

Chapter 1

An E-Learning Metaphor: The CAMEL Nomadic Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a case study of collaborative e-learning, in which technological and human adaptability was fostered in a community of practice (CoP). The chapter reflects on the use of the extended metaphor of the camel in the JISC-funded eLIDA CAMEL and JISC infoNet CAMEL projects. Technological and social insights were gained through this use of the camel metaphorical model in a designed community of practice. A series of nomadic journeys held in oases provided by partners enabled honest exchanges amongst a community of 'CAMEL' practitioners, improving e-learning practices. The creation of an intentional e-learning community of practice fostered shared understandings about learning technology innovations. The camel metaphor was formative in stimulating understanding about building communal solutions to sustainability, low-cost innovative engagement and improved cooperation with others. The CAMEL metaphorical model has been validated in numerous other UK e-learning applications from which transnational insights for e-learning development can be drawn.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter applies a case study methodology to examine the phenomenon, or 'case', of the use of an extended metaphor in an e-learning community of practice. A 'case' in social sciences research methodology is 'a unit of human activity embedded in the real world'... which 'can only be understood

in context'... 'exists in the here and now'... and 'merges in with its context so that precise boundaries are difficult to draw' (Gillham, 2000). A 'case' is therefore a fuzzily bounded entity within the human social world that is investigated in a research 'study' in which the properties of the 'case' are examined and analyzed. In this instance, the 'CAMEL' metaphor is considered as a single or unique case selected for its effectiveness. The instances in which this case is examined in this chapter are in relation

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to two publicly-funded higher education United Kingdom (UK) e-learning projects: firstly, the eLIDA CAMEL project (e-Learning Independent Design Activities for Collaborative Approaches to the Management of e-Learning) and, secondly, the JISC infoNet CAMEL project.

The unit of analysis for case study (Gillham, 2000; Yin, 1994) in this chapter is therefore the method by which the CAMEL metaphorical model was applied in practical ways in these two e-learning projects. In both projects, the acronym 'CAMEL' was used to describe a shared group approach undertaken to trial a community of practice (CoP) in e-learning. This chapter describes and analyses both projects to draw out a range of transnational insights for e-learning development, including reflections on the use of the 'camel' metaphor for a CoP. The concept of a 'community of practice' has for almost two decades provided an increasingly popular model of knowledge management through collaboration. A CoP involves the bringing together of a group of people who share a concern or passion about a particular 'practice' within a 'domain' of expertise to develop collective knowledge about improvements in that practice, as part of a 'community' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, McDermott and Synder, 2002; Wenger and Snyder, 2000). The three basic elements of a CoP: a 'domain', a 'practice' and a 'community', were involved in both projects, although the CoPs discussed here involve 'designed' communities of practice rather than spontaneously self-organizing CoPs.

The first project, the eLIDA CAMEL, was a design for learning (DfL) UK national project comprising several higher and further education partners funded in 2006-07 for £60,000 over eighteen months by the UK Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Design for Learning programme. The eLIDA CAMEL was led by the Director of Research and Enterprise at the School of Education and Training of a university based in London, with support from the School of Computing and Mathematical Sciences

(CMS) of the same university. Partners in the project included JISC infoNet, the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), Leeds College of Technology, Loughborough College, Barnet College, Dartford Grammar School, Greenwich Community College, Greenwich Children's Services and Greenwich City Learning Centre. The project was carried out during a period of 18 months in 2006-07, with a further dissemination phase lasting for around two years.

The university in this case is a large modern (post 1992) university in South East London, England, with around 25,000 students, including some 6,900 post-graduates and many international students from around 80 different countries across the world. The eLIDA CAMEL project operated from the main campus of the university

The university has a history of around 110 years, having been founded originally as a polytechnic in Woolwich in 1890. The university has strengths in widening participation, lifelong learning, undergraduate and post-graduate degree programmes across the sciences, social sciences, arts and humanities, and in the training of teachers, further education lecturers, architects, nurses, engineers and numerous other professional groups. The university is led by a Vice Chancellor's Group comprising several top management staff, and an Executive group in which all Heads of Schools are members. Each School, or large higher education faculty/institute, is led by a School senior management team including one Head of School and three Directors, one of which in each case is the Director of Research and Enterprise. The Schools provide higher education degrees, training, research, enterprise and consultancy in particular subject areas. The School of Education and Training is a large School specializing in education programmes in higher education, including initial teacher training, with around 130 staff. The eLIDA CAMEL was a research and enterprise project housed within and managed by this School.

As an eighteen month externally-funded project, the eLIDA CAMEL operated in a more or

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