Building a network for collaborative support in professional development

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore and describe important steps in creating beneficial conditions for networked learning in a project in organisations. In the inception phase of the project, four important steps were identified: creating a common virtual space, the handshake, the initial support and the mentorship. It is concluded that all the four described steps are important for a successful establishment of a networked community of practice.

Keywords

Collaborative support, Networked learning, Professional development, Technology enhanced learning

Introduction

To invest in human resources is an important and continuous process in the contemporary knowledge society (Chang, 2016). Continuous professional development has been defined as "The systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge and skill, and the development of personal qualities necessary for the execution of professional and technical duties throughout the practitioner's working life" (Friedman and Phillips, 2004). Technology in a networked learning context has been used in academia and industry to better facilitate training and learning activities in professional development, both in technical and social networks. Advantages from the learner perspective might be to define an individual pace and schedule, and to have access to qualified instructors. From the teacher perspective, there are advantages such as dynamic course content and the opportunity to teach from different locations (Horton, 2000; Chang, 2015; Chang, 2016).

In this paper, networked learning is defined as learning activities which connect teachers as well as the learning community (Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson & McConnell, 2004) and the contexts in which the teachers participate (Rydberg & Sinclair, 2016). More recently there has been an increased interest work collaborative teacher teams (Gast, Schildkamp & van der Veen, 2017), which many times has involved professional development through professional conversations (Schuck, Aubusson & Buchanan, 2008). Participating in conversations and professional development activities can be understood as learning through participating in a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) of everyday collaborative work-based settings. More specifically, Wenger (1998) refers to three distinct modes for belonging for making sense of identity formation and learning: engagement, imagination and alignment. Professional development activities are often supported by social and technological networks involving both collaboration and individual development, which can be expressed in terms of creating

conditions for networked learning.

Aim and Research question

This paper aims to explore and describe the initial steps in the collaborative support for professional development, seeking to identify and understand the important steps that create beneficial conditions for networked learning. With inspiration from Wenger's (1998) three distinct modes for belonging, the research question is as follows: How might a support model for networked professional development be divided into important and fundamental steps?

Context

The context for this study is the BUFFL-project (Swedish, in translation: Industry development at banks and insurance companies through flexible lifelong learning), which aims to strengthen competencies in a specific labour market area (banking and insurance) while stimulating lifelong learning. The project initiates new and further development of ongoing efforts using flexible technology-based methods for learning in working life. Researchers from the fields of Business Administration, Education and Informatics work together with six private companies and one governmental agency to develop a framework for flexible, short higher education courses for professionals. The collaborative organisations are active in the three regions in order to provide a valid framework, including principles of how this kind of education can be designed. The project runs over two years and contains three phases that partially intersect. The pre-project phase was based on disciplinary competence and wishes from the collaborative organisations. The researchers created a preliminary educational framework embracing appropriate educational methods and technology supported learning. During the ongoing implementation phase, courses are tested together with the employees of the collaborative organisations. The evaluation phase will analyze completed courses with the aim of contributing to the further development of the courses and the preliminary educational framework.

Four important steps

In the inception phase of the project for networked learning, four important steps were identified: creating a common virtual space, the handshake, the initial support and the mentorship. The four steps and the embryo for a model have been based on a combination of a literature review, and on authors' experiences of earlier networked professional learning initiatives.

Creating a common virtual space

A virtual space, which created a common workplace to support networked learning, was important as a base for the collaborative work with professional development. This common virtual space for teachers in the project who were preparing for the upstart of their courses, with university teachers as mentors to support these teachers' work. The course modules were developed in the university's virtual learning environment (VLE) with the support of the university technical support team.

Creating new course modules in the VLE proved to be somewhat of a challenge. Teachers at the organisations involved needed to be registered. University work routines and administrative rules created barriers for external users who could not be considered as students. Other barriers included lack of information about the project among administrators who, understandably, found it difficult to comprehend the project design and the need for flexible routines for connecting teachers and users to the VLE.

The handshake

As identified in earlier studies the inception phase is a important, and if the initial handshake fails the result may be low motivation and a high dropout rate among first time adult online learners. In the first contact with technology supported education and virtual learning platforms the challenge is not only the learning content. What can cause frustration and cognitive overload is the need to also deal with technology and the VLE interface (Osika & Sharp, 2002; Tyler-Smith, 2006). This may be related in challenges in administrative routines such as the distribution of account information to online learners who are not university students. Studies that are more recent also highlight the importance of the initial handshake and early in-person or virtual joint sessions to establish contacts and collaboration. This can be seen as a basic action that could be carried out face-to-face or by videoconferencing (Gregori, Martínez & Moyano-Fernández, 2018). Sometimes the frustration of a bad handshake can be so strong that online learners quit after their first initial experience (Sun et al., 2008; Monteiro et al., 2016). These findings from studies conducted on students in higher education are

most likely applicable also for university teachers learning to teach environments supported by technologies. The initial problems described above would better be addressed by a corresponding initial support.

The initial support

In a teacher community with a majority new to technology-supported activities, the value of an initial support group should not be underestimated. Important initial training in the BUFFL project has been to offer technical training and support for the VLE and the video conferencing tool Zoom. To achieve realistic training sessions of the Zoom tool most of the initial distance support was carried out as Zoom sessions. Furthermore, two members of the support group arranged a face-to-face workshop with hands-on activities at one of the other participant universities for project participants without earlier experience of tools for technology enhanced learning.

Other important parts of the initial support were to offer pedagogical support, technical instructions, study guides, and examples of online assessment. Although all teachers have previous pedagogical knowledge, teaching with the help of digital technologies requires a modified instructional design. Teachers also need straightforward technical instructions to get started with recording tools, video conferencing tools and the VLE itself. Learners that have not studied online using VLEs can be helped by study guides that explain aspects such as course design, collaboration tools and how to navigate in the VLE. Finally, the construction of online assignments differ from traditional assignments, and VLE modules for peer-review are not always self-explanatory.

The mentorship

In the same manner as the initial support is an important pillar in the start of the BUFFL project, mentorship is also important. This work in creating beneficial conditions for networked learning within the project group as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) can be described on three levels. On the first level, creating conditions for networked learning among mentors is important to exchange, evaluate and develop the work in mentorship to support the teachers in the organisations. This involves how mentors develop and create networks to support individual work in mentorship with other mentors. On the next level, how mentors through their mentorship support conditions for networked learning for teachers working on the courses as a community of practice is also vital. On the third level, as the project continues, it will be important that conditions for networked learning are also created for both mentors and teachers to share and exchange experiences and development work in the intersection between mentorship and teaching.

Discussion

As pointed out in several studies technology does not teach by itself, but technology supported teachers can. Teaching and learning should always have the prime focus, but technical support has an important role in blended learning. Skilled technicians can often indirectly influence the outcomes by reducing teachers' and learners' anxiety (Sun et al., 2008; Markova, Glazkova & Zaborova, 2017). However, it is important that teachers who are new in applying technology in educational settings not only learn how to use the new tools, but also receive information about why they should use the tools (Kirkwood & Price, 2005).

As highlighted by Comas-Quinn (2011), teachers play a key role in any learning approach. How a technology supported orchestration could work will largely depend on how well teachers make the transition from traditional classroom roles to the more complex teacher role in VLEs. The same can be said of university teachers as mentors. Several studies have identified the needs for new online teaching skills (Salmon, 2004; McPherson & Nunes, 2004), but acquiring the necessary new skills might not come naturally to all teachers and learners (Comas-Quinn, 2011). To achieve a successful transition from traditional teaching and learning settings to VLEs, teachers need initial, as well as continuous support. How this transition takes place and how the conditions for networked learning grow and develop as teachers slowly progress through the initial steps for professional development in the BUFFL project will be of interest to study. These steps will most likely be crucial steps creating belonging through engagement, imagination and alignment (Wenger, 1998), and beneficial conditions for networked learning in organisations through collaboration.

Conclusions

It appears that all the four described steps are important for a successful establishment of a networked community of practice. Neither the community, nor the project will fail if one step fails, but every step is important in the process of creating trust, motivation and collaboration.

Future research

This paper presented an embryo to a support model for networked professional development. The next natural continuation would be to carry out an empirical evaluation of the model and to get feedback from the various stakeholders in the BUFFL project.

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