

A Review of *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities*

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Abstract

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Etienne Wenger, Nancy White, and John D. Smith's *Digital Habitats: Stewarding Technology for Communities* (Portland, OR:CPsquare, 2009) is designed to help the reader understand the role of a technology steward within a community. Etienne Wenger is a global thought leader in the field of communities of practice and social learning systems. Nancy White, of Full Circle Associates, has over 25 years of communications, technology, and leadership skills in her work supporting collaboration, learning and communications in the NGO, non profit and business sectors. John David Smith, of Learning Alliances, also has over 25 years of experience to bear on the technology and learning problems faced by communities, their leaders and their sponsors. Together they are members of CPsquare, a non-profit organization that provides a place where people gather to connect and learn.

Digital Habitats grew from a 2001 report that Wenger wrote for the United States government on how Internet technologies can potentially support communities of practice. Wenger's report contained a broad survey of technology products available and their ability to support communities of practice. Wenger and his associates, White and Smith, began updating the report as a book. The need for this updated volume was directed by three areas that were rapidly changing: the evolution of the community support tools market, broadened mutual influence of community and technology, and finally, deepened experience with technology. "We observe communities now facing larger and more complex technology choices for their creation of digital habitats" (p. xii).

Digital Habitats describes what skills are necessary for choosing, implementing, and maintaining a web presence along with digital tools that enable stewards to facilitate groups coming together as an online community. *Digital Habitats* is a valuable tool for anyone who coordinates community activities as well as for explaining: what is a steward's role, who takes on this role, why one might be interested in stewardship, and how to begin. One of the most valuable parts of the book is the "Itinerary: A reader's guide" at the beginning of the book. The authors are clear in who the potential readers of the book are and what they might get out of it.

- *Deep Divers* are interested in deeply exploring the connections between technology and community through the application of learning theories to practical situations such as the use of technology by communities of practice.
- *Attentive Practitioners* are interested in developing their practice while learning with fellow practitioners. They are searching for better ways to serve their communities and need to be able to talk about technology stewarding, and to demonstrate its value. They seek practical advice as well as theoretical concepts to communicate effectively their role as technology stewards.
- *Just Do It-ers* are action-oriented, making things happen. They are most interested in practical information that will allow them to facilitate the needs of their communities. They are tasked with supporting their community's technology and immediately get right down to figuring out how to do the job.

While structuring the book for its potential audience the authors realized that different readers had different needs. The authors outline which chapters the three groups of readers should focus on as they advance the practice of stewarding technology.

Deep Divers should read Chapters 1 and 2 that focus on theory and history of technology. They should also read the reflections of the future in Chapters 11 and 12.

- *Attentive Practitioners* should focus on Chapters 4 to 6 that offer three models for thinking about technology in communities. There are also tables of activities, tools, and practice notes that provide resources that will anchor their practice.
- *Just-Do-It-ers* should start with Chapter 10 then move on to other chapters, as they need relevant information. They will also prefer the more concrete information in Chapters 7 to 9 and the concluding comments in Chapters 4 to 6.

As an *Attentive Practitioner*, I found that I focused on "Part II – Literacy," as my own practice involves stewarding various networks of teachers working together on collaborative student projects. Chapter 4: "What aspects of technology should a steward consider," resonated with me as I'm constantly looking at the tools, features, platforms, and configurations of the technology that our communities use. Even though the book gave examples from communities where the steward had a strong programming background, I believe that most stewards are technology users rather than developers. The type of steward that I am is one that uses and adapts technologies for the community rather than one that creates new technologies. The authors state that "this book is about the identification, description, and practice of an emerging function. The order of the chapters reflects the need to build a useful repertoire of concepts, models, and practice tips for those who undertake the role of stewarding technology for communities and its complex set of activities" (p. xvii). I believe this to be an important function of the book as I continue to build my repertoire of Internet tools that will accommodate the needs of the communities that I steward.

I found that Part II keeps good on its promise to "offer three models for thinking about technology in communities. These models are meant to help tech stewards "read" situations and propose courses of action. They constitute a kind of "literacy" of the function" (p. xviii). As I read the chapters, I found that the content helped me begin to understand my community better, including its characteristics, and the needs and membership of my group. Part II also helped me in "providing a framework for considering technology from the perspective of the life of a community, with a focus on what is unique about a given community" (p. 70). It also gave me insight into what my goals were in providing technology for my community: what strategies I needed to use, how I could solve difficulties, and how I could meet the changing needs of my community. Finally, this portion of the book helped me to consider the activities and tools I would need to work with my community. "People experience being part of a community in a wide variety of ways: communities have different styles. That is why different habitats work for different communities. This chapter organizes this diversity into nine distinct 'orientations' we have observed in practice" (p. 69). Chapter 6 explained the needs of the nine orientations, a typical pattern of activities and connections for a community, and provided a table of tools that supports the needs of the activity of the groups. This information would be valuable to people beginning as community stewards along with supporting those already working with communities.

Although the Introduction stressed what *Digital Habitats* is not, a shopper's guide to technology products or a roadmap for technology selection, this book provided strategies for both. Part III of the book focused on the practice of stewarding technology and being responsive to the needs of the community. Chapter 7 takes the reader through an assessment of the

community's needs and "many contextual factors involved in making the pragmatic technology choices that shape a community's digital habitat" (p. 103). This chapter also takes into account the complexity and varied experiences of the membership and how that will impact the community. Chapter 8 discusses the various strategies for acquisition of technology for the community. Seven acquisition strategies such as "got for the free stuff," "patch elements together," "use open-source tools," and "build your own" (p. 119) are examined and discussed. The choice of what strategies to use will depend on the knowledge and expertise of the steward along with needs of the community. Even though this is not designed as a shopper's guide, I found that there are enough examples and tool suggestions to make it a valuable chapter for those that wish it were so. I found myself reading through the strategies in both Chapter 8 and 9 then substituting my own situation to provide myself with new ideas on how to connect my community members; therefore, facilitating *their* need to communicate with other teachers in our online community. I understood why the authors suggested that "Just Do-It-ers" should skip directly to Chapter 10. Chapter 10 is an action chapter, full of practical checklists, tables, and questions that provide an outline of where to begin and how to continue a practice of community stewardship.

Digital Habitats finishes with the authors' examination of the future of technology stewardship. Chapter 11 looks at the current trends affecting community and technology while Chapter 12 "uses these trends to frame a learning agenda for the practice of technology stewardship" (p. xix). "In the final two chapters of the book, we step back from the day-to-day practicalities of technology stewarding and take a more conceptual look at the trends in the search for new digital habitats at the intersection of community and technology" (p. 171). The authors discuss the "increased connectivity across time and space" (p. 174) and how the many ways in which we are able to interact online will change along with the "changing geographies of community and identity" (p. 177). The complexity of the web will grow to meet the demands of users who are more demanding of social interaction and information.

Digital Habitats is a practical, easy to read book that will benefit anyone who is a technology steward, or those considering taking on that role. The book is a combination of text, tables and diagrams that ensure these important ideas are understandable. *Digital Habitats* will support the steward in making a difference in how they support their community, what tools and strategies they should consider, and most importantly, how to best understand the needs of the community members that they serve.