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Across the continents - online community conferences as a mechanism for school improvement. Interim Paper

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Abstract

The notion of building a learning community is central to building bottom up school improvement initiatives. Relatively little has been written about the role of online communities as a mechanism for school improvement and less about communities that transcend national boundaries. This small-scale research, undertaken in one such conference, looks at the potential outcomes and conditions for success.

Introduction and context

At Ultralab, we have many years experience in developing online learning communities (Ramondt 1998). Since 1990, in collaboration with the UK National College for School Leadership much of our development work has focused upon online communities for school leaders (Bradshaw et al 2002, Thompson 2002, Gee 2002, Doherty 2002). Explicit in this work is the notion of 'school improvement' through building learning communities of professionals (ref Evaluation Report 2002).

One such community, with approximately 300 members, is the Pupil Behaviour Management (PBM) community that has thrived for the past 3 years within the umbrella Talking Heads communities supported by the National College for School Leadership in England. In January 2003, a group from the PBM community volunteered to meet face-to-face to review the workings of the community and plan its further development. One of the outcomes of this meeting was the recognition that there was potentially much to learn from and share with school leaders from other countries on the specific issue of pupil behaviour in much the same way as this community had.

The group that met decided to host an international conference in the summer term of 2003 with support from Ultralab in identifying school leaders from different countries and in facilitating the conference. The bringing of this international dimension to improving learning opportunities for all pupils through improved behaviour was seen as an exciting development of the work of the community and this paper explains the practical issues of 'hosting' such a conference, the outcomes that can be seen to be impacting on school improvement, and the underpinning concepts supporting asynchronous learning communities.

The conference attracted 35 participants from Uganda, Kenya, England, Scotland, N. Ireland, Eira, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States of America.

The enquiry

a. Objectives or purposes

The potential for online asynchronous conferences has been made clear, in that they allow individuals from around the world to come together and share, much as they would in a 'traditional' face-to-face conference (Harisim et al 1997) yet without the time and financial costs of travel and accommodation. Potentially, this provides access to international networking for many practitioners unable find time or finance for traditional conference models.

There are of course significant differences between the experiences of practitioners working in different school systems. These may be differences in culture, experience, technological access and so on and these raise issues that need to be overcome if the use of the conference is to realize its potential for impacting on the school improvement agenda in the countries, and the institutions, of participants.

On the other hand, there are many potential advantages to the use of online asynchronous conferences, in the areas of international collaborative learning and sharing of best practice in the field of school improvement. This paper explores how face-to-face models of social relationships and patterns of behaviour are modeled in the online context and how new understanding and mechanisms are developed to support the formation of relationships in the context of an online conference.

Many face-to-face conferences preclude participation and engagement. They have at their centre a keynote presentation to all delegates making exchange between individuals at best difficult. This results, at best, in shallow learning, as defined by Biggs (1999:14), as those attending the conference do not have opportunity for active participation through explicit reflection.

In comparison, a key feature of our model of asynchronous online conferences is the premium placed on delegate participation and negotiation of meaning based on their individual contextualization of the concepts. This leads, by Biggs' definition, to deep learning.

Within the online conferences, the purpose of each conversation is grounded in framing of the discourse to meet its objectives. This is manifested in the initial stimulus for the conversation, subsequent facilitator interventions and the format of the discussion. This latter facet ranges from a simple question and answer forum, through to more purposeful conversations, with the simple exchange of ideas or examples being developed into discussion around those ideas and applying them to an individual's context with support from colleagues.

b. Perspectives and theoretical frameworks

School Improvement has at its heart the concept of building capacity to change to raise the educational achievements of all pupils (Hopkins et al 1994). Thus the focus of the international conference was on building capacity through professional dialogue and deep learning.

This builds on the ideas of Hopkins 1994 et al, who have seen building capacity as the focus of professional development for teachers, through developing the knowledge base for teachers and school-self evaluation (Macbeath et al). Through the conversations between those involved in different contexts this knowledge base is developed collaboratively with the practitioner learning being made explicit (Eraut, 1994). This resonates with the arguments of Frost et al (2001), following earlier work of Stenhouse (1975), who argue for networks of teachers undertaking collaborative action enquiry. Harasim et al (1997) document the contribution of online networks as a 'bottom up' mechanism for school improvement.

In the domain of school improvement, the notion of building capacity through professional development, networking, collaboration, and exchanging views about practice has long been seen as important, most notably in the work of Fullan (1991), Hopkins et al (1994), Joyce et al (1997).

Fullan (2001,2003), at least refers to the role of government and the influence of the national and international context on policy making. However, he says little about the cross national aspects of policy making even though the history of school improvement policy has been littered by global trends such as for instance local management, 'standards', accountability, and the 'basic skills agenda.

While little is said about international links between government agencies, even less is said about the impact of international links between teachers. In the UK the DfES has a scheme for international study visits, which have been used by some schools as a school improvement process (Baumber 2003). Such visits have built upon schemes operated by other agencies such as the British Council, and the E.C. International study visits by practitioners are one form of 'bottom up' development that can add to 'building capacity' for improvement. Can the use of the virtual conference extend this process, both in terms of the number of teachers and institutions involved in it, and the length of time of their involvement?

Fullan 2001:236, quoting Ellmore 2000:20) reports that

> *Instructional improvement requires continuous learning: Learning is both individual and a social activity. Therefore, collective learning demands an environment that guides and directs the acquisition of new knowledge about instruction.*

Now, perhaps for the first time with the advent of new technologies the potential for online asynchronous conferencing of professional educators, across national boundaries is an emerging feature of the school improvement project. Such conferences allow individuals, both at policy making and chalk face from around the world to come together and share much as they would in a 'traditional' face-to-face conference.

Quite how the emergence of this aspect of school improvement will develop is uncertain. It is clear however that there will be an impact upon the nature of reflection, and the way in which ideas about practice are exchanged.

c. Methods, techniques, or modes of inquiry

We take an evaluative approach to the enquiry and use Stake's (1967) matrix for the countenance model of evaluation and Friedman & Rothman's model of action evaluation (1999). In using Stake's approach we are able to take data that comes from a variety of sources, both structured and unstructured, spontaneous and planned. These data are grounded in the discussions in the online community set in the antecedents of the contributors' individual contexts - cultural, national and educational - and the shared contexts of pedagogy and the online community, which they participate in.

The data will be complemented by that produced from semi-structured interviews of key informants in the community who will produce vignettes of the impact of their interaction in online community on school improvement in their particular contexts. Ultralab facilitators' reflections and 'story' will be used to give a descriptive richness to the account. Finally online surveys will be used to triangulate the findings from the interviews.

Stake's approach allows is to accommodate these different data, from the informal conversations in community to the formal and quantitative outputs from surveys. It provides a mechanism for analysing the relationships between the antecedents and the outcomes intended and observed. The interactions in community will provide the informal transactions, the post-discussion interviews and surveys, the formal.

As members of the community we are not acting as external agents in evaluation. Rather we are actors in the transactions. Thus we are aligned with some aspects of action evaluation. Baseline, transactional and summative phases can be identified as in the model of Friedman & Rothman. We have defined baseline intentions in establishing the community and, through iterative refinement, we have honed these to refocus the community purpose. The transactional phase of the evaluation is in the conversations and the summative is in the interviews and questionnaires that provide formal opportunity for respondents to reflect on their interactions and on the alignment of intended and observed outcomes.

d. Data sources or evidence
Preliminary analysis of the data indicates that from a participants point of view there are significant benefits from sharing ideas through the online conference in Pupil Behaviour. A full evaluation into the likely impact is yet to be completed and at a more than 'individual' level will be difficult to identify in the time frame under which we are operating. We argue, however, that in this emerging field of online learning communities that headteachers engaging in ideas is evidence of impact (Southworth 2002).

e. Educational, practical or scientific importance of the study
The successful trial brought together school leaders from different countries, not just to share experiences of practice, but to move to the deeper learning about how other's experiences might be applied to their own context. Moreover, practitioners are now empowered to join in world debates about issues of policy in a 'relevativist' way freeing them from their introspective national debates.

The Analysis

1. Overcoming the barrier of language.

The facilitation role of the Ultralab and NCSL team was seen to be crucial in bringing together the group, developing relationships so that sharing of knowledge can take place. Hence, one of the first activities was to

One head

> "Hi everyone, I'm Head of a one form entry primary school in Rochdale, near Manchester. We are full of pupils with challenging behaviours, so my angle is one of 'inclusion' in main stream setting and how poor behaviour upsets class routines"

another responded,

> "Kia Ora. As the Principal of Hautapu (Sacred Wind) School just north of Cambridge, New Zealand, I am privileged to work with 15 quality humanitarians, 200 creative and eager learners; and to serve a community that has supported this school for 125 years. Decile 9, Year 1 to 8, Semi-Rural and completely refurbished over my past three years here. From one of my desks (I have one in each class of the school and share it with a different student every week), I can see race horses, a 911 Porche, adventure playground, native Kauri, Totara and Kaihikatea trees and a big photo of my family. I am looking forward to engaging with you all in some quality discussion."

The 'introductions' phase of building the community was once again seen to be important by the facilitation team. Of note were how quickly the informality developed, barriers were broken and online identities established. The enthusiasm for the online conference as willing active participants shows through.

A further activity was to get though differences in terminology and this was achieved through a 'brainstorm' of acronyms.

Table 1

Three Letter Acronyms (TLAs)
Started on : 26/06/03 23:00
Ended on : 18/07/03 23:00

We all use them but they can be a huge barrier to mutual understanding! Please use
this space to ask about other people's TLAs (Teacher Learning Assistants) and to explain any of
your own.

SATs = Standard Attainment Tests (I think!)	AToL - assess to learn (NZ)	PATs - Progress and Achievement Tests (NZ)	I.E.P. Individual Education Plan (NZ)	PSP - Pastoral support plan
In the US, SAT stands for Scholastic Achievement Test. :-) John Smith 27-JUN-03 20:10	CPD: continuous professional development (England)	LSA - Learning Styles Analysis	IBP - individual behaviour plan (UK)	IEP's: as in N.Z. Individual Education Plan
S.A.R.R.S. Students at risk in reading support programme. 8 years to 10.	NCSL - National College for School Leadership (England)	ADHD - attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder	BMU(S) Beam Me Up (Scottie) when in desperate need of rescue (England)	NQT-Non-qualified Teacher (UK)
QTS-Qualified Teacher Status (UK)	R.T.L.B. Running through looking busy. (Resource Teacher of learning and behaviour)	CoP - Community of Practice	I.L.P Individual leraning plan - the ultimate in differentiation!	That's not right! (above) NQT is 'newly' qualified teacher
P.L.Ps - Personal Learning Plans (Scotland)				

2. The community creating the agenda

Our work on community emphasises the need for the agenda to be driven by community
members, involving both individual self-direction and collaborative communal negotiation, so
that every individual establishes learning goals for themselves within a group framework.

In the online planning phase of the conference open to all delegates, the following issues were
raised about the potential agenda:

- Support structures and agencies
- Motivation for success
- Conflict resolution
- Parental support
- Changing teacher practice
- Peer mediation
- Self and peer assessment
- Support staff
- Large classes

These suggested a fairly common agenda, across national boundaries with some local flavour.
For example, Ugandan delegates were keen to focus on coping with teenage pregnancy in their
schools. Headteachers from the UK tended to focus on more 'abstract' topics including the real
dilemmas of Headship and pupil behaviour management. For example, one Head suggested the
topic of:

"getting the balance right in terms of making allowances because of known
difficulties and being consistent about unacceptable behaviour "

2. "Exchange in International Communities"

Table 2

MAJOR CONFERENCE DISCUSSIONS

New and current conversations

Learning Across the Globe....

Problem Setting and Problem Solving

Three Letter Acronyms

Strategies

Golden Moments and Hot Tips

Summarised conversations

Learning and Teaching debate

Working with the whole Community

The conference discussions were organised by the facilitation team around a number of topics . These were chosen to limit the number of places to contribute, yet with a view to covering the agenda set by the community. An emphasis was placed upon developing the positive outcomes of 'strategies' and articulating what was being achieved in the exchange, especially for example recording 'Golden Moments and Hot Tips'.

This emphasis on facilitation in 'structuring' and proactively 'enabling' the community is not the only form of exchange.

Facilitation of communities also encourages exchanges beyond the conversations. Online community tools such as home pages, 'stickies' or electronic post it notes, or e-mail can be used for all sorts of other request and exchanges. We believe in community tools that empower members as 'creators' of conversations and materials for exchange. Examples of this includes,

"Hi Ann my school has been involved in ALPS for 4 years and I firmly believe it works. Hope we can meet up on line and discuss this fully."

And

"I'm interested to hear what others have to say (or have experienced) when a school wide value system is put in place."

One request in the community for examples was,

" AK(Name of a community member) I would be grateful for a link I could use to find out more about the LSA. It sounds fascinating."

Learning across the Globe: What participants said about the experience.

The enthusiasm of the volunteer group of Headteachers was not dampened at all by the experience of an international online conference for practitioners.

One head from Uganda reported that,

> "Learning across the globe has been an interesting thing, where one finds people from different localities but with similar views. I have achieved a lot of which I am to integrate and find out a better way of doing things. I have found interesting things where child behaviour depends on us as teachers, the community and generally everybody."

The development team were surprised by the extent to which there were common themes across national boundaries, with practitioners experiencing many similar national policies.

One Head from New Zealand illustrated a theme introduced by an English context,

> "G's comment that the joy of teaching is removed when the curriculum becomes too prescriptive is an accurate description of how many of my staff feel. Some see it as a bind & that they have to get through so many different curricular areas with a multitude of approaches, they don't have the energy to be creative."

Another conversation revealed one of the many informal links that have developed with one head requesting further information on a topic which was sent and responding with,

> "thanks R, what I love about this conference is that although we are in very different countries, working with different age children I can learn from you and we are dealing with the same things, brilliant"

Another Headteacher, from Africa, illustrated the challenge of providing access across school systems,

> "Personally I have learnt a lot from the conference. However, my setback has been on my location. The place I am working in is a rural one where one has to move a great distance for the café (internet),but all the same I am grateful and I pray that the conference be maintained and sustained."

The comment underpins the potential value of the online community as a potential source of support for global school improvement" while one way of providing some access for the school systems for the most underdeveloped economies.

Consolidating the Discussion: The Summary

Another key to successful online community facilitation has been shown to be through consolidating the outcomes of discussion into a summary or précis of what has been covered . Table 3 shows one of the summaries for the PBM conference.

Table 3

Last week's conversations revealed some common issues faced by school leaders around the world such as:

It is important to work with the whole community. All conference delegates who participated in the conversations agreed that the students? environment outside of school is highly influential and teachers need to be aware of this. It can be difficult to work effectively with parents or outside agencies if they are unwilling or lack understanding. This gap can occur for different reasons. In Uganda, for instance, some parents did not receive an education so do not know how to advise their children. In other places a lack of resources can restrict progress in dealing with problem children. Some advice for dealing with these issues:

* As head of your school, be visible and available to staff, parents and the community-show yourself to be a listener
* Use appropriate language and not "teacher talk"
* Listen and act rather than react-look for the primary reason-not the secondary
* Communicate with parents through newsletters and social gatherings
* Out of school activities such as homework clubs and sports events can establish links and positive feeling with the community

Participants agreed that the teacher is the vital element in the classroom. Not only do they have the potential for powerfully influencing students for the better through fostering respectful, trusting, caring and professional relationships, they are also the key factor in turning schools around. It was suggested that teachers need to become learners as well, to understand how we learn and what it is like for their students. If teachers are resistant to positive changes in a school, and reject movement away from traditional discipline techniques, they can be suffering from low self esteem. Some advice for improving school relationships and discipline procedures:

* Lead by example
* Send teachers to schools to observe how different approaches can work
* Hold regular discussions about choices and child self responsibility, looking at constructivist articles and theory
* Update discipline policy with students
* Invite specialist 'experts'/'advisors? into staff meetings to talk about things such as gifted and talented, integration programmes
* Send staff to relevant courses that inspire and uplift
* Learning from each other is very effective
* Change is a long term project-small changes are the ones that stay

Conclusion and Discussion

The participants reported the value of the conference conversation in meeting their needs and interests. Learning has been reported and informal exchanges of information and views has been developed between a number of headteachers. Clearly. there is more potential for teaching staff and students.

In line with other Ultralab research the key role of facilitation as an empowering mechanism to bring people and their agenda together and to lead towards a conclusion has been illustrated.

The research emphasises the potential of international online community conferencing as a means of exchange beyond national boundaries and systems. It is our feeling that a "school improvement' model that emphasised bottom up initiatives would welcome the power of learning going beyond single school systems and policies. Such a view may concur with Clarke, Lodge and Reed's (1997) call for an "emancipatory" school improvement model so that "new ways of living in a post-modern society are encouraged as part of education for sustainability" (1998p2). Clearly, Head Teachers working in a global world sharing their views about common global problems may be one way forward in this century.

The intent behind Ultralab facilitation has been to "empower" the professional by seeking their agenda, moving forward their conversation and providing the online tools. Yet clearly this has involved a degree of "structuring" of the community.

Mortimore (2000) has already outlined the inevitable effects of globalisation in education. Some may conclude that there is a danger of a new form of colonial cultural imperialism in the school improvement agenda in this initiative. However, our view is that with enlightened agencies such as NCSL providing tools such as online community tools for use across national boundaries there is a very real potential for building bottom up global school improvement initiatives.

Clearly, there is much room for further development and research into establishing and maintaining a global online community conferencing for educational practitioners. Such a forum might be best established by agencies such as ICSEI, and some leading sympathetic NGO's such as NCSL with a view to empowering, sharing and building bottom up improvement on a larger scale. Innovation in technology has moved what might seem to have once been a pipe dream into a very real possibility. Indeed some are already heavily involved in a global era, for example:

> "Increasingly, in the global era, 'flows' of students, staff, managers, information, images and ideas, courses, infrastructure and finances are crossing national and cultural boundaries for educational purposes. The emergence of a 'knowledge economy' is opening education to new forms of international competition and collaboration and creating the need for a fundamental reappraisal of educational purposes, practices and pedagogies. While the field of international education practice has grown rapidly, the issues surrounding it are generally under-researched and under-theorised. As a research field 'International education' is concerned with this broad area, and picks up both 'pure' and 'applied' aspects. On one hand it takes

in professional practices in internationalising the curriculum and managing international programs and cross-cultural situations; on the other it is concerned with developing and testing theories of globalisation in education, and engaged in inter-disciplinary collaborations along these lines. It also takes in the older academic tradition of comparative education, now being reworked in the global era.

(From Monash University at http://www.education.monash.edu.au/research/res_areas/global_international/ last accessed Dec 2003)

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