



# Brokers of Expertise: How We Can Help Each Other Change Education



By Steve Midgley

## Introduction

Advancements in communications and information technology over the last 15 years have changed the face of many industries. Supply chain management has allowed WalMart to turn pennies per transaction into billions in profit. IBM has undergone an almost complete transformation from a vertical market monopoly into a horizontal services and integration company<sup>1</sup>. While the enterprise of education is arguably more complex in many ways, many organizations and individuals are currently exploring how such advances in communication and technology can be utilized within the public education community to create better learning opportunities for students and more effective communities within our schools.

## Open Communities

Communities are hard to define but easy to recognize. As in the physical world, the on-line world offers many types of communities and many methods for participating. EBay, for example, has successfully created an on-line community of buyers and sellers. To make the system work, EBay maintains a “reputation network” which allows its members to communicate with each other about the question: “How likely is this stranger to be reliable when doing business with me?”

Amazon and CNet have also created communities that connect buyers to sellers. These community building companies have focused more on “information networks” that provide better knowledge to buyers about their choices in the market, allowing their customers to make better purchasing decisions<sup>2</sup>. Recently these “information networks” have begun including reputation data and EBay is always working on generating better information about its products, and its product taxonomy is improving<sup>3</sup>.

## Open Education

Is public education more like an information network or a reputation network? That is, do we care more about orderly units of knowledge which persist over time, or with the reputation of the agent providing the information? Are we a horizontal product or service oriented industry or more of a vertical provider, using complete solutions that we build internally?

Of course, there is no single answer to these questions. If education is like an information network, then we only need access to better information to improve student outcomes. When considering which blender to buy, technique or pedagogy is not a critical issue (just plug it in and push the button): reliability,

### FOOTNOTES

1 The terms “vertical” and “horizontal” refer whether a company attempts to sell products which provide complete, proprietary solutions for specific industries or applications (vertical) or whether they provide products and services that can be used in many situations and can often be resold by other companies as part of an “integrated” solution (horizontal). For example, IBM in the 1970s and 1980s was a vertical market company, supplying just about everything from the plug in the wall to the green and white print-out paper. It was often not possible to substitute any piece of the solution in between with a non-IBM component. IBM today is refashioning itself as a systems and services company who can integrate solutions that they generate internally with many products available from other companies or in the open source domain.

2 Generally speaking, their product categories and “buying experience” are much more orderly than EBay – comparisons between department stores and swap meets might be appropriate.

3 It’s worth noting that EBay’s product lines are currently much more transitory than Amazon and therefore more difficult to generate persistent knowledge and taxonomies about.

cost, style and availability are really the only pieces of information we need. When considering which strategies to use with a second grade English learner, much more complicated issues relating to technique may be the most important things.

If education is a reputation network, then the credentials of the person matter most. This is partly true also. When deciding whether to buy a product from a stranger on EBay, credentials matter more than price: a consistently unreliable seller is not worth dealing with at all. In education, determining who is providing accurate, effective advice is also difficult. We don't have any consistently effective ways to rank providers of information, the way that EBay ranks buyers and sellers. A Ph.D. might define a somewhat narrow area of great expertise, but a person's professional experience and research since that time must count also. And, who's to say a teacher with 30 years of practical experience knows less about a specific strategy or method than an education professor?

I am proposing that education is a combination of networks: an "expertise network." Expertise combines aspects of reputation and information. It is much more complicated to quantify because the quality of expertise often has very limited domains; that is, it is highly subject to context. An expert in second language strategies may know very little about special education issues. With a reputation network, a reliable seller is very likely to remain reliable no matter what kind of product they are selling. An expert's reliability is highly dependent on what information they are sharing.

#### Brokers of Expertise

Jack O'Connell, in his State of Education speech this year, said:

"I want us at the department to become brokers of expertise. There are schools and programs within schools throughout our state and country that are islands of excellence... our hard-working principals and superintendents have neither the time nor the resources to cull through and evaluate copious research or to distill it in a meaningful way to meet students' needs."<sup>4</sup>

To address this need, I am proposing that public education needs a technology platform where experts and knowledge seekers can share their expertise and experience with each other. Not only in the traditional sense where experts distill and disseminate information, but where expertise is shared multilaterally. New communication technologies make it pos-

sible for everyone to contribute and share where their experience and expertise allows: we no longer need to rely on traditional publishing models where experts are permanently designated. Expertise in the modern sense can mean that each person can apply their own expertise, and the community of experts can help to evaluate, sort and validate the knowledge.

We need such a "broker of expertise" to help us build and share expert knowledge and experience from within the classroom, home, district office, corporation and university. This brokering system can allow us to build a growing and changing set of educational categories (taxonomy) to describe our work. Within this user-managed taxonomy, communities can be fostered around specific areas of interest and expertise.

For example, high school English teachers interested in performance-based assessments and multi-year student portfolios may be able to find or create a community to focus their discussions and share their experience and materials. Within this community, ongoing conversations can help answer quick questions and provide historical archives for answers already provided. There can also be places for individuals to create their own pages of information about their work (similar to how MySpace.com allows our students to create and share information).

Public forums can also exist to share information that reflects a group perspective rather than a single individual's knowledge. Such forums can hold com-

munity developed performance assessment prompts and guidelines that could be downloaded by any teacher seeking such material. The discussion forums can help support such a teacher with any questions about the material. Also, the forums will provide access to consultants and vendors who sell products and services relating to this subject matter. Members of the community can share information about these products and services, letting others know where such tools have been successfully used and what environmental or contextual factors might affect their use.

This brokering system would serve many of the functions that EBay, Amazon and CNet provide to their customers, providing the public education communities with access to taxonomies of products and information, community generated content, persistent reputations of sellers and experts as well as a repository for knowledge that can be created and managed by the communities themselves. As educators, we often refer to our desire to make our communities a better place by providing a high-quality education for all students. With this Brokers of Expertise system, we might be able to make our own educational communities a better place as well. ■

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cde.ca.gov/eo/in/se/yr06stateofed.asp>