

Scardamalia, M. (2003). Knowledge Society Network (KSN): Toward an expert society for democratizing knowledge. *Journal of Distance Education*, 17 (Suppl. 3, Learning Technology Innovation in Canada), 63-66.

## **The Knowledge Society Network (KSN): Toward an Expert Society for Democratizing Knowledge**

Networks are ubiquitous, but the social engineering of networks for effective action is in its infancy. A common pattern of network social behavior is the progressive splitting of discussions and newsgroups into smaller subdiscussions or groups devoted to narrower interests. Effective action in any sphere typically calls for the reverse process—the joining together of people with diverse talents and interests to achieve common goals. But in order for that to happen, people must feel they have more to gain from coming together than from splitting apart. The key is *symmetric knowledge advancement* (Scardamalia, 1995). It occurs when the participants in a network are able to advance their own knowledge-building agendas by helping other participants advance theirs.

All kinds of organizations are aspiring to be “learning organizations” or “knowledge-creating organizations.” Invariably this means bringing people together in the hope that their various knowledge-building agendas can thereby be advanced. Thus, symmetric knowledge advancement is the ideal among such diverse groups as health care specialists and their clients, the various project teams in a large knowledge-based company, and the stakeholders in an effort to upgrade the economy and living conditions of a city.

The Knowledge Society Network (KSN), an offshoot of the CSILE/Knowledge Building Project (see Chapter 1) is a bold experiment to test the limits of symmetric knowledge advancement. Spanning countries worldwide, the KSN integrates the work of education, health, cultural and community organizations, businesses, and homes—and unites teachers, students, scholars, business associates, parents and administrators in the common goal of preparing citizens for the knowledge age. The network is designed to reflect cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as diversity in achievement of basic literacies. It recognizes that the coming knowledge society will require different responsibilities and relationships across the entire educational spectrum. Therefore, in addition to their regular roles, K-12 students and educators participate as knowledge creators and researchers, while tertiary educators, students, researchers, and scientists also participate as learners.

The Knowledge Society Network provides a natural extension of the progressive refinement of problems, knowledge sharing, and group interactions that define work within a community. By interleaving talents within and between communities knowledge building organizations create self-maintaining social systems. Continual effort does not have to be exerted to make the system function, as knowledge building is built into the very dynamics by which participants communicate and pursue organizational goals.

### ***Knowledge Building Communities***

The knowledge-building communities that participate in KSN are not simply collections of people who individually pursue knowledge, even though their individual interests may be diverse. They are a community in the sense that they share their knowledge, support one another in knowledge construction, and thus develop a kind of collective expertise that is distinguishable from that of the individual members. Participants may be co-located or distantly located. The defining characteristic is their commitment to the collective goal of engaging all participants in productive knowledge work.

The distinctive approach taken by KSN requires knowledge building technologies and social systems that *enable rather than presume advanced knowledge processes*. Guiding principles include:

- embed the process of expertise and innovation in technological and social supports that surround the day-to-day work environments and communication systems of members of an expert society.
- design supports so that the underlying, hidden aspects of expertise and innovation are made transparent to participants.
- provide ‘a way in’ for everyone, with no outer limits on what can be accomplished.
- support work at the cutting-edge of abilities and disciplines
- create systems of interaction and concurrent research that support and inform the continual improvement of the knowledge artifacts that participants generate.

The knowledge building technology that aims to provide the technological infrastructure for this work is Knowledge Forum® (see Chapter 3). As a research intensive network, the KSN requires that participants contribute to the collective resources of the network. Teachers and students alike use analytic tools to monitor their own knowledge building progress and to continually set higher standards. They serve as ethnographers of their knowledge advances, and present select portions of their face-to-face and computer-mediated interactions for review in an online multimedia journal. They have also opened their classrooms to each other, and to the broader international educational community by agreeing to host *Virtual Visits* to their databases. The extent of these commitments is a challenge, but reflects the depth of participants’ belief in the importance of what they are doing and their understanding of what it takes to effect significant change. The knowledge building communities joined by this enterprise continually set higher standards for best practice, while at the same time serving as a distributed online community to help newcomers who share the desire to advance beyond current limits of competence.

### ***The Virtual Suite of Possibilities***

A Virtual Visit is basically a story, with multimedia support, which is intended to enrich the knowledge base that all participants draw on in advancing the state of the art in their particular fields. A Virtual Visit is primarily an account, in narrative form, of the knowledge advances of a community, with annotation from different perspectives serving to explain how these advances were achieved. The essential elements of a Virtual Visit are the following:

1. Introduction to the evolution-of-ideas story. This provides the big picture for the Virtual Tour. The story may be about one select subsection of a Knowledge Forum database or the database as a whole. The introduction also includes a 'view-of-views' of the database and some statement about the views included in the tour.
2. Multiple perspectives. The evolution-of-ideas story is told from different perspectives, all surrounding the central story of the evolution of ideas in the database. Thus, for example, a movie viewed from the assessment perspective might jump quickly from day 1 pretest to the end-date post test, and then to results. It might then provide a retrospective of intervening activities that might account for the results.

Virtual Visits from different sites and also from the same sites at different times are collected and indexed, forming a suite of evolution-of-ideas stories that can be examined and discussed within the KSN from a variety of perspectives. Many events can be arranged around these visits, including workshops and seminars. Professional development schools can schedule virtual practica, making use of both these virtual visits and interactive sessions with teachers. A broad range of interactive events support the communities within KSN. This suite thus constitutes a distinctive resource that is integral to the rise-above energy of the local-to-extended community KSN process.

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*For more information:*

<http://ikit.org> (click on Virtual Visits)

## **References:**

Scardamalia, M. (1995). Knowledge-building technologies: Beyond information access. *Orbit*, 26(2), 31-36.