Learning, Community and Technology: Ultralab's recent experience working in partnership with the National College for School Leadership

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Abstract

The use of online communities for professional learning is an emerging field, particularly in education in the UK. This paper reports findings from ULTRALAB's experience with online learning communities with the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in the online elements of the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH) learning programmes and the Talking Heads informal communities for headteachers (principals).

In this work we explore some of the issues arising from our preliminary research and analyse some of the different contexts in building such online learning communities. Such issues that are emerging include developing participation, promoting supportive yet challenging tutoring/facilitation, structuring learning opportunities, connecting formal and informal learning, overcoming isolation, and progressing the boundaries of community knowledge.

Models for online learning communities

Our view is in line with Salmon's (2002) analysis, that it is the community model that seems to us to offer the most potential as a vehicle for professional learning in the immediate future. We are influenced by the social theory of learning put forward by Lave and Wenger (Lave and Wenger 1993, and Wenger 1998) who develop a particular view of situated learning through the lens of an 'apprenticeship' model. For Lave and Wenger, learning is seen as an "inseparable aspect of social practice" (Lave and Wenger 1991) between a community of practitioners sharing a common set of practices developed around a tightly defined domain. A key distinction between this and other theories of learning is that it moves away from the focus on cognitive processes and conceptual structures and instead focuses on developing the "distributed intelligence" (Brown, 1998) of that community.

We believe, however, that constituting online learning communities exclusively as a group of practitioners, risks promoting a conservative approach to professional development as there is no explicit mechanism for taking forward the learning of communities beyond that which community members contribute themselves. To address this issue, we have pioneered the 'hotseat' as a mechanism to bring together both practitioners and those involved in enquiry and research.

Learners in our communities are professionals – serving teachers and school leaders. Our view is based on that of Eraut (1994) that their learning comes from making the tacit professional experience-based knowledge explicit. We do this through providing opportunity for interaction to allow learners to be scaffolded (Vygotsky, 1978) and through reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983, Eraut 1994).

The use of online community also provides a means of addressing Knowles' (1984) model of successful andragogical learning. This model states that adults learn best when learning is:

- based on solving problems not assimilating content;
- negotiated with learners, so that their expectations and needs are met;
- relevant to their immediate context, in their professional lives;
- experiential.

These key ideas about learning are linked to a model of tutoring based upon creating, and 'facilitation' of, an environment where professional learning is enabled and supported.

In designing our online community spaces, we do not eschew content altogether. Rather we provide stimulus and starter references, to allow the development of participative asynchronous online discussions. The discussions are central to the learning, and the summaries of earlier cohorts or topics are used as resources for future groups. If the knowledge is to be found in the experience and reflection-on-action of the learners, then these summaries, which make that knowledge explicit, are as valuable as any from third-party writers.

The role of the facilitator / tutor is essential, research by Ultralab (2002a) shows "We similarly observe that the role of the online "teacher" moves from directing to enabling online learners as they move from dependence to ownership." This approach is supported by research of Stephenson (2001:41) who developed a paradigm grid for online learning that illustrates the options available in an online context. A key finding is the importance of clearly aligning the expectations of learners with the intended pedagogical approach. Empowering learners is not the same as leaving them to their own devices.

Case Studies

At Ultralab, we have been engaged in developing online learning projects since the early 1990s. Since January 2000, we have worked with the UK's Department for Education and Skills (DfES) and, after its establishment by the Department, the NCSL, in the use of online learning communities for school leaders. We adopt a case study, ethnographic approach.

Two projects are described here. As with the majority of Ultralab's work, they are projects in which staff are actively engaged – in these cases, as tutors or facilitators – and are carrying out action research. The findings of the research come not from detached observers, but rather from those working at the heart of the projects. Another important principle guiding our work is that the projects are not pilot ones for the sake of research**.**

NCSL programmes

The NPQH programme was remodeled and re-launched in January 2001. Aimed at teachers aspiring to school headship in England, the evaluation that led to the redesign emphasised the need to focus on learning and assessment through school-based activity, the practitioner as reflective learner and the use of ICT in delivering learning opportunities. Some 2500 learners enroll on this programme every six months.

Ultralab has also been engaged in the development of an online community for the Certificate of School Business Management Pilot. This is an NCSL programme aimed

at school bursars. One of the significant features of the programme has been the introduction of blended learning – mixing online learning community with a managed learning system. Unstructured feedback from learners is that they appreciate the community and see it is the centre of their learning – a place where they learn with others.

NCSL Informal Learning Communities

The development of the online learning programmes followed Ultralab's project for the NCSL/DfES in the design, implementation and facilitation of the online community for headteachers in England – Talking Heads established as a pilot project by the DfES in February 2000. It was developed into a working model and placed under the remit of the NCSL in August 2000. The project has focused on developing an engaging an informal online learning community through active facilitation by educational professionals trialing a variety of strategies. The project's aims were to reduce isolation and enables headteachers to share good practice.

At the time of writing membership of Talking Heads is approaching 6000.

Key findings

The fundamental challenge faced was generating participation, without this there is no online community, and no learning. Both informal online communities, such as Talking Heads, and more structured programme related communities are effective in enabling professional learning, but to make them successful is a complex task requiring a number of component elements to be put in place. It is easy to underestimate this complexity.

It is possible to generate a vibrant and relevant online community that also enables headteachers to generate and exchange insights regarding their practice, considerably assisting in building capacity for school improvement.

For the individual at its most effective, this manifests itself in school leaders and teachers taking a self-directed approach towards their professional learning.

Time needs to be given to induction, with specific activities designed to negotiate expectations, provide guidance to the online space and resolve problems. In other ULTRALAB projects, we support this with synchronous online activities – 'chats'. This is a departure from our normal use of asynchronous activities.

When engaged in any CPD activity, teachers often report that the social interaction and networking is as important as the formal sessions (Terrell, 2002). To engage learners in online community, opportunities for social interaction have been provided by some tutors. These allow for the informal networks developed at induction to continue and provide an online equivalent of the learning circle face-to-face meetings arranged by candidates.

The online space can be an isolating one, with comments made asynchronously and by individual remote learners. Learners appreciate tutors who support the community through other channels of communication such as email, telephone and synchronous

chat.

Where online teachers are overtly engaged in conversations, providing feedback, setting focuses, acting as either facilitator or expert, candidates are more likely to respond. Where the tutor is not overtly engaged, candidates are likely to focus on the barrenness of online space. It is also apparent that where a tutor or hotseat guest provides lengthy answers, this will invoke similarly lengthy future contributions. There is a fine line here between the desire for brevity for readability, and the need for in-depth responses for deep professional learning. This modeling of desired behaviour by the tutor/facilitator is essential.

Moving tutors from 1-1 to community/group discussion requires both acceptance of the new technology and understanding of the new culture and philosophy of community learning. Where tutors have problems, they often fall back onto emails with individuals, devaluing the community.

When analysing the contributions in the informal induction space, it is clear that some students feel that this is as natural a place to discuss their learning as the more formal module space.

Some students cite the community software as a barrier to participation. They are averse to its use and prefer to focus on the technicalities of the environment rather than the interaction with others. To minimise this effect we have reduced the number of spaces to contribute to and also emphasized the communication and learning taking the focus away from the technology.

Some learners will read all the resources made available to them before they feel able to contribute to discussions even stating that they are not prepared to discuss anything before they have learned about it. Individual preferences for learning styles play a part here as no doubt does past experience and expectations of what constitutes learning. Stephenson (2001) accepts that this should be both expected and worked with. There is need to consider learners' preferred learning styles. Those who report a more assimilative style will tend to read the resources before contributing. We have found that by providing fewer resources at the beginning of a conversation, and focusing the discussion on students' own practice reduces the effect of this time-delay.

Our experiences concur with those reported by Owen (1999) in that the use of conversations alone is not enough. They must be supported by resources, activities and support the recording of learning in portfolios.

It seems to us that time in an online learning programme exhibits some unusual behaviours, at least in the minds of participants. We have experimented with having few or many units and conversations open at once. On the one hand, the asynchronous nature of the space allows time to be slipped and for students to contribute whenever they wish.

On the other hand, time slippage has meant that students typically look to deadlines to complete activities and without them, fail to participate. It is as if with no structure to time, students cannot structure their learning. We have moved to a set of time-limited

activities with a clearly defined pathway through them. This has been criticised by some students who look to e-learning to provide open paths. Previous models of having all conversations open at any one time have resulted in little or no interaction, however, as the presence of learners in any one conversation is diluted.

The bringing together of practitioner experience and knowledge generated through enquiry and research is made possible through the use of the 'hotseat'. In simple terms, a guest expert is invited into a closed community for a time-limited period to engage in dialogue around a specialist domain. Initially, some candidates more readily engage in a direct question and answer with a nominated expert than share their learning with peers. This often deepens into reflection on participants' practice. The learning is two way with experts often commenting on the benefits of the dialogue, and in some cases this helped influence DfES policy.

Conclusions for a model of learning and teaching

We are engaged in developing a model of learning and teaching that comes from the interaction of traditional learning, the theories of communities of practice and of situated professional learning and the use of technology. This is a model designed for learning that is manifested by the developing professional practice of the learners. Much of the knowledge and understanding is tacit, and a key objective is to make this knowledge explicit, sharing learners' reflections on it and its application to their professional role. There is a balance here between the knowledge acquired through participants' previous experience, new knowledge and understanding through reflection-on-action and the selection and use of appropriate propositional knowledge as a tool for reflection and analysis.

There is also a balance between the formal and informal learning. This is very marked in face-to-face situations, and needs to be reflected on line. We are constantly looking to develop self-directed and collaborative learning, but this needs to be nurtured – it does not happen on its own. Our model (Ultralab 2002b) is underpinned by notions of community, the components of the learning programme and the role of the tutor, facilitator, or expert. These three come together to shape the learning experience and influence the design of the programme and the online space in which it takes place. In this concluding section, we look at each of these in turn and summarise our approach.

The community aspects of our online learning programmes are used to overcome isolation and to develop social learning. Through their use, learners are encouraged to reflect on their experiences and the tacit knowledge they have developed. Within the community there is a common domain, that of professional educators, and through active participation, this reflection is taken further as each learner analyses and critiques the individual and shared understandings of the group. The introduction of 'outsiders' provides a stimulus or catalyst that prevents the community from becoming inward looking and conservative in the development of its practice.

Through induction and synchronous events the identity, role, and persona that people exhibit online is explicitly discussed to try to overcome the issues of only receiving partial information about fellow learners through text-based communication.

The components of an online programme are as listed above - discussions, activities, resources and knowledge. In designing our programmes we are conscious of the balance between the immediacy time demands of synchronous events. The bulk of the activities and discussions are asynchronous, with contribution being possible at any time to given conversation. Previous experience with open-ended deadlines or having many discussions running in parallel have not been successful.

Learners have become frustrated by the lack of activity in the particular discussion they are engaged in if others are engaged elsewhere. Time is a difficult concept online. For those who are engaged it can run very slowly and they can make many contributions in a short period. For others time can seem to move very quickly and, if they have not contributed for a while, they can lose the thread of the discussions very easily. We provide resources in the form of an electronic "library", but are careful not to overstock this as a large proportion of learners prefer to read all resources before contributing. This results in a stagnation of discussion.

Included in these resources is the summary of the discussions from previous cohorts, thus developing the shared knowledge. In this use of online learning community, we are distinguishing programmes from the traditional distance learning models, but the resource-based nature of these latter still has a role and is valued by many students. The role of the online tutor is key in balancing the demands of time, drawing out the personalities to involve all members of the group, structuring and designing the online space and meeting individuals' needs and styles. Expectations are shared at the beginning of each programme and the tutor needs to support the online community activities and discussions with telephone and e-mail communications, sometimes referred to as 'back channel'. We encourage tutors to have a weekly or fortnightly communication with all students, to be overt when they are in community and to model behaviour. If a tutor has the habit of always contributing, constructively challenging and following up comments made then learners are more likely to follow suit.

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Researchers working at ULTRALAB www.ultralab.net in the U K with a focus on the use of the Internet as a means of enabling professional development.