Learning from peers. Online professional development for university staff

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Abstract

Professional development has long been associated with the provision of events or alternatively of accredited courses, often supplemented by texts or websites. At the same time we are aware that much of what is learnt about university teaching happens "on the job", as staff try out new approaches, or meet each other for a chat in the corridor. In a distance environment such ad hoc arrangements are less likely to take place particularly for part-time staff, and both online courses and informal communities have a particular role in joining staff who otherwise have little opportunity to meet.

We have been exploring the opportunities for harnessing the potential of peer learning in two online professional development courses at the Open University (UK) both of which are concerned with the adoption of new online tools for teaching and learning. This paper describes a case study of the two initiatives which deliver professional development at scale: some 2000 staff have undertaken the courses to date, including an astonishing 1000 staff over the last 12 months. We discuss some of the lessons we have learnt on the reasons for the widespread success of these initiatives and some of the factors influencing effective engagement on the courses.

We have demonstrated the value of a near-synchronous strategy in a small cohort which enhances a sense of presence, while providing sufficient flexibility to accommodate working practices. An experiential approach which gives participants the opportunity to experience first hand the sense of being an online student is valued by many staff who are new to it, and it provides a safe environment in which to try out new techniques and tools and to reflect on what is a pressing concern for many staff. The affective, confidence building aspects of this experience seem to have been important to many participants. At the same time we have also found that a self study route can work for some individuals who value the added flexibility to work on their own.

Further work will be needed to establish the extent to which the courses have resulted in new or enhanced working practices. But if we have succeeded in helping staff to develop the confidence to experiment for themselves, then this will have been a worthwhile endeavour.

Keywords

Professional development, online learning, peer support

Introduction

One of the many challenges in providing professional development for university staff is in designing opportunities which are sufficiently engaging and attractive that staff will persevere with them and find them of practical use. The challenge is compounded where staff are geographically distributed or working part time, and where they might belong to a wide range of contexts which constitute competing priorities. Knight, Tait and Yorke (2006) have made use of Engestrom's (2001) Activity Theory in describing the interplay and often conflicting interests of context and community in influencing what is actually learnt through professional development programmes.
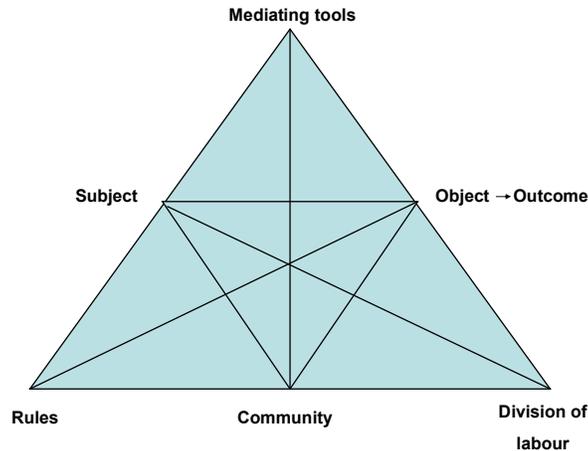
Fig 1: Engestrom's Activity Theory

While the Subject can be viewed as educational development event, course or resource, the Outcome or long term goal is better educational practice by members of staff. However the extent to which the Subject is translated into a successful Outcome is mediated by the Community, or communities in which the staff operate, as well as being influenced by factors such as the Division of Labour and Rules, or current working practices in the faculty, as well as the Tools, or design of the workshop or online resources. There is always tension and contradiction between the various influences described here, and also a dynamic and transformational dimension, where staff undertaking professional development may themselves influence the context around them as they experience some shift in their own identity.

Knight et al (2006) showed how important social learning practices were in the general professional formation of staff, although formal provision still had a place in the development of specific roles. In a similar vein, Boud (1999) has underlined the significance of approaches to educational development which are of obvious relevance to staff because they are situated or embedded within the context of staff working practices. Peer learning has clear benefits in this regard, because it provides the opportunity for staff to contextualise new approaches to teaching and learning, to support validation by the group (Beaumont et al, 2009) or to discuss their applicability to a specific environment. Very often such discussions can surface experiences from peers which bring new concepts to life, or influence the direction of the professional development in unanticipated directions.

Wenger's (1998) ideas on communities of practice have some resonance for personal or professional development here as they reflect notions of informal learning on the job with one's peers, but we believe it is also useful to attempt to exert leverage by harnessing the power of community involvement in professional development which is driven by official university initiatives, thereby acknowledging the significant contribution of community within the activity system.

In the provision of professional development to a large and highly distributed workforce many of whom work part-time, the use of online media becomes of particular relevance because we need to provide for flexibility in participation. Online professional development brings its own challenges: for while in a classroom participants are usually polite enough to stay until the end however tedious the event, the same cannot be claimed for participation in online activity. One approach to engage participants is to employ a constructivist pedagogy which starts with the premise that students learn better by doing, and by sharing their understanding with their peers. The way in which they do this is related to a variety of factors, including their individual context: the experiences they have had in the past, their motivation and the purposes to which they intend to put the new knowledge. This approach is now common in many courses at the Open University (UK), where interest in learning design has led to an initiative to share designs amongst staff and across Faculties as part of the Learning Design project resulting in a database of 44 case studies. We describe here its adoption to support the learning of staff in two large scale online professional development initiatives.

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The arrival of a new Moodle VLE at the Open University has meant that a wide range of online tools has become available for staff use. While some staff are already familiar with the various uses of forums for supporting students, others find the choice of new tools bewildering and intimidating. At the same time there is an urgency to find out about them as courses switch wholesale into the new environment. Staff with a wide variety of backgrounds are anxious to discover the extent to which the tools are relevant to their job, and how they might affect educational practice in the future: and there are pressing implications for the student learning experience. We know that our institution is not alone in these concerns: in the States the most recent 2009 ECAR study of Undergraduate Students and Information Technology reports that of 30,616 freshmen and seniors at 103 four-year institutions and students at 12 two-year institutions, fewer than half reported that most of their instructors used IT effectively in their courses (Smith et al 2009).

This paper describes a case study of two professional development initiatives at the Open University which provide development to staff in the applications for new online tools. Both initiatives operate at scale, and have catered to 2000 staff over the last four years, with 1000 participants in the past year. We discuss some of the lessons we have learnt from participants on the reasons for the success of these initiatives and the factors influencing their uptake and application.

VLE Choices course

The course VLE –Choices was developed at the OU in Scotland in 2009 with central university funding and is written for use by all OU staff, including part-time tutors. It provides an introduction to choosing appropriate VLE tools by illustrating a range of innovative strategies around the university. We recognise that one of the central problems with the adoption of technologies for teaching and learning is in deciding how they might be used appropriately, or alternatively when they should not be (Laurillard, 2008).

In this course, rather than start with a list of new tools with which staff need to become familiar, we start with pedagogy and illustrates the common *intentions* in teaching and supporting students, for each of which is illustrated a range of *strategies:* they in turn link to a choice of *tools.* In this way we hoped to encourage reflection on the existing practices of peers, for which online tools have a tried and tested application.

Table 1: An outline of VLE Choices, linking intentions, strategies and tools

Intentions	Strategies	Tools
Pastoral support: meeting students, keeping in touch, personal development	Tutor contact, course website, peer support initiatives	Forum, blog, profile, reflective diary
Course concepts, skills, assignment feedback	Tutor contact, Course Team designed activity	Elluminate, forum, online quiz, podcast

The common intentions described in the course include pastoral support, and teaching and facilitating. Reflecting the diversity of staff who support students at the university, the strategies described might be initiated by tutors, or by the Course Team who are responsible for designing the course and sometimes integrating activity within course design, or by other units such as the Library or Student Services, or indeed by the students themselves. To illustrate these strategies the course shows examples of good practice, illustrated by audio clips of staff from around the university as well as linking to the Learning Design website and other online resources.

The tools introduced in the course include a forum, wiki, learning diary and file sharing, Elluminate, audio recording tool, and blog. We recognise that there may be a choice of tools which are appropriate to any situation, so we give participants the opportunity to try out the functionality and to discuss their relevance or application with fellow participants on the course forum, or to use the learning diary to reflect on their use. With this framework which is driven by pedagogic intentions the course can readily be revised to accommodate the use of new tools, whether within the VLE or outside it, where they meet an identified need.

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The course is available in two routes: firstly for self study, when participants may join or leave at any time: it takes around 7 hours to complete. Secondly, we run cohorts for units wishing to organise a dedicated course for their staff with exclusive use of communication tools. Responding to market demand, we are experimenting with variable sized cohorts, which have so far ranged from 21 – 48 participants, and to varying the duration over which the course is to be completed, from one day for a course team wishing to familiarise themselves with the tools in preparation for course writing, to one week for a group of staff tutors from all over the country whose job is to manage the part time staff.

Whether self study or learning in a cohort, participants who complete a choice of six activities out of thirteen receive a certificate of completion. Both routes are staffed by trained facilitators, who respond to queries in the course forum and provide pastoral care. However most forum discussion is non-mandatory: while one activity requires discussion in the forum, and one interaction in Elluminate, the rest can be completed without co-present participants.

Participant reflections

From March 2009 when the course started operation until the end of August 2009 a total of 126 participants had completed the course and collected their certificate, with about equal numbers of internal staff and part-time tutors. Out of 163 who signed up for the course cohort route, 72 completed, giving us a 44% completion rate. However, on the self study route, of 830 who visited the first page of the course, 60 completed the first forum activity and 54 completed the course and collected their certificate which suggests that large numbers of visitors simply visited the home page and then moved on.

Quantitative and qualitative data on their experiences is drawn here from the end of course evaluation together with the transcripts from 90 contributors to the course wiki, in which participants are asked to describe their context and summarize a strategy which is relevant to them. The end of course evaluation was completed by 63 (50%) between March and August 2009 and it illustrates how the course was seen as successful in raising awareness of the potential of VLE tools. At the outset the majority (around 70%) were either "dimly aware" or "familiar" with a "few options" for supporting students using VLE tools. On course completion most (around 60%) were "aware of the options of relevance".

When asked which parts of the course they found most helpful around a half (43%) referred to activities using the tools. The course appears to have stimulated some creative thinking on the application and potential uses for VLE tools: these examples of potential applications are taken from the course wiki.

> I've found that keeping a learning journal for this course has been much more useful and interesting than I anticipated. One of those surprise experiences that I'd like students to share !

> There is lots of potential here I think to combine with existing audio and visual learning materials.. to make this kind of 'live' learning work for social work and social care students and practitioners.

> I can see the potential of the Elluminate whiteboard for discussion of close analysis of poems and paintings.

As for the value of community in supporting participant experimentation and reflection, we can say that some participants appreciated reading examples of existing good practice: a third (27%) referred to the value of examples of practice from different units. However we had hoped that if the course were busy enough there would be a steady flow of messages in the course forum and a choice of fellow staff with whom participants might discuss issues or arrange Elluminate sessions. The dearth of fellow participants was particularly acute for those wishing to join an Elluminate session with colleagues because there was frequently no-one around to invite.

> I actually know what 'Elluminate' is now but feel that I need to take part in an interactive live session before I would be confident to actually use it with students.

While this has been apparent in the cohort route where participants are by definition relatively co-present, the forum for the self study route has suffered "empty corridor" syndrome, with very few fellow participants

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available at any one time to discuss course issues: a total of 60 messsages over six months for the first forum activity averages out at 10 messages a month and this bears out observations by Caspi et al (2003) on non-mandatory discussion in plenary groups. It is not clear whether the wiki environment is quite so dependent on a sense of presence to sustain participation as for example a forum. Arguably this will depend on its purpose: if it is used to develop a reference work then it is possibly less critical if participation rates are low.

At the same time, self study appealed to some staff since the route afforded them choice and flexibility. We plan to advertise the course more widely, as there is clearly a market for both routes.

> I had to stop temporarily due to marking [assignments], […] but intend to continue

> I would say the course could easily be done in 5 hours, but has taken me much longer, through choice, as it taught me a lot, and being self-study, I felt I had the time to do it.

So in summary, VLE-Choices is in the early stages of implementation. It has provided an opportunity for staff to explore a variety of applications for new online tools. Some staff have chosen to join cohorts with colleagues of similar background, while others have chosen to study on their own: both routes appear to have been successful for staff with different needs. Peer learning has been valued by some participants for looking at existing uses for new tools on both self study and cohort routes, and for discussing the implications for their implementation on the cohort route.

Tutor Moderators course

Tutors constitute by far the largest user group at the Open University: they need to learn how to use online tools to support the tutor group and this has become a core part of the job. The award winning course Tutor Moderators was developed specifically for this market, and provides a three week introduction for tutors in the facilitation of online groups. Developed at the Open University in Scotland in 2004, it has become standard provision for tutors on level one courses and is delivered at scale throughout the University. A total of 1500 staff had undertaken the course by April 2009, and a further 660 by Feb 2010, so demand has accelerated. With the adoption of Elluminate within the VLE we are currently reversioning the course so that it will cover an introduction to the facilitation of online groups using a combination of asynchronous and synchronous tools.

The course promotes engagement through activities and reflection with a peer community: it has minimal content and relies heavily on experiential and collaborative learning. In a choice of three out of five activities per week, participants are required to undertake a task and leave a message reflecting on their actions in the course forum. Activities range from reflecting on the experience of being a newcomer in an online group to discussing social presence and approaches to communicating effectively, dealing with disruption or coping with shy or dominant students, and finally considering how the role of moderator varies with the purpose and size of the online group. Participants learn by trying out the tools, discussion with peers or observing the actions of the course moderator.

The student as "identifiable individual" is a central premise of tuition and support at the OU, where in every tutor group students are known to the tutor and absences are noticed. We use this principle on Tutor Moderators course to optimise completion rates, and model good pastoral practice. In the week before course start participants are sent a reminder which includes advice from previous participants, with an invitation to engage in planning personal objectives for the course and also to consider their time management during the course. If participants have signed up for the course and do not join within a couple of days then we contact them. If at the end of the course a participant has not completed then we write again, allowing them an extra two week's grace, with a reminder to complete the activity checklist. Course facilitators are required to give strong pastoral input in week 1 by responding initially to each individual, but to stand back somewhat in weeks 2 & 3.

Participant reflections

A total of 600 participants in 34 cohorts completed the course between June 2008 and March 2009, with an average completion rate of 75%. The cohorts were sponsored by a number of Faculties, in response to the urgent need to train tutors for new courses which make use of online tools. Courses were also sponsored by

regional or national centres of the OU, which are responsible for organising continuous professional development for staff in their geographical area.

Quantitative data from an exit questionnaire completed by 373 participants (a 62% response) in the period Jun 08 – Mar 09 has given us a graphic illustration of their perceptions with respect to a growing confidence and competence (see figs 1 and 2)
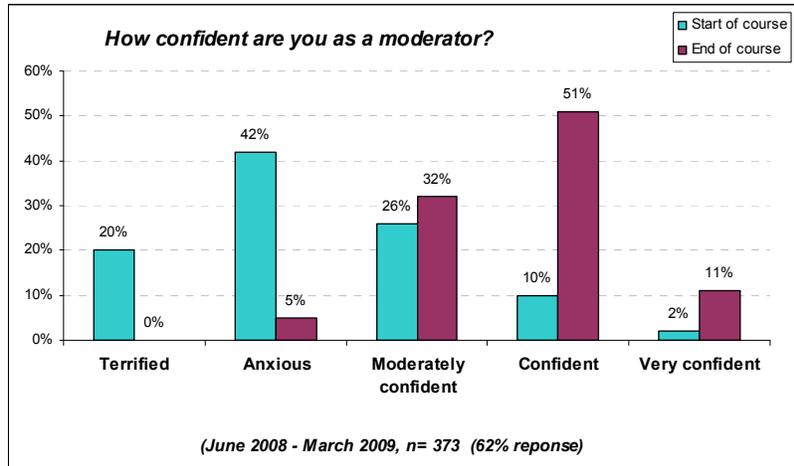
How confident are you as a moderator?

Legend: Start of course, End of course

- Terrified: Start 20%, End 0%
- Anxious: Start 42%, End 5%
- Moderately confident: Start 26%, End 32%
- Confident: Start 10%, End 51%
- Very confident: Start 2%, End 11%

(June 2008 - March 2009, n= 373 (62% reponse)

Figure 2: Perceptions of confidence before and after the course

How do you rate your competence as a moderator?

Legend: Start of course, End of course

- Complete novice: Start 51%, End 0%
- Generally unfamiliar: Start 22%, End 6%
- Moderately competent: Start 20%, End 38%
- Competent: Start 7%, End 48%
- Very Competent: Start 1%, End 7%

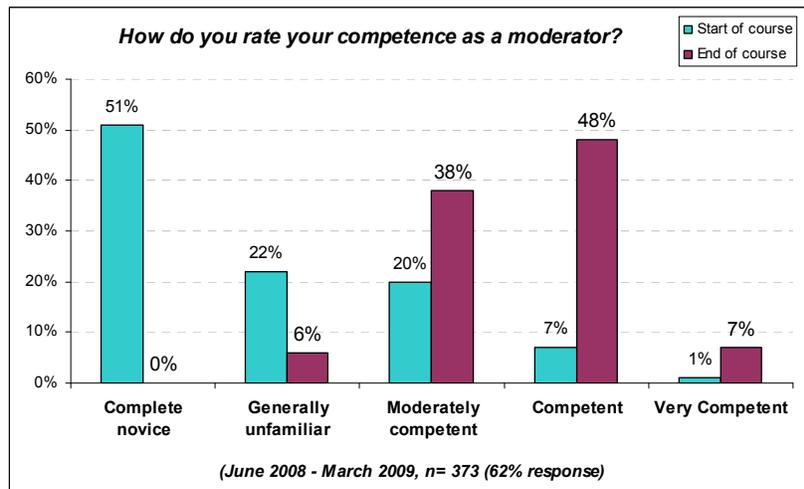*(June 2008 - March 2009, n= 373 (62% response)*

Figure 3: Perceptions of competence before and after the course

While personal perceptions of competence are inevitably subjective the figures certainly illustrate a change in participants' views of their competence as a result of the course and we note the high proportion of complete novices (51%) and of those who said they were either terrified or anxious of moderating an online group (62%) before they did the course. It seems probable that with an increase in confidence alone they will be better equipped to experiment for themselves, and be more prepared to try out new functionality or new approaches to supporting their online group.

We believe a number of factors have contributed to the success of this online course. Perhaps the first issue is the motivation of participants, who are eager and often anxious to learn about the support of online groups because of the new duties associated with the increasing use of online media for supporting students, and the steady adoption of VLE tools for teaching. We note that 60% of completions were associated with the Faculties

of Arts, Health and Social Care and Social Science, which have just recently begun to adopt online technologies for supporting their students: their staff probably belong to what Rogers (1995) refers to the "late majority" in terms of adoption of technology for working practices, and do not have a long tradition of belonging to online communities. This is reflected in the low levels of confidence and competence of tutors before completing the course.

In the same exit questionnaire respondents were asked in what ways the course had helped them: this section draws on the qualitative data we have collated in response to this question. Around half of the responses refer to the value which participants attach to the experience of learning by doing, in the opportunity to engage in reflective practice, and in belonging to an online community:

> There's nothing like learning by doing. This was my first experience of an online forum so doing it was great

> …the most important learning came from being a participant.

Because we recruit cohorts of participants to work together, the groups can develop an identity and sense of community over the three weeks. They have the opportunity to share ideas and best practice with their peers, not only learning from those who are experienced, but also sharing the realisation that not all problems have easy answers.

> I felt part of a community and have been able to benefit enormously from the comments of all colleagues, many of whom speak from experience

> Good discussion about problems I was having. Lots of very good ideas and discussion from tutors facing the same problems and issues that I am facing

Clearly the affective issues associated with online facilitation were of pressing concern. Many referred to the confidence building which comes from being part of a safe environment, and discovering that by joining an online community they were no longer alone in their concerns and anxieties. For faculty sponsored cohorts there was added currency and relevance in belonging to a group with common interests and approaches to teaching.

> It has been great to feel less isolated. I no longer feel my students are weird

> I also realise I'm part of a large group of moderators many of whom share my excited apprehension about the task in hand

Many also commented on the opportunity to reflect on their actions and feelings associated with being a newcomer in an online community, and of recognising how their students might feel in the same circumstances. There were implications for ways in which they might help their own students more effectively.

> You gain from the collective experience of colleagues and you learn new skills. You know how it feels when your tutor replies with enthusiasm to your posting and when a forum member responds to your ideas positively

> Also, having experienced the forum as a student has been really helpful : I should be able to empathise with the participants and I am aware of how difficult it is to take the initial plunge and join in.

The near-synchronous approach created by contributions which must be made within each week gives participants limited flexibility over a restricted period and has helped to develop a sense of presence. The focus which is lent to participation within a limited timeframe gives them the motivation to concentrate on professional development which otherwise can be overtaken by more pressing tasks.

In summary, the course evaluation has illustrated how staff appreciated the chance to understand what it felt like to be an online student, indeed the affective, confidence building aspects of learning with peers seem to have been important to many of them. It also gave them the opportunity to try out new tools and discuss their use, and many staff also valued the opportunity to discuss the applicability of new ideas and techniques with peers,

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supporting Boud's (1999) observations on the value of peer learning and reinforcing the value of situated learning for practitioners (Knight, Tait & Yorke, 2006) . Such experiences are achievable once staff are grouped into cohorts of individuals with similar interests.

Conclusions

Engestrom's (2001) activity system provides a helpful framework to describe the interplay between the specialist in educational development, the practitioner who might learn how to enhance their practice, and a range of influences including the people with whom they work, departmental policies, tools to cast understanding into practical shapes, and the division of labour within the department. This case study of online professional development initiatives illustrates some of these issues, specifically with reference to an understanding of potential customers and their reasons for undertaking professional development, their environment, and their need to be in touch with colleagues.

Laurillard (2008) comments:

> Technology is certainly part of the problem…it is new, ever-changing, expensive, difficult to master, complex to manage, wide ranging in its potential, disruptive of existing systems. And although there is usually funding for the hardware and infrastructure, there has never been, at least in the UK, commensurate funding for staff development…the solution has to be responsive to the teaching community's perceptions of what they need (p144)

Whether we have been responsive to the teaching community's needs remains to be seen. Certainly, participant reflections on these two short courses illustrate the value of peer learning and community, although we are also mindful of Wenger's (1998) comment, cited in Cousin and Deepwell (2005): 'There is an inherent uncertainty between design and its realisation in practice, since practice is not the result of design but rather a response to it' (1998, p. 233). In other words, what the learner actually learns cannot be predicted in advance. Further work will be needed to establish the extent to which the courses have resulted in new or enhanced working practices. But if we have succeeded in helping staff to develop the confidence to experiment for themselves, then this will have been a worthwhile endeavour.

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