PROME: A THEORETICAL FRAMING FOR ONLINE MENTORING

Katja NEUREITER[1], Clement LEEMANS[2], Manfred TSCHELIGI[3]

ABSTACT

The demographic shift towards a decreasing share of people of working age and an increasing relative number of those, who are retired but still quite active, requires solutions that support older adults taking an active role in society. ProMe allows getting active as a mentor on an online platform to share professional knowledge with younger generations. In this paper we outline the theoretical basis for the platform, addressing social-psychological aspects for knowledge sharing and HCI perspectives that need to be considered. Besides we provide first insights from user studies.

Keywords: Intergenerational Cooperation, Communication, Collaboration, Intergenerational learning, Coaching, Mentoring, Community of practice

1. Introduction

Integration and connectedness of older adults to enhance quality of life are major topics and challenges of AAL solutions. The ProMe platform offers support to older adults in order to manage their transition from an occupational lifestyle towards and into retirement. ProMe allows them to support upcoming professionals, ranging from accompanying a person over a longer period (e.g., in the process of starting up a company) to simply offering advice or information on specific topics. In order to provide more than just a variety of different means of communication (e.g., text messaging, video calls), we offer the opportunity to take on different support roles and to engage in different types of professional collaboration on the platform. So far, we focus on three types of professional collaboration reflected in the role of *mentor*, *coach*, and *network facilitator*. The mentor focuses on career development and personal growth. The coaching relationship encompasses the idea of helping the coachee to perform and develop at work, related to a specific professional assignment, project, problem or challenge. The network facilitator supports the

[1] ICT&S Center, University of Salzburg, e-mail: Katja.Neureiter@sbg.ac.at
[2] Sociale School Heverlee, Leuven University College, e-mail: clement.leemans@khleuven.be / clement.leemans@movelearning.com
[3] ICT&S Center, University of Salzburg, e-mail: Manfred.Tscheligi@sbg.ac.at

process of network learning in a community of practice and encourages network members to share and develop knowledge and expertise in a defined professional area, e.g., a specific field of expertise. In order to do so, different opportunities for communication are enabled through a variety of functionalities on the platform, e.g., video, text-chat, email, blogs, etc. The main challenge is to provide more than simply different means of communication but to offer the possibility to take on different support roles and engage in collaboration that is addressing the specific needs of the users.

In the following paper we describe the theoretical framing for the ProMe platform and provide first insights with respect to the implementation of the different roles of collaboration. We describe the theoretical background on collaboration and knowledge sharing from a socio-psychological perspective and will outline in what way technologies can support collaborative processes.

2. Three forms of collaboration

Collaboration is mainly understood as a cooperative arrangement, supporting two or more parties to work towards a common goal. This can be described as a kind of psychological contract that implies mutual obligations in order to reach the common goal and that can be described as "… a set of individual beliefs or set of assumptions about promises voluntarily given and accepted in the context of a voluntary exchange relationship between two or more parties." [3] With respect to the ProMe platform the success for a valuable collaborative relationship requires the development of a shared and transparent contract between a requester of support (e.g., mentee) and a supporter, meaning that an individual's perceptions of mutual obligations need to be clear to both parties. Information about what users on the platform can expect and what is expected of them when entering a collaborative relationship is seen as an important precondition for a successful relationship.

For the purpose of the project we distinguish between three forms of collaborative relationships. One way to differentiate these three is to look at the degree of 'directiveness' of the supporter. The directive versus non-directive continuum is based on who is predominantly driving the relationship, and on the role supporter and requester take in the relationship (see Figure 1).
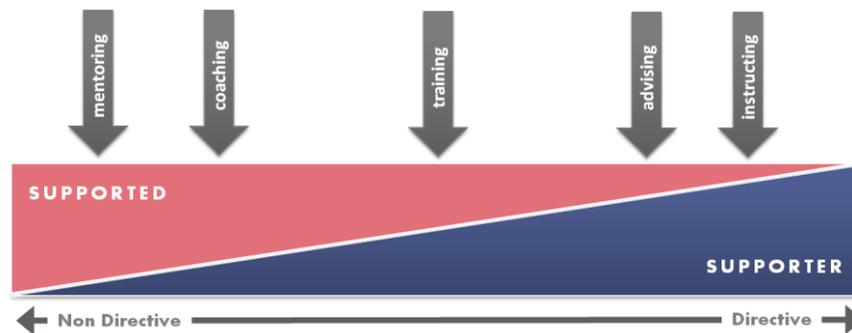
Figure 1: Adapted from : The consulting process in action [5]

Mentoring is the most non directive role, which we define as a developmental relationship, involving intense accompanying of the mentee by a more experienced mentor and focusing on both career development behaviors and personal growth and development, especially psycho-social support. Mentoring is characterized by taking a more holistic view on the person (mentee) and is not focusing exclusively on one specific topic. It is usually also seen as an 'open ended' relationship, where coaching to the contrary, ends when the 'issue or problem' the coaching process was focusing on, is solved.

According to Stern [10] coaching can be defined as an experiential, individualized development process, focusing at improving a person's skills, knowledge and job performance, leading to the achievement of organizational objectives. It targets high performance and improvement at work, usually lasts for a short period and focuses on specific skills and goals [1]. Coaching is also non-directive in the sense that the coach is not telling the coachee what to do but challenges his thinking and focuses on helping the coachee to develop alternative (innovative) courses of action in order to cope with the issues at hand, i.e., "helping the coachee learn rather than teaching them" [13].

As a third option for a collaborative relationship we define professional network learning, as a community of practice, where a group of people share a common concern, a set of problems, or interest in a topic (field of expertise) and who come together to fulfill both individual and group goals [12]. The experienced professional can play in such a community of practice two distinctive roles: sharing his expertise and experience as a member of the community or acting as a process facilitator in order to help the community to share and to learn from each other.

3. Supporting collaboration in a mediated environment

In order to put these concepts of collaborative relationships into practice, i.e., support different forms of collaboration on the platform, we consider social presence and media richness theory. Both concepts are valuable instruments to describe the ability of a communication medium to reproduce information. The modalities that are supported through the platform have been identified as influencing the communication and collaboration between people [8]. Depending on the form of collaboration with respect to the different roles we assume that different modalities are required, whereby there might be overlapping.

Social presence refers to the feeling of being present with somebody else when communicating over distance. It has especially raised attention in the context of learning environments, i.e., how to support collaboration best (e.g., [4][7][11]). First approaches for a definition of social presence originate from Short et al. [9] who define it as *"the degree of salience of the other person in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions"* (65), emphasizing the importance of a medium's qualities, e.g., to convey visual or auditory cues. Social presence, the experience that the communication partner is there, can perceived distance [14] and thus encourages immediate responses of the communication partner. Social presence is, for example, expected to be lower in asynchronous (e.g., e-mail) than synchronous (e.g., live chat) communication. Moreover, enhanced sensory stimulation through a variety of different non-verbal cues positively influences the awareness of the communication partner [6]. Similar to social presence theory, media richness theory [2] assumes that the goal of any communication is the resolution of ambiguity and the reduction of uncertainty, which is influenced by the amount of information media allow to convey.

For the purpose of the ProMe platform we consider social presence as one important aspect when implementing different opportunities of collaboration on the platform. The higher social presence, the larger the social influence that the communication partners have on each other's behavior, which of course influences collaborative processes [8]. In the next section we will provide first examples in what way socio-psychological aspects of knowledge sharing and insights we gained from social presence theory are brought into practice, supporting the process of implementing different types of collaboration on the platform.

4. The framing of three support roles

We consider collaboration as a voluntary exchange relationship and cooperative arrangement, in the sense of a kind of psychological contract that implies mutual obligations to reach a common goal. In order to allow the development of

such a relationship it is most important that expectations and obligations of requester and supporter are clearly defined. For that reason we suggest that requester and supporter will be well informed about the different forms of collaboration, before they engage in a mutual collaborative relationship. This could be done, for example, by providing a short video that illustrates the different forms of collaboration, including information about obligations and expectations. In a second step, user profiles (from supporter and requester) could give more background information when deciding for a certain form of collaboration, which we would define as a kind of initiation tools.

With respect to the different forms of collaboration mentoring might be the collaborative relationship that requires the highest level of social presence. It focuses on career development behaviors, personal growth and development, especially psycho-social support. Being a mentor for somebody else implies seeing the collaboration partner in a holistic manner, actually accompanying somebody else over a longer period and not only or exclusively to support a mentee to reach a certain goal. Collaboration in a mentoring relationship is more than simply sharing information and supporting somebody else with respect to a certain goal but being more a companion. This in turn requires that the platform allows developing a trustworthy relationship, which can be supported through social presence. We suggest, that for example the opportunity for video-conferencing would allow mentor and mentee to get to know each other and would provide an opportunity to reduce perceived distance [14].

5. Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined the theoretical background for the framing of three mentoring roles on the ProMe platform and have provided first insights on how different forms of collaboration could be designed. In a next step, these ideas are further elaborated including potential end users, which we consider as important contributors for the success of the platform.

6. Acknowledgements

REFERENCES

[1] *CIPD.* Mentoring – CIPD Factsheet. Last download on 19th August 2014: https://www.shef.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.110468!/file/cipd_mentoring_factsheet.pdf

[2] *Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R. H.* Organizational information requirements, media richness and structural design. Management science, 32(5), 1986, 554-571

[3] *Denise Rousseau.* Psychological Contracts in Organizations. Understanding Written and Unwritten Agreements. Sage Publications,1995

[4] *Gunawardena, C.N.:* Social presence theory and implications for interaction and collaborative learning in computer conferences. International journal of educational telecommunications 1(2). 1995, 147–166

[5] *G. Lippitt and R. Lippitt.* The Consulting Process in Action (2nd ed.) Pfeiffer & Company, 1986

[6] *Mukawa, N., Oka, T., Arai, K., Yuasa, M.* What is connected by mutual gaze?: user's behavior in video-mediated communication. In: CHI EA '05, 1677–1680

[7] *Richardson, J.C., Swan, K.:* Examining social presence in online courses in relation to students' perceived learning and satisfaction. JALN 7(1), 2003, 68–88

[8] *Salnäss, E.-L., Rassmus-Gröhn, K., Sjöström, C.* Supporting Presence in Collaborative Environments by Haptic Force Feeback. ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction, Vol.7/4. 2000, 461-476.

[9] Short, John, Ederyn Williams, and Bruce Christie. "The social psychology of telecommunications." (1976).

[10] *Stern, L. R. Executive coaching:* A working definition. Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 56 (3), 2004, 154-162.

[11] *Tu, C.H., McIsaac, M.:* The relationship of social presence and interaction in online classes. The American journal of distance education 16(3), 2002, 131–150

[12] *Wenger E, McDermott R., Snyder W.* Cultivating Communities of Practice: Guide to Managing Knowledge, Harvard Business School Press. 2002

[13] *Whitmore, J.* Coaching For Performance: Growing People, Performance and Purpose. Nichalas Brealey Publishing. 3rd revised Edition. 2003

[14] *Woods Jr, R.H., Baker, J.D.* Interaction and immediacy in online learning. International Review of Research in Open & Distance Learning 5(2), 2004