Service Oriented Approaches and Lifelong Competence Development Infrastructures

Proceedings of the TENComptence Open Workshop in Manchester, UK, 11th and 12th January 2007
Editors: David Griffiths, Rob Koper, Oleg Liber

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Introduction

These proceedings consist of the peer reviewed papers presented at the Second TENCompetence Open Workshop, with the theme Service Oriented Approaches and Lifelong Competence Development Infrastructures. The workshop took place at the G-Mex Manchester International Conference Centre, UK, on the 11th and 12th of January 2007.

TENCompetence is an Integrated Project funded by the EU 6th Framework Programme, which runs for four years from December 2005. The aims of the project are to develop an European, open-source infrastructure that will support the lifelong development of competences. More specifically the infrastructure will enable individuals, teams and organisations to:

1. Create formal and informal Learning Networks in different professions and domains of knowledge.
2. Assess and manage the competences that are acquired at any stage in life by the participants of the Learning Network, taking into account that people have learned from many different formal and informal learning sources.
3. Stimulate the reflection on the current competences to support the formulation of new learning goals.
4. Search for adequate formal and informal learning resources to build new competences or to update existing competences in a profession or domain of knowledge.
5. Provide the actual learning environment that is needed to perform the learning activities.
6. Provide effective and efficient support to learners.
7. Support the sharing of learning resources.

To meet these needs the project has developed a domain model for Lifelong Competence Development. This has been implemented in a client-server system called the Personal Competence Manager (PCM) which enables individuals, groups and organisations to manage the whole range of their lifelong competence development activities. The system integrates a number of existing open-source applications, together with the outcomes of research and development work carried out by the project into models and tools for:

- knowledge resource sharing and management
- learning and assessment activities
- competence development programmes
- networks for lifelong competence development
A key part of the strategy adopted by the project is the use of open-source licenses for all software which is adapted or developed for inclusion in the TENCompetence system, and publication of all models and other relevant documentation under Creative Commons licenses. To make this strategy effective, the project promotes public engagement with the research which it undertakes through a series of public workshops. These are of two types. Firstly, the project organises its own open workshops, each with a theme related to the research being undertaken by the project. The first of these was held in Sofia, Bulgaria, in March 2006, and the second was the Manchester workshop which led to the production of these proceedings. Secondly, the project collaborates with other organisations to set up workshops which address related issues, as was the case with the joint PROLEARN – TENCompetence workshop at EC-TEL 2006, and at ICALT 2006. The project also organises an annual winter school, where PhD students are invited to become part of the TENCompetence research community. The proceedings of all these events are available from the TENCompetence public Web site.

The area of Lifelong Competence Development is extremely wide, as it includes (among other aspects) informal learning, professional development, higher education, competence based approaches, assessment models, learning design and IMS Learning Design (LD), and personal development activities of all sorts. As might be expected, the issues raised by the provision of a technical infrastructure to support this wide field are also wide ranging, including Service Oriented Architectures, programming frameworks, open-source organisational models, interoperability specifications, domain models, Personal Learning Environments, competence frameworks.

Within this wider context the theme chosen for the Manchester workshop was Service Oriented Approaches and Lifelong Competence Development Infrastructures. This was chosen, firstly, because it was a key issue for TENCompetence at a stage where the architecture for the integrated architecture was being finalised. Secondly, it was seen as being particularly appropriate for the UK TENCompetence open workshop because of the potential synergies with the work carried out by JISC in developing the e-Framework in applying Service Oriented Architectures (SOAs) to education. It was therefore gratifying to see the participation in the workshop of a significant number of JISC funded projects, including MANSLE, Horus, mPLAT, ioNetworks, JISC CETIS, and the CETIS Portfolio SIG.

The call for papers for the workshop requested contributions from researchers working on SOAs, or on the infrastructure for lifelong competence development, and did not focus exclusively on the intersection between the two fields. This encouraged the participation and exchange of ideas from a wide range of researchers working in the area. The papers included in the Proceedings have been grouped into five thematic sections. These were established for the programme of presentations at the workshop, and reflect some of the key foci of the TENCompetence project.

1. **Support for social engagement in Lifelong Competence Development.** The top level unit of organisation addressed by TENCompetence is the network, a group of people who share an interest in a particular domain of competence development. Consequently the investigation of the various aspects of social

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1 www.tencompetence.org

2 www.jisc.ac.uk
social groups reported here is a key focus of interest.

2. **Pedagogical applications of Service Oriented Architectures.** Service Oriented Architectures are a foundation stone of the TENCompetence project architecture. The papers here do not report on the architecture of the project itself, which was not finalised, but rather on related aspects and initiatives.

3. **Managing and sharing knowledge resources and activities.** The management of content and resources, and the development of innovative approaches to their creation, storage and sharing is a key factor in competence development. Consequently it is a basic requirement of the TENCompetence system. Among the aspects discussed in the papers in this section are semantic interoperability, Open Content, formats, production processes and cultural issues.

4. **Competence development and interoperability.** In this section we group together a number of papers presenting enabling models, including a number from the TENCompetence project itself, together with examples of practical experiences.

5. **Approaches to assessment.** While assessment is of importance in all education and learning, it has a particular significance with competence based approaches because it provides a means for participants to situate themselves within a competence development network.

Noticeable by its absence from this list of themes is design for learning, and IMS LD (although there are individual papers which do deal with this topic). This has been reserved as the main theme of the forthcoming TENCompetence Open Workshop on Current research on IMS Learning Design and Lifelong Competence Development Infrastructures, to be held in Barcelona in June 2007.

The Second TENCompetence Open Workshop was a highly stimulating two days in which researchers from all over Europe came together to discuss Service Oriented Approaches and Lifelong Competence Development Infrastructures, and we hope that these proceedings will serve to make the insights achieved available to a wider audience. To ensure the maximum impact of the best contributions five authors have been invited to submit expanded papers to a special issue of the International Journal of Learning Technology. We also aspire to continuing the discussion of these issues within TENCompetence, and interested readers are encouraged readers to engage with the ongoing research carried out by the project. The TENCompetence Web site publishes calls for participation in events, links to research outcomes of the project, and to the public forums where all are welcome to discuss a wide range of issues related to the project.

Finally, we would like to thank the programme committee whose efforts in reviewing submissions made the workshop possible, the organisers who ensured the smooth running of the event, and all those authors who committed their time and energy to sharing their research with the wider community through their participation.

The Editors:

- David Griffiths
- Rob Koper
- Oleg Liber
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Support for social engagement in Lifelong Competence Development
Considering "workblogs" as Organisational knowledge management tools

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Abstract: "weblogs", are being applied by organisations in their attempts to harness the tacit knowledge of workers and develop "organisational intelligence" as part of broad knowledge management and communication strategies. This activity could play a key role in the competence development of knowledge workers and support personal (lifelong) learning strategies.

The new genre of “workblogs” could provide organisations with access to network spaces for intelligence gathering and dissemination. However, inherent in this practice are tensions that require consideration by all stakeholders alike. The open, relatively anonymous, and democratic nature of “social” “bogging” culture could challenge organisational hierarchies.

Analysing practice including blog conversations, espoused policy and use by organisations as part of their communication strategy the authors introduce the notion of “protected authority”: which could result in stifling the “open” nature of “blog” conversational culture and render ineffective the application of this emergent technology in support of strategic knowledge management initiatives.

Keywords: blogs, workblogs, , knowledge management, protected authority, communication strategy.

1 Introduction

The authors argue that in order to be effective within the knowledge society, organisations must harness the personal enthusiasm of their knowledge workers to develop a competitive advantage. Employees are part of extended learning networks that may span institutions and cross borders drawn by the more day-to-day focus of the organisations' business strategies. To identify future trends or track emerging practices, knowledge workers may be required to share information with their competitors, challenge institutional hierarchies and circumvent information management strategies. In a networked society this can be conducted through the use of communication technologies such as workblogs, replacing “water cooler” conversations or chance meetings in corridors.

The Joint Information Systems Committee’s Centre for Educational and Technology Interoperability Standards (JISC CETIS) service in the UK has established the use of employee “workblogs” as the focus of its knowledge management and communication strategy. The new strategy orchestrates the personal and professional voices of all the service staff in a “bottom-up” manner: attempting to provider much richer content,
perspective and develop organisational intelligence. This includes aggregating both existing personal blogs and creating organisational blogs. Undoubtedly more complex and challenging; the policy could be considered controversial and inherently dangerous.

The practice of harnessing the undercurrent of networked societies is certainly not new. Indeed, there have been numerous attempts to use mailing lists, discussion fora, and “guest books”, to engage with customers and the wider community in order to develop new ideas. It appears that in academic communities the use of these “traditional” channels may have gone into decline. As Jill Walker observes, concerning research and scholarly mailing lists; "most have devolved into distribution channels for conference announcements or for irregular and off-topic random postings." And she continues: "Blogs are still on the ascendant and may never go through such a decline..." (Walker 2006).

According to the Garner hype curve of mid-2005, Corporate Blogging is on its way down to the bottom of what Efimova & Grudin, describe as the "Trough of Disillusionment". In this paper the authors reflect upon the risk of disillusionment that may arise in connection with the introduction of blogging in the workspace – disillusionment which may pose a threat to the potential of bringing lifelong learners up to the "Plateau of Productivity".

Observation of early attempts in Norway at establishing “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998) uncovered serious stakeholder concerns in respect of open discussion. Was this experience an example of premature technology implementation, or was it indicative of the future organisational and social issues that are emerging now when weblogging is a legitimate activity undertaken by workers as an element of the organisational knowledge management and communication strategy?

2 Weblogs as personal and professional practice

In general weblogs\(^1\) give low-threshold access to publishing tools and exposing a voice online. If we focus on weblogs in the context of the workplace then another aspect of the weblog becomes interesting: the ability to provide a “personal protected space” where the individual can communicate with others while retaining control (Gumbrecht, 2004). Ownership seems to be necessary to unleash the enthusiasm and effort that is required to engage workers in the practice, resulting in the regular postings that are essential to the success of the activity and ultimately to harnessing “the wisdom of the crowd” for organisational objectives.

Evidence of this notional aspect of workblogging is provided by the experience of JISC CETIS, who took a policy decision in March 2006 that “workblogging” would become the focus of their communication and organisational knowledge management strategy. JISC CETIS did not introduce the activity with strict policy guidelines regarding use although staff were asked to “tag” their postings as individual reflections (personal), internal organisational reflections (internal), and external (public) reflections (front page). Postings that are aggregated to the web site front page are subject to editorial control. We anticipate that as the JISC CETIS workblog practice evolves, tensions may emerge as described in “Blogging from Inside the Ivory Tower” (Walker 2006). She describes how she finds it harder to blog now: "I preferred blogging when most people didn't know about it." She started to blog when she was outside the academic system. "It's different though,

\(^1\) answers.com defines weblog as "A website that displays in chronological order the postings by one or more individuals and usually has links to comments on specific postings." (answers.com, accessed 2006-11-26)
being on the inside of the system”. Her question is what happens when research blogs - and their authors - become part of the academic system rather than being outsiders trying to get in?

It is not only the discomfort of being recognised and targeted with specific opinions and comments by persons that you never have met, making blogging within the “ivory tower” more difficult. Other more fundamental, issues are involved, pointing to the importance of hierarchy.

3 When those with Power enter the Blogosphere

The authors reflections on the conditions of professional dialogue across hierarchies are framed by experience of events in Norway in 2006 where a “blogger” in a position of authority in the Norwegian Educational system. A full textural analysis of the dialogue is the subject of further work. In summary, however, the Habermasian (McCarthy 1978) ideal of speech situation, where participants are equally endowed with the capacities of discourse, was unachievable in a larger part due to the “protected authority” of the “blogger” in authority. Tensions emerged, consistent with findings by Goffman in relation to “conventional” dialogue, relating to the funding of future projects which distorted the relationship between the participants preventing open and constructive dialogue.

"In general then, when a rule of conduct is broken we find that two individuals run the risk of becoming discredited: one with an obligation, who should have governed himself by the rule; the other with an expectation, who should have been treated in a particular way because of this governance. Both actor and recipient are threatened." (Goffman, 1967)

4 Discussion

The relative anonymity and openness of some forms of electronic conversations may dissolve the hierarchical systems that make many organisations and systems work the way they do. Stephen & Harrison suggest this as an "interesting, if unpleasant, reason for the decline of useful, constructive discussions" in their 1994 study of the Comserve electronic community which used mailing lists (in Walker, 2006). Weblogs have in many communities of practice fulfilled the role of both the communication channel and the organisational glue that mailing lists used to offer. Hierarchies have the power to make emergent communication practices change direction.

In Walker's current position as a tenured faculty member in the hierarchical meritocracy of a university, she still "loves these inversions of conventional power relationships that blogs and other forms of online publications make possible.” However, her ambivalence towards keeping an active blog emphasises the inherent tensions in blogging from the Ivory Tower. The tensions could also be a challenge for bloggers in workplaces other than Academia. Are workblogs doomed to become silent and ineffective or to change focus as the tensions caused by hierarchy and protected authority develop?

In many domains there is an urgent need for open dialogue to develop and construct knowledge. In a paper to the 2006 ICALT conference Hoel (2006) asserts the need for open processes to develop technologies based on service-oriented approaches claiming that this has proved difficult in a country like Norway where there is a tendency to blur the distinction between the Knowledge Building and the Decision Making processes, see figure 1.
Within public management there is a danger that the management logic of decision making processes is invading the space for knowledge building and open discourse. If the expert communities are small, it may prove difficult to have an open and active online conversation on any issue before the web of postings and comments become entangled in hierarchical power plays. The result could be that control of the known protected authority becomes more important than exploring the unknown.

If blogging is not straightforward in academia and public administration, the stumbling blocks could be potentially more disruptive in the corporate sector where an unfortunate posting could influence the stock market. The headline "Corporate Blogging: Killer App or Corporate Killer?" from a consultant offering to help companies build effective blog strategies (Lewis, 2005) states the dilemma succinctly for those workbloggers in the private sector.

Efimova and Grudin (2007) have studied the adoption of Employee Blogs at Microsoft. They found "an experimental, rapidly-evolving terrain marked by growing sophistication about balancing personal, team, and corporate incentives and issues". Both the company and the employees struggled to find some accepted middle ground between work and private life, and between controversial issues and issues that did not reveal any company secrets but still attracted readers. When the researchers asked if there were any guidelines for weblog practice they were repeatedly told that "the policy is that there is no
policy”, or “the policy is 'be smart'”. Both employees and employers could benefit from weblogs, Efimova and Grudin conclude:

“For an employee, a weblog can provide a space to share passion for work, to document and organize ideas and work practices, to find and engage others inside and outside the organization. For an employer, this can result in accelerated information flow, increased productivity, improved reputation and customer engagement, but also in greater dependence on personalities, less control over the corporate face to the outside world, and possible challenges to hierarchy.” (Efimova & Grudin, 2007)

4.1 Blogging as boundary practice – consequences for the employer and the employee

Efimova has in her blog (http://blog.mathemagenic.com/) described blogging as a "boundary practice" shaped by at least three contexts, see figure 2.

Fig. 2 Personal perspectives on work seen from the knowledge worker's perspective, from Efimova. http://blog.mathemagenic.com/2006/11/06.html#a1851
From the blogger's perspective blogging is a personal, individual and private activity. Workblogging is a subset of this activity and means that the blogger in some respects is crossing the boundaries into the company domain. However, if the company is not aware of both the personal and private aspects of blogging, it may not be able to understand the tensions that could arise when the external community starts to react to the blog posts. This is not a question of content focus or content style even if postings are thematically work related. The personal dimension of blogging activity will undoubtedly emerge.

JISC CETIS, could use the following policy proposals to address the inherent tensions in workblogging for stakeholders:

1. Define the concept of the “workblog”
2. Introduce an editorial process for “workblog” postings
3. Develop the “workbloggers” community
4. Encourage employees to write separate blogs for work and private life
5. Introduce community “workblogs” with their own community identity
6. Give up identifiable “workblogs” and mask the identities of the powerbloggers

Table 1. Policy proposals for the application of workblogs.

We argue that, in understanding the weblog as a social phenomenon, it may not possible to enforce guidelines that blogs should be topic as opposed to author focused. A case study provided by Efimova & Grudin (2007) showed that employee bloggers were very conscious that it was their "personal voice" that attracted readers. That was why they were very reluctant to accept proposals from the company to convey certain messages, e.g. concerning new products, new features etc. It also seems that the personal or individual identity aspect of weblogs are somewhat built into the technology itself. The social ecosystem of "blogologues" are distributed conversations between online identities (Efimova & Fiedler, 2004) supported by blogging software technologies such as blogrolls, pingbacks, permalinks etc. Even if weblogs are not more than collections of links and short commentaries, the blogs projects identity, and the bloggers themselves become "human information routers" for like-minded readers (Efimova & Fiedler, 2004).

In some organisations an editorial process for blogging means the active moderation of blog entries by an editor. For active bloggers it is possible that the very idea of introducing some kind of super-consciousness would make them withdraw. Experienced bloggers write for their perceived audience, not for their editor. It is possible that a new genre of “workblogger” could emerge, one sensitive to organisational perspectives and used to writing with editorial control in mind. Such a writer would be more akin to the journalist on a traditional publication than to the early adopters of blogging technology occupying the space just now.

However, JISC CETIS already employs loose guidelines that might be more in accordance with the ethos of social software users. Tags are introduced to help the editor to aggregate appropriate blog entries to the front page. It is an accepted convention within the blogging community to use tags to facilitate discussions on how certain pieces of information or opinion should be framed. The tacit dialogue about what might be "constructive" between the JISC CETIS editor and the workbloggers could in itself be productive. The tagging process could represent a valid area for further research.
For many knowledge workers the idea of having separate blogs might be strange, one for
work issues and one for personal interests. Alternatively a blog with different sections
might be used: An example of this practice is the chief architect of the Topic Map
standard, Lars Marius Garshol, who runs a blog at www.garshol.priv.no that has three
categories: Technology, Beer and Personal.

Judging from recent practice in Norway, community blogs raise some issues concerning
sustainability. The Norwegian Opening University launched a "group blog" at
http://norgesuniversitetet.wordpress.com/. It has not been successful as seasoned
bloggers do not sign up for group accounts, preferring to maintain their own blogs, and
novice bloggers do not provide stimulating enough postings to attract an audience.

Walker (2006) describes the academic “masked identity” scenario with pseudonymous
blogs about academic life. We argue that this may not be a viable approach outside
Academia, where employees do not experience the same degree of job protection.
Companies are concerned about unflattering portrayals and leaks; there are several
reported incidents which have led to employee bloggers being fired (Efimova & Grundin,
2007; Hill, 2005; Brandweek, 2006). With universities increasingly becoming more
concerned about their public profiles, pseudonymous blogs could have an uncertain
future in Academia too.

5 Conclusions

We argue that blogging is inherently a social activity facilitated through technology. It
cannot be considered merely a technological process. In cases where organisations have
introduced workblogging as a central theme of their knowledge building and/or
communication strategy, employees have exercised personal ownership of “their”
blogspace, even within the constraints of the technology and institutional guidelines.
Should workblogging become ubiquitous in organisations then it will be interesting to
observe if a new “workblogger” will emerge, one who balances the conflicts of personal
ownership with the institutional voice. Or will employees continue to exercise freedom in
their postings?

“Workblogging” could emerge as an effective knowledge building and communication tool
in those institutions that recognise the social ownership of the blog space and balance
this with a liberal approach to their protected authority. In order to realise the potential
of blogging for knowledge building and employee personal development, we propose that
institutions must embrace the challenge presented by the “wisdom of the crowd” and
strive for the undistorted Habermasian ideal of speech. It would be a fertile area for
further research to explore whether this ideal situation could ever be achievable

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