The Practice of Networked Learning : Experiences of Design and Participation.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper considers a continuing professional development networked learning Masters course which is about learning and teaching via the Internet. In the paper, one tutor and three course participants describe their experiences of the course as a way of illuminating some issues around the design and participation of networked learning.

We start with an over view of the course, which is followed by the personal perspectives. We finish with some general remarks about learning and teaching in networked learning environments.

THE BACKGROUND TO THE MED

The MEd in Networked Collaborative Learning by action research is an advanced part-time "at a distance" programme designed to provide participants with a comprehensive grounding in the theory and application of networked learning. On the programme, we focus on learning about the new information and communication technologies; designing online learning; developing learning communities; and working with online groups of collaborative learners.

We aim to help course participants appreciate and understand the ways in which they can use the Internet and the Web in their professional practice, and how they can design and evaluate learning events which focus on group work and are based on sound principles of action learning and research (Winter, 1989) and problem based learning (Boud and Feletti, 1998). We try to emphasise the implementation of innovatory online practice by creating a supportive and creative online research learning where participants can feel free to experiment and "learn by doing", while constantly holding a critical perspective on their practice and the theory underpinning it.

We have been running the programme since 1996.

THE RESEARCH LEARNING COMMUNITY

In the programme, we wish to emphasise the educational need for learners to work in social learning environments where they can feel "connected" to other participants and tutors, and where they have a sense of a lively, highly interactive learning community. Participants and a tutor work closely in a learning set (anything between 6-10 members), as well as the whole community working together on "community wide" issues and concerns. This is linked to the capability of the Internet to support groupwork and provide a virtual environment for learners to work together, share resources and collaborate. Within this virtual research learning community perspective (Pedler, 1981; Fernback, 1999; Smith and Kollock, 1998; McConell, 2000), participants have opportunities to:

- have a wide choice over the content and direction of their learning

- manage their own learning, and cooperate with others in theirs through processes of negotiation and discussion
- take a critical perspective on learning and academic issues with strong relationships to their professional practice
- focus on their own learning and development from a critical, reflective perspective, combined with an understanding of relevant academic ideas and concepts. A means for doing this is exposure to other participants' development within the learning community
- participate in developing the research learning community perspective, which is based on participants and tutors taking collective responsibility for the design and evaluation of the programme, via constant review and modification of the design, procedures and ways of working

The programme is run on an action research mode of learning (Winter, 1989), and is based on a philosophy which acknowledges that people learn in different ways. The action learning/research focus allows participants to make choices about the management, focus and direction of their learning. Throughout the programme, there is an emphasis on reflecting on our education practice, for both participants and tutors alike.

ASSESSMENT

Participants submit three pieces of work in Year One, and a further one plus a research dissertation in Year Two. Topics chosen for course assignments are negotiated with staff and other participants, and are focused on practical professional issues and problems relating to participants' own work (Boud and Feletti, 1998). In addition, they are required to work with other participants in producing a collaborative piece of work in each workshop.

Assessment is part of the learning process on the MEd, and forms a major part of the content of the programme. Course assignments are submitted for triangulated assessment i.e. assessment where the writer, their co-workers in the learning set and the set tutor read, comment and assess the assignment (McConnell, 1999; McConnell, 2000). Assessment is on a pass/fail basis. We feel this approach to assessment is consonant with, and supports, the overall aims and values of this course, which are largely concerned with forms of cooperative and consultative teaching and learning. We aim to model this form of teaching and learning within the course, so providing participants with experiential learning of computer supported cooperative learning.

Although participants are not assessed on their contribution to the online work and discussions, it is a course requirement that they fully participate in them. It is not possible to gain a Pass without full online participation.

THE EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING AND TUTORING

In preparing for this paper, the tutor invited the three course participants to join him in writing about their experiences of learning and tutoring on the MEd. The invitation was sent by email :
"... (snip) I have in mind a presentation that would explore each of your experiences of taking the Med - from whatever perspective you feel you would like to take." We spent several weeks sending each other emails and refining our contributions. Below are the three participant contributions and the tutor's.

The Learners' Perspective

Nick Noakes : Threading Community

The filters for my experiences on this course come from being a language teacher using a cooperative, collaborative and discovery learning methodology, a teacher developer, a frequent online learner and a less frequent online facilitator, working within an Asian adult and higher education context. From these filtered experiences, the most significant area for me has been the development of a learning community and the activities within the programme that have engendered this.

This community building started with a series of tasks at the face-to-face meeting in October 98. These tasks were aimed at connecting us personally, professionally and as learners and at giving us a high degree of autonomy. They were also organised to include reflection on purpose and process, and not just content or outcomes. All of these I see as real strengths. Although, the repetition of similar tasks and the time given for them generated frustration for some participants, the goal of beginning the process of community building was achieved. However, the one strong feeling that was generated within me at the face-to-face, and still endures today, is Pedler's notion of "liberating tension" that comes with such an open, autonomous structure (Pedler, 1981). On returning to Hong Kong, I was very enthusiastic about working with my first self-chosen learning set as well as the full cohort.

My participation and energy stayed high through to the end of the first workshop in Jan '99. I kept in touch with what was happening in other sets and from this felt part of the whole cohort and not just the learning set I was in at that time. For me, the self-chosen cooperative and collaborative projects built on the feelings of community and created a nice balance between shared and individual concerns. The action research based cooperative assignments helped us to 'ground' our learning and to share more of our contexts and ourselves with our peers. The high degree of reciprocity in this strengthened the community further. The community building was also reinforced through the self-chosen assessment criteria (alongside the programme ones) and the peer review. The latter caused anxiety for some as they felt that they weren't 'qualified' to provide such constructive feedback. But, the fact that these feelings were present also demonstrated the existence of community. Community building was also strengthened through two programmed periods of collective reflection for each workshop; one at the learning set level in the middle after the collaborative assignment and the other at the end for the full cohort.

As the programme developed, I began to feel what I would call learning community bio-rhythms at three levels: individual, learning set and cohort. Just as our asynchronous discussions were threaded so was our participation; with long and short periods of low and high levels of intensity threaded among individuals within a set and threaded within the cohort. At the cohort level, participation was highest during the end of workshop reflection and decision periods called "the pause" but this got referred to as the "community gallop" as people became swamped with a "red tide" of new messages which tended to work as much against community building as for it. At the learning set level, participation was collectively highest when assignment deadlines became due. But individuals learning rhythms varied considerably being impacted deeply by external factors such as work demands, job-loss, divorce, family bereavement and personal illness.

As we are all now near the end of the M.Ed. with only our dissertations left, I feel incredibly supported by everyone in the cohort. I know that whatever type of problem I meet, I have a peer group that won't let me down. And given that I'm some 5,000 miles away, I think this says a lot about the learning community that we have collaboratively weaved.

Paddy Rowe : First experiences

Installing - got linked up to the University server via Lotus Notes just before the residential so I felt like a bona-fide cyber-citizen.

This achievement would be just the start of very steep learning curve. The curve analogy would be replaced at times by that of a vertical wall, not constructed to keep people out, more in the spirit of adventure training, with a few footholds and voices 'off' yelling encouragement.

First postings

My first postings to the Welcome 98 database within Lotus Notes sent in the pioneering spirit of 'brave new world'.

I had been typing all of my message in the subject heading space. This error was pointed out by one of the tutors and quickly rectified, so first and typical example of 'learning by doing', very much a theme of the Med.

Collaborative problem solving demonstrated after only one or two postings - not bad!

During the residential, I was surprised that there was not more emphasis on learning the intricacies of Lotus Notes given that this mode of communication would be the major interface between us for the entirety of the course.

What I found most refreshing during the 'hands-on' sessions at the residential was the ability to personalise the technology with the pervasive sense of humour we, as a group, had already experienced in the face to face sessions.

For example of LN humour see below - a tongue-in-cheek reference to a running gag about:

Flipzip Flapzap

Jack Kerouac on 10/06/98 at 11:29 AM

ho hum

flip chart
heaven

Abort, fail, retry? Y/N

First set

Level of communication almost frenetic with most members of the set feeling obliged to answer every posting, this phenomenon later coined as the **'the Red Tide'**, so named because any 'unread' postings appear as red text in the databases.

Lotus Notes is easy to use and good examples of threading showing responses to responses, etc.

Suggestions being made by some participants about the protocol for postings giving rise to debates about the content, eg: avoiding 'cyber nods' and 'cyber pats; such as 'I agree' or 'Good idea', etc.

Finding reading on the screen very difficult indeed so I would copy and paste to a word document and print out, however, printouts not representative of true narrative as newer postings not accounted for.

Debate rages later about the most effective use of Lotus Notes to cut down on the volume of postings.

Some discussion about having designer rights to add to existing tables (eg: when deciding who would review what) rather than having to copy and paste each time. Easy to add attachments, others managed to play with comments boxes. Adding URLs to postings for resources very common but not possible to access to link by simply clicking. Discovered a way of referring back to a previous posting by doing document link into the posting.

After first set to present

Designer rights achieved by some members. The aim of this more direct control over the organisation of postings being, not to diminish discussion activity, but harness it into a more organised format.

I would like to have taken part in this experiment but was already feeling I had reached my plateau of learning with accessing LN; using the web to access resources; experimenting with ICQ synchronous meetings (managed a 5-way with South Africa, Hong Kong and various locations in UK) and trying to get to grips with web page authoring for workshop 3.

Databases become large, unwieldy and a barrier to communication in their maturity. To combat this problem, new databases are opened with every workshop.

Although the level of postings has dropped quite considerably since the first, enthusiastic sets, the technology has, nevertheless kept me engaged in the course in a way which has surprised me, in fact, I don't think I would have sustained a traditional face to face course for 2 years without the degree of flexiblility distance learning has afforded me.

Will Stewart : Reflections on the first workshop

During those early months we were all "learning" to work online. The need for collaboration had come through strongly at the residential and, from the start, this was one of the most obvious characteristics of the Learning Sets. At the end of that first month I wrote in my Reflective Diary:

Like the residential week, the supportive nature of the on- line group has developed quickly. There has been an immediate openness and supportive feedback. People who admitted not previously being happy in this kind of environment, were happy to "come out" and open up to the group.

Individuals are thinking out loud on line. The first 3 weeks have seen very frequent interactions occurring. With 10 members in the group, the initial response has been quite staggering - no real warming-up period.

We were making good progress in sharing needs, providing resources and working together to plan our collaborative project.

At about the same time, I wrote that our collaborative project was:

..coming along well with all individuals contributing.. How would it be if there were people who didn't contribute ? How would this be handled by the group/tutor ?

It had quickly become clear that the success of the group was dependent on everyone's contribution. If one individual had opted out or had been a freeloader then the viability of the group would have been compromised.

During this initial period individuals were obviously feeling their way, checking out what was acceptable online behaviour and sizing up what was a safe level of openness. We were learning

how to support each other online and how to make group decisions. We were learning how to give and receive comments and criticisms in a supportive and meaningful way.

In short, we were all learning how to collaborate effectively in an online environment.

Towards the end of the first collaborative project I wrote:

The week before the deadline for submission of the collaborative project was quite exciting. We had put most of the ideas into the pot and the challenge was now to put it all together into a cohesive document.

The individual strengths of each member became apparent during that final week.

It felt good to be working hard, while at the same time knowing that everyone else was also working just as hard.

This entry illustrates how the individual differences within the group were actually crucial in helping us make progress on the collaborative project.

At about the same time I concluded that:

The idea of "positive interdependence" (McConnell, 1994) has been clearly demonstrated within the group. I feel that we are all aware that both personal and group success is dependent on us working together and supporting each other. I think that this has been reinforced by the successful experience of the collaborative project. In this situation, I would say that we each achieved our own personal rewards by collaborating ("positive goal interdependence"), but we also achieved a successful group outcome ("positive reward interdependence") (McConnell, 1994).

The first four months were an exciting time. I had survived my first experience of an on-line learning community and was now ready to dive head long into Workshop 2.

David McConnell :Some Issues on Facilitating the Learning Community

I had been working on this course since its inception in 1996. This particular cohort started out with a tutor team of four : myself, Shelagh Avery, Celia Graebner and Bob Toynton. We collectively planned the course and were particularly concerned to ensure that the first residential in Sheffield (1) was carefully designed in ways that encouraged the development of a research learning community which would continue into the online (Lotus Notes) workshops.

This first residential was a testing ground for exploring the many challenges that lay ahead for us all – tutors and participants alike - during the next two years. We wanted to develop a sense of openness in the learning community : a context where direction, decision making and planning would be shared to a large degree. It soon became apparent to us that many participants found this open learning approach extremely challenging. At times there seemed to be a palpable air of anxiety. Clearly, from our perspective as tutors, it seemed that many participants had never experienced what it is like to "manage" their own learning and work in a collaborative community. It seemed that for some, a profound shift in their perception of themselves as