Chapter 14
Community of Practice or Networked Learning:
A Matter of Design

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the case of an online teacher professional development community that was designed to facilitate both networked learning and whole-group activities in cyclical form to support the eventual formation of a Community of Practice over time beyond the facilitated episode. Participants completed activities with a group (collective) focus in a series of wikis, and activities supporting networked learning in discussion forums. The design of the tasks was intentional, with clear identification of the learning purpose and scaffolding to support desired outcomes. The participation and learning outcomes were evaluated using a range of qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. The framework of Dron and Anderson (2007) identifies the potential for both learning networks and a community of practice within a group of online learners. Using this framework, activities were intentionally designed in which the best elements of both were enabled.

INTRODUCTION

A series of facilitated online communities was established within a Queensland education system ICT framework between 2007 and 2009 to support teachers in working towards accreditation as leaders in digital pedagogy. Whilst the accreditation was by creation of individual portfolios, the sharing of expertise and provision of mutual support was considered to be important. The intent of the facilitated community was not only to support ac-

creditation but beyond that, to support the formation of an enduring Community of Practice (CoP) with existing members mentoring new members and maintaining professional growth through the sharing of ideas.

This is the second of two papers examining the design for early formation of a CoP. The first paper identified strategies to increase the sense of 'belongingness' in a group and address early attrition through activities designed to initiate partnering and networking (see Fasso, 2010). This paper identifies the key design features of the first six weeks of this community as it moved from

initiation to a cycled focus on the development of learning networks and an early community of practice. It considers the pattern and quality of participation through content analysis; and the participants' perceptions of the value and outcomes of the strategies used through a Plus/Minus/Interesting (PMI) analysis, teleconference transcripts and surveys.

BACKGROUND: THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY

Teachers participating in the community were self-nominated as leaders in digital pedagogy in schools, districts, regions and across the state. It was accepted, when the community was designed, that the priority of participants was accreditation. However, beyond that was the focus on professional learning through activities designed to consolidate, define, and extend thinking. The individualized nature of the process was understood by the designers to be better supported much of the time through networking with other participants in similar teaching contexts, a feature of activity within a community of practice identified by Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002). However, it was also hoped that after accreditation a sustainable and enduring community of practice would continue to exist which, in turn, would support new teachers in their accreditation process. One of the core design principles was therefore to facilitate both networking and community bonding with a shared understanding of the central issues and knowledge of expected practice in digital pedagogy at this level.

The design of online activities intentionally facilitated two types of activity to support this vision. The first was to support the collaborative development of a shared understanding and the negotiation of core ideas common to all participants. The second challenged individual perceptions and knowledge embedded in each participant's teaching and leadership contexts, to further develop and often transform individual constructs of digital pedagogy.

This approach draws on the emerging debate in the literature about the relative merits of using the characteristics of community of practice or social networks to describe the structure and interactions of participants in the online environment (see, for example, Jones, Ferreday, & Hodgson, 2008; Castells, 2001; Cousin & Deepwell, 2005; Schwen & Hara, 2004).

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Emerging from the work of Wenger (1998), the concept of community of practice has been drawn from its original face-to-face context and applied to the online environment. The two defining characteristics of a CoP are learning transactions within a shared domain and the support of relationships that enable mutual learning engagement (Ardichvilli & Westling, 2003; Wenger, 2007; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Of great importance in developing relationships and sharing are mutual trust and individual identity (Wenger, 2009; Wenger, McDermott & Sneider, 2002).

It is the shared repertoire, mutual engagement and joint enterprise, with a clear identification of common ground, that sets a CoP apart from simple aggregations or networks of people (McDermott, 2000; Wenger, 2009), but which is not necessarily a given result of online activity (Schwen & Hara, 2003).

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF NETWORKS

The critique of the constructs of CoP in online environments has been extended to suggest that the pattern is better described as 'networked individualism', created through the interaction of

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