, be prepared to share with barcampers. When you leave, be prepared to share it with the world” (BarCamp, 2012). Further, the attitude is that when people attend a BarCamp they are all “participants not spectators” (BarCamp 2012). People are expected to join the discussion whether as presenters or participants. One rule of major importance is that “presentations promoting specific commercial products or companies are discounted” as the event is not intended to promote corporations (BarCamp, 2012). The camps often have corporate sponsors and this can create tensions. Sponsors will discuss their products – and the sessions *are labeled as corporate* to make the distinction explicit.

Another rule is that participants will share information without reservation. For example – software code is not proprietary, it can be given to anyone to do with what they will – as long as they don’t turn it into a commercial enterprise.

It is expected that discussions should not be “sage on the stage” type. Some presenters may pitch their ideas at the last minute then have to borrow a device to share the info...they bring everyone into the mix. There is often a brainstorming aspect to the event or ”how can we make this work for you” type activities. One group built a robot that everyone at the camp could come play with:

[“@BarCampCHS the team 342 robot is now operational! Come play!” \(3delizabeth, 2012\).](#)

One area of difference? Coding “wars” – similar to the Mac vs. PC wars – can get passionate without being nasty. Even the pitches are not formal: “Are you part of a micro-nonprofit? Do you get frustrated when reading an NP article and the author refers to a “small” NP as “only a few employees and

a budget under \$1 million"? Does it make you scream "That's not small! These people have paid staff! And a million freaking dollars! Each year!" Or maybe you were in this position, but now you've made it to the next level, hired that first staffer, and you want to share your wisdom." (Burton, 2012).

The Twitter community was developed around a hashtag #barcampchs and the user @barcampchs. Twitter was used as a way to inform the community about raffle winners, scheduling and possible interruptions during the day. These tweets were directed at the BarCamp community as a whole to provide logistical information. In addition participants were tweeting their thanks to the event organizers in ways such as "great day of learning at my 1st BarCampCHS" and "learned about art, software, power of linkedin and unifying chs tech community. Thanks" (MacMcSwan, 2012; loganwedwards, 2012).

Another tweet describes a session where the participants participated in the game to see how the tool worked then gathered to create their own game: "For gamified life session, go to <http://scvngr.com/> and get app. Then, search for Robert Smalls Building. Then complete challenges 2 win." (barcampchs, 2012c). If you arrived at the right place, you had figured out the game.

In some cases learning "assessment" is built into the discussions; for example, one facilitator suggested that participants create their Google accounts so they could work with the facilitator on some of the tools. Participants could then create and share information using a variety of Google products. During the workshop participants shared ideas on ways they could use this in their school or workplace – opening up new ideas for the group at large. Everyone could see if the tool was "understood" and used by the participants.

Discussion

One of the interesting aspects of the BarCamp experience is that some of the central motives and goals appear to include individual learning and improvement of techie skills, *group* self-directed learning (which is not new but an important conceptualization), and a focus on learning as an outcome of joint activities that have a sense of spontaneity. The lines are somewhat blurred between *individual and collective* and between the *formal and the informal*. Further, there is a sense that one of the implicit motives of BarCamps is the development or reinforcement of a collective consciousness about how we garner and share technological knowledge and skills. Perhaps this is a good potential research area for investigating some of the CHAT questions about how to explore the notion of collective, systems learning while accounting for its messiness and multiplicity. At the same time we can consider the ways that a BarCamp as a community of practice may have an ethos that can be understood with more depth and shared with other communities.

Another aspect of the BarCamp experience is the concept of *technology* – it permeates every aspect of the community. Technology, in this case, can be seen as a part of the culture, a mediated action, an activity, a tool, a part of production, consumption and exchange, and it served as part of the division of labor in concrete and abstract ways. There are BarCamp rules regarding the use of technology, the improvement or adaptation of technology is certainly a desired outcome of some participants and/or the group. Technology and the notion of open sharing versus proprietary technology is contested and a shared value and also a contradiction for many. It was a great source of confusion and excitement in the analysis. We had difficulty constructing another imaginary example of how one concept can move so fluidly within the BarCamp experience or a CHAT analysis. Thus, it will serve as

the launching point for the discussion of the BarCamp pilot and an exploration of CHAT constructs at the presentation.

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