

# Technology without Information

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With the advent of Web 2.0, information *update* from anywhere in the world *by anyone in the world* has become easier than ever before. Applications that use the power of Web 2.0, such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, etc., now lead the world in terms of users and revenue generation. How have these applications become so powerful?

It is important to understand that all these Web 2.0 applications essentially *share* information. Literate, illiterate, young or old, rich or poor, everyone has something to share – a fact, an experience, reflection, wisdom or a creative idea. As my school principal wrote in my autograph book, “If you listen to the depths of a person, you may discover a completely new person – a person that you never realised existed!” Everyone can share information they want to share with others – these applications have put *power* in the hands of those who wish to share information. They have shown that there is no end to information, the more information we share, the more our collective knowledge grows. Information shared is therefore information gained or *knowledge shared is knowledge gained*. Knowledge is shared when knowledge is recorded or documented for everyone to see and knowledge is gained when others are able to read and understand. If ten persons share information, each individual gains *nine* times more information than he/she individually had. The more people that share information, the more it multiplies.

Web 2.0 basically enables and facilitates knowledge sharing through active participation of each user thus fostering individual ownership and creativity. Web 2.0 applications and services allow active collaboration in storing, editing, updating, adding, publishing, analyzing, informing of information in the form of text, audio, video, pictures, links, animation using the net that can be accessed through a

host of devices such as a PC, mobile as well as a PDA. This promotes collective access and learning as was never possible before.



Fig.1 Results of Google search on 'wikipedia'



Fig.2 Wikipedia entry for 'Encarta'



Fig.3 Collecting and sharing ideas by participants

As an example of collective learning and content creation, let's look at Wikipedia, the free Web 2.0 encyclopedia. Wikipedia is continuously being edited, updated and constructed using the support provided by Web 2.0. To find Wikipedia, we just have to type Wikipedia in Google (another Web 2.0 application) and we get the following links with descriptions as shown in Fig.1. Now look at the entry for Encarta

(a Web 1.0 application) in Wikipedia shown in Fig.2. Compare both Wikipedia and Encarta in terms of number of entries, speed of update and the effect Wikipedia is having on Encarta. Feel the difference in how knowledge has multiplied with the implementation of Wikipedia. Feel the power of collaboration provided by Web 2.0 in the difference it has made to the growth of Wikipedia. Examine, in particular:

- \* number of entries
- \* speed and ability to continuously update
- \* cost
- \* obsolescence of information
- \* the number and types of people involved

Where is Bangladesh positioned in terms of the knowledge explosion and learning that is happening all across the world? Bangladesh has its share of literacy problems, infrastructure problems and documentation problems among others. What we *do* have, however, is a huge indigenous population. It is by providing services for this population that Prof Muhammad Yunus has got himself a Nobel Prize! There is another thing that this population has, something that is generally overlooked – indigenous knowledge that resides in the *heads of people all over Bangladesh*.

If we could find a way to capture this knowledge, share this knowledge and utilize the collective knowledge what would possibly happen? Could we start by putting our heads together and collectively start solving our own problems? Imagine if a group of individuals came up with an inexpensive product (much less expensive than a mobile) that would be useful to the rural individuals, what might happen? Could the product become an economic success?

As an example of how information can be captured from the heads of people, NGO's in Bangladesh practice a noble way. They capture information from the heads of field workers. Why field workers? They are the nearest to the target clients, are familiar with day-to-day problems and would generally be implementing the solutions. Field workers in NGOs such as BRAC can collectively solve problems faced using this method. The method can be best described by pictures as shown in Fig.3. In the example used to show how data is captured from each participant's head, 'learning problems' refers to distance students. The participants are the teachers themselves. Like the field workers, it is the teachers who face the

students on a day-to-day basis and would also be implementing the solution.

Participants give anonymous responses to questions posed (white long card) by writing ideas as keywords on (green) cards. The participants then collectively discuss the responses and group them into overall categories (red cards). The participants would then be divided into groups (four, in this case, as four categories have emerged), and asked to prepare a poster presentation of an action plan of how, for instance, the 'COMPREHENSION' problem can be overcome. An example of such a poster is shown in Fig.4.

Such participatory workshops have found to be very powerful as they not

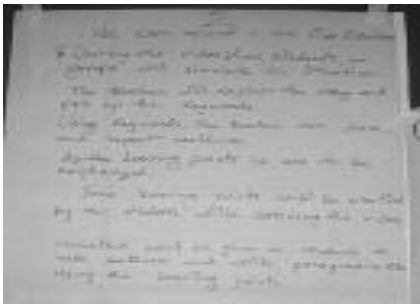


Fig. 4: Example of a Socially Networked Action Plan on how 'COMPREHENSION' can be solved based upon the idea cards.

only share knowledge they impart ownership to the solution. Ideas are drawn from those who would implement the solution. I call this Socially Networked Action Plan (SNAP) as ideas are drawn from all participants. It is important therefore that all stakeholders be engaged as participants. When ideas are collectively discussed and grouped, the participants understand each other and are able to see a much broader picture. They are then collectively asked to 'construct' and present an action plan similar to that shown in Fig.4.

The example shows teachers as participants. If, with the help of technology, ideas could also be drawn from other stakeholders such as students, alumni and employers, as would be important in the case of a university, and purposefully documented for creating strategy, it would promote ownership and loyalty on the part of all those involved. The HRD Institute at Daffodil International University has started using this method of participation for teacher workshops and for mature student batches.

Unfortunately, after such presentations, currently, there is no systematic documentation of the action

plan for others to learn/benefit from. The posters are not saved. They are destroyed along with the 'idea' cards! Using such or similar methods if we could find a way to document and share indigenous knowledge for the purpose of solving our own problems we may see the beginnings of a knowledge explosion in Bangladesh. Imagine a Wikipedia of indigenous information/knowledge/solutions. Challenges would include how to capture knowledge from people with low literacy, engaging technology to document this knowledge and share knowledge so that such knowledge could be turned into viable services and products for the rural indigenous peoples. Who would best know what day-to-day problems they have and how to solve them? *How did Prof Yunus hit upon the idea of giving loans?*

Information Technology or IT can only benefit us if we have information to share to solve our own problems. Without such or similar information gathering interventions we run the risk of having a lot of technology but without our own information to share [1]

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