The Ning Thing

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Previously free, and easy to set up, Ning has until now been a robust environment for educators seeking to collaborate on professional growth and projects benefiting students. However, Ning's recent announcement that the free ride is over has educators scrambling for alternatives and contemplating both the wisdom and viability of relying on cloud-based networks for connectivist community building. This article explains what Ning is doing and what impact this is having on Ning communities operating toward the end of the long tail, and explores options available to people with altruistic educational agendas who cannot afford to maintain their Nings.

Use of Nings by Educators

Wikipedia is a good source for information on Ning: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ning (website). There you find that the company was launched in 2005 by Gina Bianchini and Marc Andreessen. Andreessen was reknowned for helping form the Mosaic Communications Corporation in 1994, which developed the Netscape browser. In 1998 Netscape started the open source Mozilla project and publicly released the source code of Netscape Communicator 4.0. According to Wikipedia, Ning was founded on similar principles. "At its launch, Ning was a free-form platform for the development and hosting of open-source social applications. The source code for Ning applications was available to users," though this was eroded in 2006 to "some source level control of their social networks, enabling them to change features and underlying logic. Feature modification was temporarily disabled on October 21, 2008," and Ning was simply making APIs available for developers in 2009.

Open source was apparently not a viable business model for Ning. On the Ides of March, 2010, Bianchini was replaced as CEO by Jason Rosenthal, and a month late the new CEO informed the world at large that as of July 2010, Ning would cater to only its paying customers, comprising 75% of sites hosted at Ning. The remaining 25% would have to either sign up for a plan or migrate elsewhere. As a further cost-cutting measure, Rosenthal announced at the same time that the company was letting go 40% of Ning's employees (Rosenthal, 2010).

The new Ning pricing structure is three-tiered, as explained here: http://blog.ning.com/2010/05/introducing-ning-pro-ning-plus-and-ning-mini.html. As of July 20 there will no longer be free Ning hosting, so the three options are a $20/year plan for Ning "Mini" for up to 150 users, a $200/year plan for networks over 150, and a $500/year plan for Ning Pro users operating at the "big scale" referenced in Ning promotional announcements.

Nings have compelling affordances for group collaboration, and as a free service appealed especially to educators. Basic-level Nings were easy to set up, too easy as it turned out. People were tempted to start Nings on almost any topic. They gave administrators a simple, intuitive, yet comprehensive set of features to control their communities. Data blocks called "features" can be added or removed through drag-and-drop onto Ning portals. These can contain elements such as forums, scheduled events, RSS feeds (including feeds of recent Ning events), blog posts with fixed URLs, badges, and so on. Participants can sign up or sign in and set up profiles for any particular Ning, parts of which carry over to other Nings, achieving familiarity with minimal repetition of data entry. A Ning displays profile pictures of recent joiners and encourages participants to befriend one another. By showing galleries of network members and associating faces with posts, each Ning is given an appealing look and feel that engages participants intuitively.

In just a few years, Nings have proliferated and become crucial components of many educators' PLNs. One called the Educator's PLN hosted Howard Rheingold recently (for free, of course, http://edupln.ning.com/forum/topics/the-howard-rheingold-live/). Steve Hargadon invites participants in his Classroom 2.0 Ning to join or view his interviews with new media gurus such as Clay Shirkey, Dan Pink, Seth Godin, and Sir Ken Robinson (http://www.classroom20.com). Heike Philp runs her successful, free Virtual Round Table conferences via a Ning (http://virtual-round-table.ning.com). EuroCALL SIGs have at least three Nings: the EUROCALL/CALICO Virtual Worlds Special Interest Group set up by Graham Davies (http://virtualworldssig.ning.com), the EUROCALL CMC SIG Ning set up by Robert O'Dowd (http://cmcsig.ning.com), and the EUROCALL Teacher Education SIG Ning, established by Nicky Johnson (http://eurocallteachereducation.ning.com). EUROCALL is a fee-based professional association, but its Nings are free to all interactants. Webheads in Action used to enroll participants in its free bi-annual WiAOC international online conferences in a Moodle, but for the last one, moved the community over to a Ning (http://webheadsinaction.ning.com). This Ning now has over 350 members.

Because Nings were free and robust for collaboration, they were an ideal tool for educators seeking to jump-start communities on little or no funding. Educators gravitated to Nings like lambs to the pasture and have left a wealth of content on them. They were popular with EVO session moderators. (EVO is Electronic Village Online, free annual TESOL-sponsored teacher training sessions run by all-volunteer moderators and coordinators, http://evosessions.pbworks.com). Participants in the EVO Multiliteracies Ning for example communicated largely via blog posts all hosted at the Ning (http://multiliteracies.ning.com/profiles/blog/list/), and to which people can still permalink (though whether this will still be the case after July is in doubt). As with most

blog posts, authors assumed that what they put online in expressing themselves on a topic would be remain undisturbed online for a long time, as did readers who linked to those posts.

Responses to Ning's New Pricing Plan

There was general consternation among the long tail users of Ning at the April 16 announcement. On my printer, I queued Rosenthal's original 2-paragraph post along with some other documents on the topic I planned to refer to in the car while I drafted this offline on my laptop, but I failed to notice the 622 comments, almost every one a plaint from an educator explaining how valuable their Ning was to their professional goals and interests and hoping that Ning would do something to accommodate all the educators without budgets who had started Nings to launch their communities or classroom projects, and were wondering what they could do to replace them, and if Ning had considered its impact on them. Consequently, the printout of that one brief post ran to over a hundred pages.

Dave Cormier, Jennifer Maddrell, Jeff Lebow, and John Schenker pointed out in their webcast April 19 (listen at: http://edtechtalk.com/EdTechWeekly161/) that Ning has every right to expect to be paid for services rendered. As users of Geocities and Bubbleshare have already discovered, the Internet is not free forever, and educators need to wean themselves from this dangerous notion. Furthermore, it would be folly for educators having suffered inconvenience at best, data loss at worst, to commit their content yet again to a potentially unreliable cloud provider. Alec Couros sees this kind of thing happening more and more in the crystal ball future and suggests that schools and educators would be better off investing in self-hosting using FOSS, free and open source software (Couros, 2010).

There are a number of issues involved here. One is for how long Internet users can expect free services over the Internet (explain to me again how that works?) but the other side of the coin is the nature of teaching, where hard-pressed teachers with little time and less budget tend to cobble together whatever resources they can muster to fling at the problem. What's amazing (and speaks for the remarkable ingenuity of teachers in general) is that this frequently works. It may work only for the short term, but the 'art' of teaching is just that; hence, Wesley Fryer's reaction right after the announcement was made that "this is VERY bad news for educators and the cause of educational networking/ constructive social networking in schools. Most educator-created Ning networks are NOT going to fit into this "at huge scale" model" (Fryer, 2010).

Concerns of educators were not particularly allayed with suggestions trickling in from Ning on how the entrepreneurs who comprised the other 75% of Ning's user base could capitalize on their investment: http://about.ning.com/revenue/. Suggestions range from a choice of donations widgets, to installing pay-to-play games, to running Google ads. Perhaps the most novel approach is to install an app where users can buy apparel and gadgets with logos on them; "They make the stuff. You get 10%." Perhaps Steve Hargadon was visionary when in 2008 he called Ning the new eBay (Hargadon, 2008).

Monetization is rarely a consideration for teachers and educational technology specialists, whose main aim is to find platforms that will support learning through sharing. The immediate concern following an announcement such at the one issued by Ning April 16 is simply preservation of content stored at the free site where the host is an entity outside the users' control, and also preservation of the network centered on that content. These two are symbiotic to one another, and a connectivist view might even suggest that preservation of the network was the prime concern ("The pipe is more important than the content within the pipe," Siemens, 2004).

Those with access to funds can achieve both by paying up, not under the illusion that this will protect their content forever, but at least for the life of the contract. If funds are available this is the most convenient option. The community remains where it is and all works as before. Teachers with small Nings for a class or two of students might be able to get small grants or enough petty cash to cover the $20 it would cost to keep a Ning functioning for an academic year, or they might even pay this out of their own pockets. But given network dynamics, educational groups (if several classes are joined in one network, or if students tend to stay connected after the class ends) often have over 150 members, or if they acquire their 151st member, then the price to sustain a Ning for a year increases ten-fold, no longer pocket change. So this is not an option for many of the people who have started Nings for altruistic educational purposes, who don't intend to monetize them.

When it was announced that free Ning sites would no longer be supported, a palliative was offered educators with hint of a partnership between Ning and an un-named education company. On June 24, 2010 both the partner and the substance of the partnership were revealed. The partner is none other than Pearson, who has offered to sponsor Nings for educators at the Mini level, the lowest level of Ning; that is, the one that is limited to 150 members and costs $20 a year. In return, "Brought to you by Pearson" will appear at the top of the sponsored Ning, and Pearson becomes a member of your Ning (which means they can post what they like there). Furthermore, sponsorship is available only for "Ning Networks focused on North American K-12 and Higher-Ed … including Ning Networks that facilitate learning in a classroom, best practices, educator-to-educator collaboration, or parental support," http://about.ning.com/pearsonsponsorship/. Comments running at the Ning blog post announcing this development range from appreciation to frustration over the implications for stunted growth of networks and how almost all continents on the planet are excluded from the deal: http://blog.ning.com/2010/06/pearson-to-provide-ning-mini-for-free-to-educators.html.

Alternatives to Ning

As suggested above, the only reliable alternative to Ning is to host your community yourself, or at a trusted institution, where you do your own regular backups, and your content is safe behind a firewall, with a UPS power source in case of power outages, and perhaps some sort of RAID system to keep you running through system crashes.

In case you decline the option to maintain your own server(s), you might decide again to trust your content to a provider who could prove temporary or who might alter the

ground rules in the not-too-distant future. After all, the beauty of free hosted social networking sites is that they can be set up in minutes and hardly maintained, except perhaps to moderate them or to clear them of spam (which you'd have to do anyway). Except when someone moves to pull the plug on them for good, they mostly run themselves. And many such sites started with flair and purpose lose their vitality long before a host will consider rejecting them.

So if you are aware of the ramifications but are still attracted to the ease of setting up a ready-made community using a free online cloud-based template, what are your options?

As soon as he heard about Ning's impending withdrawal of its free services, Alec Couros (2010) decided to crowdsource some answers to that question. He set up a Google Doc and tweeted his network to visit its URL and write in their suggestions. Others swiftly retweeted, and in short order his document had been written on by dozens of contributors (there's a list of over 100 at the end of the document who claim to have written there: http://tinyurl.com/alternatives2ning). This document remains the most comprehensive source of advice on what to do about replacing Ning that exists anywhere on the Internet, as we count down to July 20, when unsupported Nings are set to be ejected by their servers.

It should be possible to back up your Ning through a utility that captures whole web sites down to a depth specified such as http://www.httrack.com. Save My Ning (http://www.savemyning.com) will store whole Nings on its servers (with ads) where people can read them as they were when downloaded, but not interact with them. Ning itself has provided a "content archive" tool, described here: http://blog.ning.com/2010/06/content-archive-tool-coming-soon.html. Comments below that blog post suggest that the tool is not without issues, but it was only just released by Ning in mid-June, 2010.

For those preferring a fresh approach, there are a number of sites offering Ning-like look and feel which will (attempt to) import your content, or some of your content, from Ning. One such site is Grou.ps, which can transfer Nings with content (they say). The first 10 GB of storage and 100 GB of data transfer are free (http://grou.ps/groudotps/wiki/item/251914/).

Yet another site that will migrate your Ning content is Grouply, which was designed to work as a social-network portal for Yahoo and Google Groups. Grouply has a 'Migrate Ning' icon under its group management tab (http://blog.grouply.com/ning/) that will import discussions, postings and photographs from a Ning for which you can give its credentials (this worked well for me; see: http://webheads.grouply.com). There is a notice in the migrate dialog box that says it will soon be able to import blogs (but not yet).

Blogs are sometimes the most interesting part of a Ning. A tool that works well for capturing blog content is Posterous (Rao, 2010). If you visit http://posterous.com/switch/ you will see an option for importing Ning content. To activate it, log on to your Posterous account, enter your Ning email address and URL, and decide if you want to get just your blog postings or everyone's (if everyone's, all

postings will unavoidably appear at Posterous as if you had posted them). Then let the script run and when done find the imported Ning material in your dashboard. You now have to decide if you want to merge these materials with an existing blog or one that you have created new. The result appears to work well, fetching both the postings and media (see http://webheadsinaction.posterous.com).

Spruz is another free site that lets you set up a Portal with features similar to those of Ning. It can provide you with a script that you put on your Ning site inviting users to migrate themelves to Spruz. Then "when a member is logged in and clicks the Migration Link or Button on your old Ning website, their profile information like Name, Age, Location, and Profile Photo will be copied over when they register on your new Spruz website, leaving only the email address and password they would need to fill out." Unfortunately, this doesn't appear to port any more content than that. Comments from people who have tried the migration tool can be found here: http://my.spruz.com/pt/Migrating-Your-Members-Off-of-Ning/blog.htm.

Wackwall is another social networking portal which will do much the same thing, import your member data from a .CSV file generated by your Ning which you then import into your Wackwall network (http://blog.wackwall.com/2010/05/migrate-from-ning-to-wackwall.html).

Other sites encourage you to restart your community afresh. Some with the most comfortable feel and functionality (in my view) are Cloudworks (http://cloudworks.ac.uk), Mixxt (http://mixxt.com), and SocialGo. The latter produces very slick social network portals and claims to be "free forever," but only for the first GB of storage and 10 GB of bandwidth (https://signup.socialgo.com/plans/). These sites offer a substrate for your community but you'll have to either start over with new members and content or port content manually.

Good and Bazzano (2010) have a good rundown of many of the options listed here, and then some, hyperlinked from a mind-map chart.

So the best choice is probably to host it yourself, but whether maintaining your own web domain or using one of the free choices still available, your strategy is to (1) grab your content, and then (2) try to reconstruct your community in its new location. Fortunately there are some appealing options for doing that, but try to choose one that doesn't go the way of Ning this time!

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