# The Evolving Concept of the Community of Practice

Stephen Downes

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# A. Origins

# Etienne Wenger

- "Communities of practice are an integral part of our daily lives.
- They are so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus, but for the same reasons, they are also quite familiar.
- While the term may be new, the experience is not. Most communities of practice do not have a name or issue membership cards.“
- http://www.checkmi.com/comprac.htm

# What CoPs Do

- Facilitate collaboration
- Answer specific questions via Subject Matter Expert
- Filter out incorrect information by peer group
- Capture institutional knowledge and reuse it
- Prevent re-inventing wheels by sharing knowledge
- Share successful (best) practices

http://www.icasit.org/km/kmrt/march04/bgscott.ppt

# Salient Features

- Shared Domain of Practice/Interest
- Crosses operational, functional and organizational boundaries
- Defined by knowledge, not tasks
- Managed by making connections
- Focus on value, mutual exchange and learning

http://www.icasit.org/km/kmrt/march04/bgscott.ppt

# CoPs Within Organizations

- CoPs are informal
- CoP Members are motivated by their enterprise
- CoPs are responsible only to themselves
- No one owns CoPs
- Managerial control to produce certain deliverables will kill CoPs

http://www.icasit.org/km/kmrt/march04/bgscott.ppt

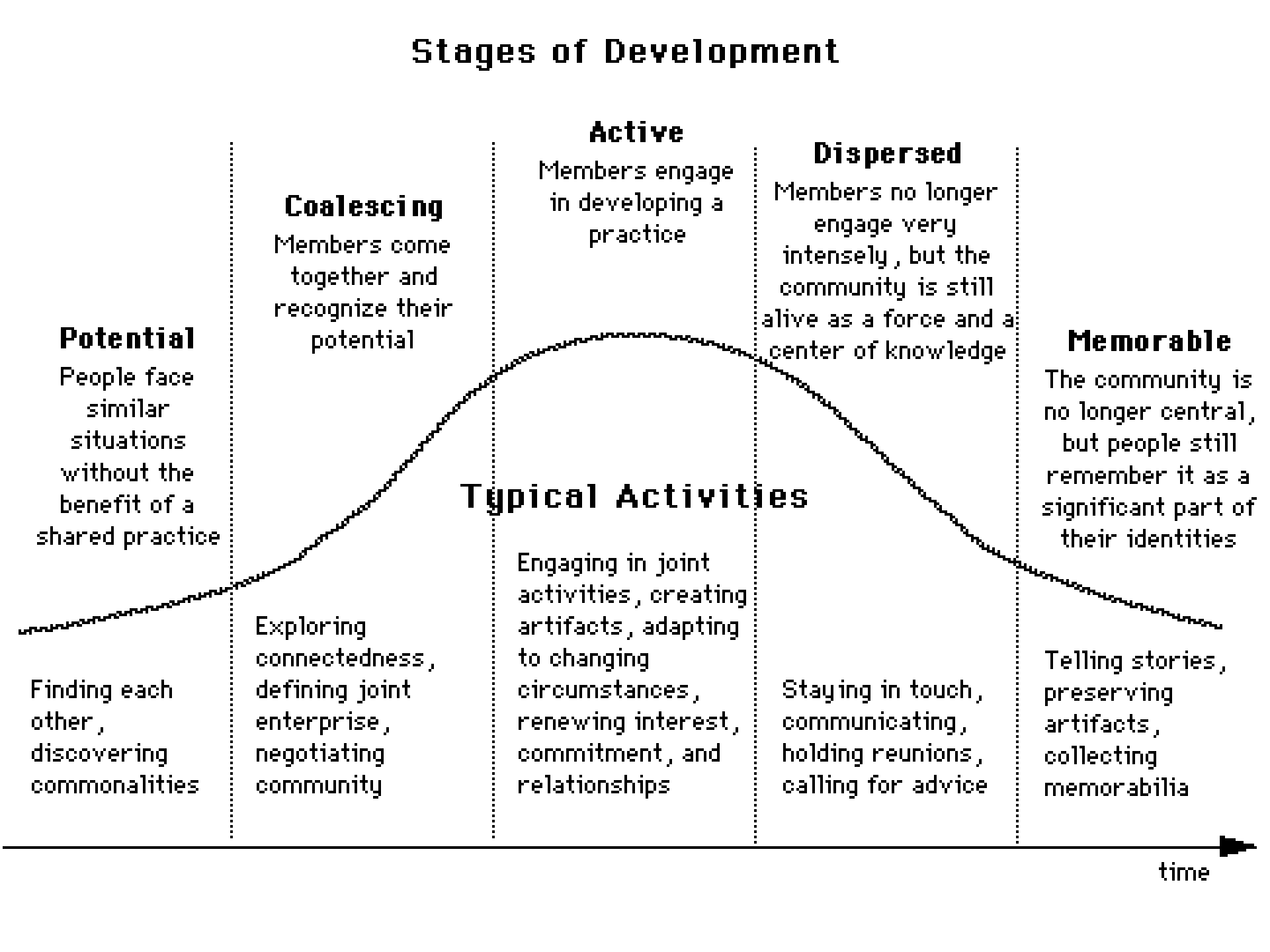
# Growing CoPs

*"…you cannot force a plant to grow by pulling its leaves…*
*what you can do is create the infrastructure in which it can prosper."*
*- Etienne Wenger, 1999*

# Three Dimensions

- What it is about – a joint enterprise understood and continually renegotiated by its members
- How it functions – mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity
- What capability it has produced – the shared repertoire of communal resources, routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.

http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/cop/lss.shtml


Stages of Development
Potential
People face similar situations without the benefit of a shared practice
Coalescing
Members come together and recognize their potential
Active
Members engage in developing a practice
Dispersed
Members no longer engage very intensely, but the community is still alive as a force and a center of knowledge
Memorable
The community is no longer central, but people still remember it as a significant part of their identities
Typical Activities
Finding each other, discovering commonalities
Exploring connectedness, defining joint enterprise, negotiating community
Engaging in joint activities, creating artifacts, adapting to changing circumstances, renewing interest, commitment, and relationships
Staying in touch, communicating, holding reunions, calling for advice
Telling stories, preserving artifacts, collecting memorabilia
time

# CoP in a Business

- Different from a *business or functional unit* in that it defines itself in the doing
- A community of practice is different from a *team* in that the shared learning and interest of its members are what keep it together.
- A community of practice is different from a *network* in the sense that it is "about" something; it is not just a set of relationships.

# number of functions

- *exchange and interpretation of information*
- *retain knowledge* in "living" ways, unlike a database or a manual.
- *steward competencies* to keep the organization at the cutting edge.
- *homes for identities*. They are not as temporary as teams, and unlike business units, they are organized around what matters to their members.

# B. Stasis

# Virtual Communities: Net.Gain

- Distinctive focus: members readily understand what kind of resources they are likely to find there
- Capacity to integrate content and communication: broad range of published content
- Member-generated content: environments for generation and dissemination
- Access to competing publishers and vendors
- Commercial orientation: organized as commercial enterprises

http://www.businessweek.com/chapter/netgain.htm

# Commercial Benefits

- Reduced search costs
- Increased propensity for customers to buy
- Enhanced ability to target: detailed profiles of members and their transaction histories,
- Tailor and add value to existing products and services: integrated transaction histories
- Disintermediation potential: deal directly with their end customers without retailers, wholesalers, distributors, or brokers
- http://www.businessweek.com/chapter/netgain.htm

# MuniMall

http://www.munimall.net

# MuniMall: Objective

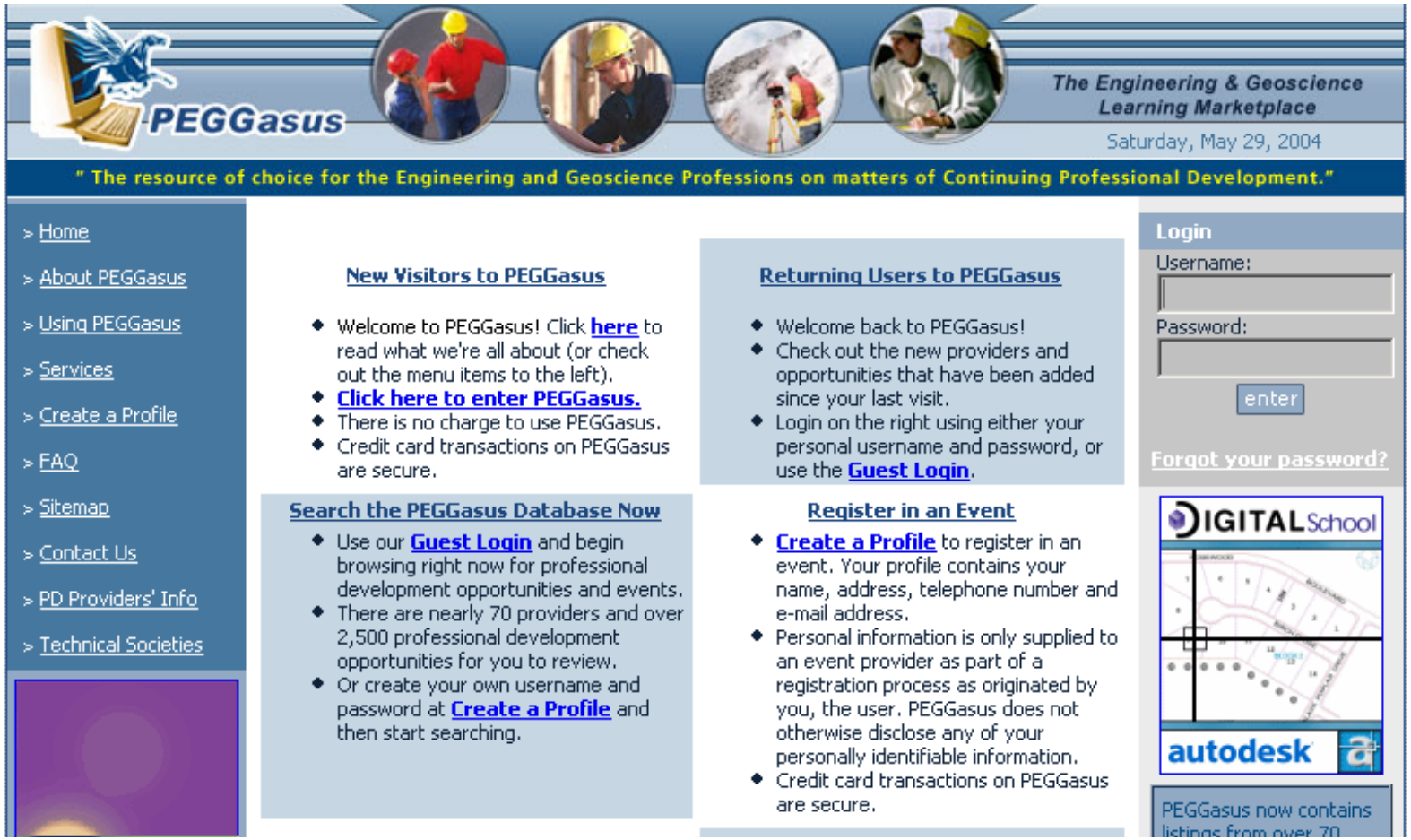
- Sought communications from their non-virtual channels onto the Internet
- Sought to enhance these communications through repositories of information and opportunities for discussion and other exchanges
- Communication, trade, and common culture would be transferred to the Internet environment and enhanced.

# MuniMall: Issues

- The very transparency of the invited discourse
- The utility of using the virtual community versus other available sources and opportunities.
- The disruption of established relationships (including power and authority relationships)
- How much value virtual communities provide members
- The willingness to use the resource

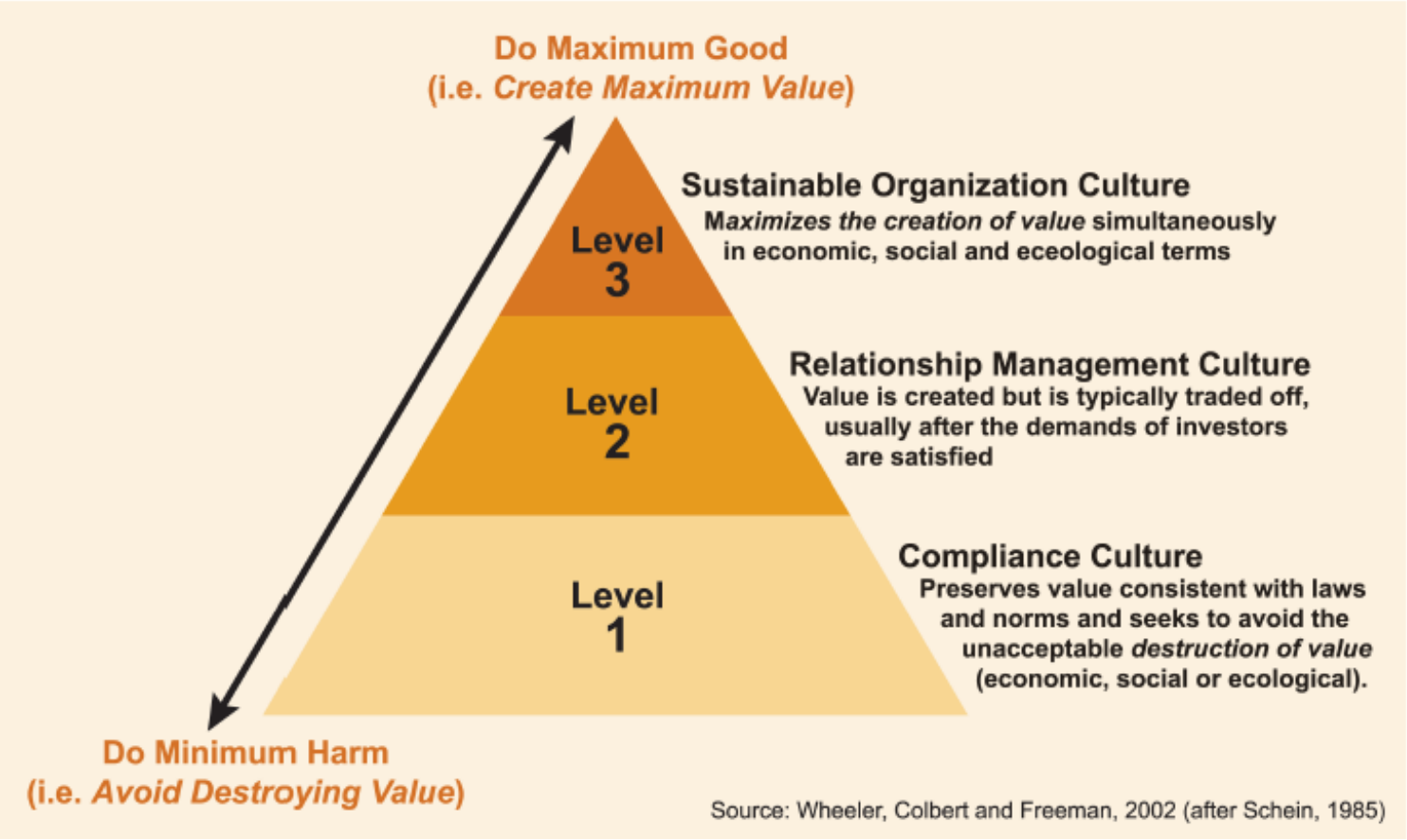
http://www.govsource.net/govstudies/projects/olt/appendix04.pdf

# PEGGAsus




http://www.peggasus.ca

# Looking for the Next Level




http://www.sustainablelivelihoods.ca/Resources/Sustainability,%20Social%20Capital%20and%20the%20Canadian%20ICT%20Sector.pdf

# C. Evolution

# Cluetrain

- Markets are conversations.
- We are waking up and linking to each other. We are watching. But we are not waiting.

http://www.cluetrain.com/#manifesto

# Power of the Individual

- Evolution of the power of the individual
- It is the individual whose desire is once more important and not the creation of that desire by the 'massage' of the media
- The web allows for a new individuality in both inquisitive acquisition and informed choice
- This is a step in the evolution of modern commerce and modern culture.
  http://www.cluetrain.com/signers.html

# Telephones, Email, Blogs

- Control – and the technology – is in the hands of the individual
- Creative capacity and technology lies at the edges
- The network is merely a means of facilitating communication

# Nomic World

- Social Norms - have the effect of governance - no one can react to you in any kind of official way if you violate that rule, and yet there's a social structure that keeps that in place.
- Mechanics - the stuff that just happens…
- Interventions: places where we give some segment of society heightened power, and then allow them to make judgment calls
- http://www.shirky.com/writings/nomic.html

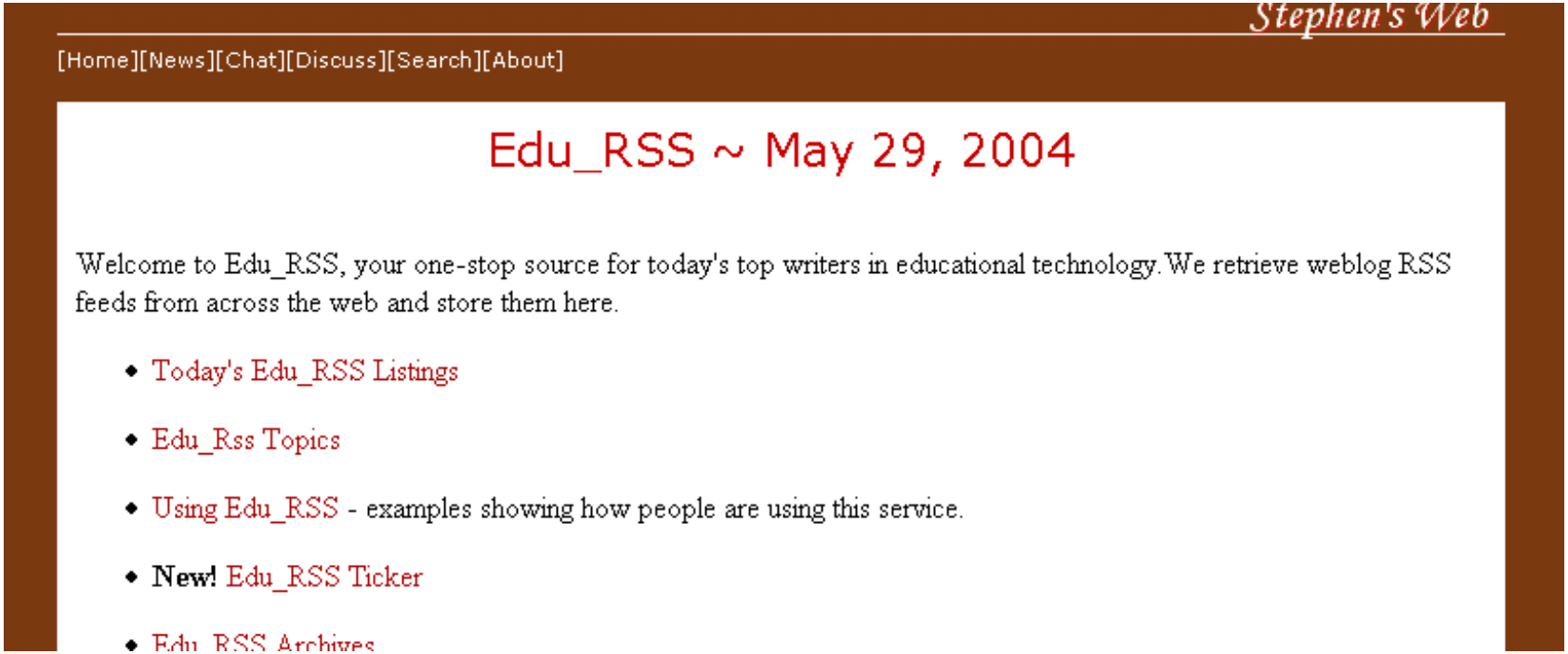
# Issues in Online Governance

- Code: it's difficult to share the powers of code among the users - we don't have a design that's allows for social constraints on individual use.
- The second big obstacle is economics - the box that runs the virtual world is owned by someone, and it isn't you.
- http://www.shirky.com/writings/nomic.html

# Dynamic CoPs

- The information and the control is at the edges
- Based on conversations, communications
- Increasingly complex vocabulary – think blog posts, camera phones, presentations
- CoPs are not created or grown, per se, they are *found*

# Edu_RSS




http://www.downes.ca/cgi-bin/xml/edu_rss.cgi

# Small Pieces Loosely Joined

http://careo.elearning.ubc.ca/wiki?HomePage