

Informal Learning Projects as a Vehicle for Collaborative Professional Development in Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

This article is a theoretical study looking at a new role for online learning communities. This role is to provide support from members for others to bring informal learning projects to be collaboratively developed and explored in a meaningful dialogue. This model creates a symbiotic relationship that is flexible and authentic within the context of global education. In this article the author reviews the experience of taking an informal learning project to an online community for collaborative support. The particular project under review sought to develop a support framework within an online community for other members' projects. An implemented model is described and considered within the framework of community capacity. To support learning at all levels, a method is described for developing exploring community history and identity through the sharing of narratives and the construction of a Library of Experience.

This article seeks to explore the potential of online communities to support and develop new practices around collaborative mentoring and informal learning projects. This study seeks to address the following research hypotheses:

1. Informal learning can be utilised as a developmental approach in an online open environment
2. Online communities can learn from involvement with informal learning projects and they can support the development of a community history and identity
3. Online communities can be effective in supporting informal learning projects

In this article, I describe an initiative arising in part from earlier work (Bowskill et al, 2001) that seeded the development of a model of support and development within an online community. This model is my own informal learning project (Tough, 1971) and forms part of the author's doctoral research at the University of Sheffield. This model is innovative in the way it provides an open member-to-member service that is culturally sensitive and inclusive.

Jobring (2002) is interesting in describing online learning communities as context providers and a move away from being content providers. Jobring (2002) also notes 3 key areas of concern which are community management, community measurement and skills for working within communities. Community measurement asks how we might come to know what is being learned within a community. This is important and in this paper I offer a clear framework to facilitate a view of what is being learned through the adoption and support of informal learning projects and the creation of archived case studies from within the community. This in turn provides a method for management in a voluntary setting. The point raised about skills is also interesting as Jobring (2002) identifies 7 skills marking an apprenticeship from initial joining through to a position of greater autonomy. In the initiative described below, I mark out a similar apprenticeship structure around involvement in co-mentoring of informal learning projects. This apprenticeship is a clearer more practical route to developing autonomy within an engaged and focussed collaborative context.

Keywords

Informal Online Learning, Online Communities, Global Education & Learning, Voluntary Support, Co-mentoring.

INFORMAL LEARNING

Tough (1971) and many others have identified that many people have developed numerous ideas and interests outside formal educational settings. Although the potential of the internet has been identified there is little

evidence of practice beyond casual use of the internet for browsing and joining discussion lists or participating in occasional events. This paper will demonstrate how informal learning is being developed within a voluntary online community. Table 1, below (derived from Long, 2001), gives an overview of relationships between formal and informal learning. This is drawn from different studies in the literature.

Table 1: Overview of the relationship between formal and informal learning in different settings (from Long, 2001)

	Formal	Informal
Over a lifetime (Carnevale, 1984)	17%	83%
In an average week (Livingstone, 1999)		15 hours per week
In first 3 months of starting employment in a company (Bishop, 1991)	8%	92%

Although formal learning may be very important in providing opportunities and space to develop learning and to seek accreditation for instance, it plays a comparatively small part in the totality of our learning. Whether we look at this based on an average week, the initial stages of new employment or across a lifetime, the message is the same. Informal learning is the major part of our learning activities and yet receives much less recognition and much less support. Part of this lack of support has to do with the obvious difficulty in pinpointing how to offer support and what kinds of support might be most useful.

This paper seeks to respond to that difficulty in concrete terms by describing the design on an online collaborative initiative within the WAOE to support members bringing informal learning projects to the community.

INFORMAL LEARNING IN COMMUNITIES

Informal learning like all learning is understood as a social activity where meanings and practices are shared and situated. In non-networked environments community centres have a long tradition of being supportive meeting places for learning to take place and often provide access to tutors, resources and mental space. In this paper I affirm the idea of learning within communities but re-position that view within a global online community context. My focus here is upon the idea of online communities as professional development arenas in general and in this case for development around issues to do with learning and teaching involving technology.

The development of a 'learning community' model is presenting us with a new and increasingly popular vehicle for networked professional development. Examples include course and institutional communities, professional communities and communities open to anyone interested in general education (see Schlager et al, 2002, for more detail and examples). Within the literature, the learning community concept relates to an apprenticeship of practice shared or developed by a given group (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

ACTION RESEARCH

This short study aims to explore online communities as a vehicle for professional development around topics to do with learning and teaching with technology. I have chosen action research because of the unique nature of the context (namely one that is entirely voluntary, draws heavily upon informal learning projects and online mentoring, is cross-cultural and open to private and public sector participants in a spirit of mutual collaboration and self-help). This combination of factors means that the literature is thin on the ground. I also aim to support the development of our online community and our practices within that community through the development of this initiative. On this basis we see action research as entirely appropriate.

There is a school of thought that adopts a view of action research made up of formal processes. Whether it is in the definition of how many steps are involved in the cycles and spirals of reflection (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982) or whether it is to do with how systematic the overall process should be (Sagor, 1992, Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982) there is a group of people in the literature that espouse increasingly formal and scientific approaches to action research. Schon (1983) and others have argued against this and say that reflection is at the heart of action research. Keeping a journal and periodically reflecting upon the contents; writing about emergent thoughts; and reflecting upon the relationship between emergent views and practice seems to be as formal as some desire. Certainly, a reflective approach to a problem to which the practitioner is connected is seen as important by most writers.

The role of documents in the reflective process is one I hold to be important in collaborative voluntary online learning. The storying of experience, and the sharing of documents provides a grounded approach to researching shared ideas and perceptions. It also greatly informs the development process over time. Writers such as Sagor (1992) advocate collaborative approaches to action research in order that research makes a wider contribution to knowledge development and is more tested within the context of practice. I will argue that practitioner knowledge should contribute to both personal and professional knowledge and that this can be facilitated in concrete terms through the sharing of narratives and documents. This approach means development and research can be sufficiently flexible to be meaningful and useful to the situation and purpose of those involved

WAOE AS AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The WAOE is a non-profit public benefit corporation registered in the state of California, but its membership spans five continents without being dominated by any geographical region. The WAOE is a chiefly virtual association serving the needs of academics and educators concerned with turning online education into a professional discipline. The WAOE focuses on combining dedication to online learning with social and cultural exchange. The objectives and purposes of the WAOE explicitly promote humanistic ethics and global collaboration in online education, specifically:

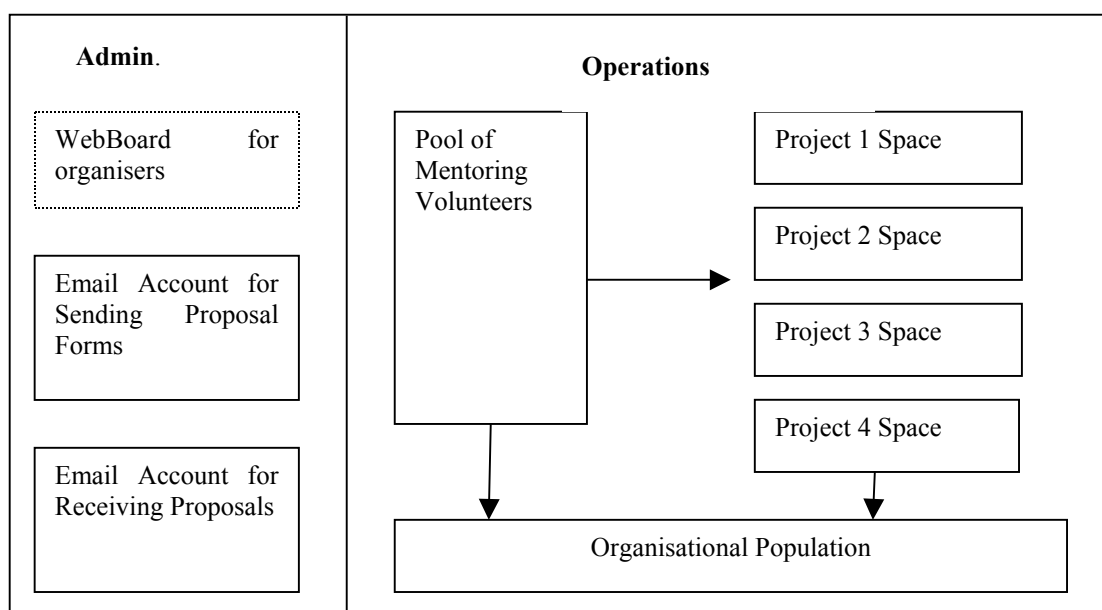
1. to maintain a global perspective as a world organisation, supporting multi-lingualism and multiculturalism in online education, preserving human rights to diversity and mutual respect despite differences, and encouraging intercultural sensitivity and world reconciliation through intercultural communication among global citizens,
2. to be as inclusive as possible in scope, serving the aspirations of all members and working for equitable access to online education and to membership.

For more information see: <http://www.waoe.org/npo/bylaw.htm>

A SELF-HELP INITIATIVE WITHIN WAOE

In the summer of 2003, I designed and developed a new initiative in collaboration with other members of the WAOE. This initiative was itself an informal learning project of the author aiming to explore and understand how it might be possible for online communities to actively support informal learning projects brought by its members.

The initiative arising from that project involved other members constructing informal learning projects. Other members of the community convened around those projects to collaboratively mentor project holders. The model was introduced to the community discussion list as a possible vehicle for collaborative professional development. The idea was warmly welcomed and an invitation to adopt and develop an initiative based on this idea was made. Through a series of online discussions within the community the initiative was developed and refined and through reflection a model of the initiative has been constructed. That resulting model is outlined in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Model of Online Mentoring for Informal Learning Projects

The infrastructure is almost entirely email list based. This is partly to increase accessibility and partly because some people were finding it difficult to clear the time to go over to a web site. Email based approaches may also help reduce transactional distance (Moore, 1993) at an individual and collective level.

The first project proposal was submitted in August 2003 and a voluntary team was put together shortly afterwards. At the time of writing, there were 4 informal learning projects being supported within the WAOE initiative. These projects each have a team of volunteers assembled as a temporary co-mentoring learning set. Typically each team has 5 or 6 people. These people are drawn from a pool of volunteers invited and recruited from the general community discussion list. Members signal their interest to become involved by subscribing to a 'teampool' discussion list that constitutes the available mentors for an individual learning project.

The 4 projects currently operating within this model cover a range of topics:

- Helping to design a semester-long online course
- Supporting the development of a Virtual Think Tank for Africa
- transform a course from face-to-face to online
- Constructing a training resource for remote centres in India

These projects have each generated between 30-100 messages from participants. They are each still at an early stage of development within the model but work and dialogue continues. The membership of the project support teams is highly distributed and brings together people in Asia, South America, North America, Africa, India and Europe.

The model itself is in its infancy and work continues to develop and scaffold the initiative for future generations. New documentation is being drawn up in collaboration amongst the pool of mentors and these early projects are regarded as a cycle of action research. This collaborative self-help model of professional development has moved from design through to implementation within the online community. It does currently support dialogue at various levels within the initiative although there are periods when activity levels dip as might be expected amongst busy people. Improvements are being considered and a second cycle is under active consideration. These will be the subject of future research to be reported elsewhere. In the next section, I want to probe deeper and explore the model in the context of community capacity and the possible value of the model to enhance capability within the community.

DEVELOPING ONLINE COMMUNITY CAPACITY & CAPABILITY

The idea behind this initiative is to facilitate learning conversations (Rowland, 1993) around issues to do with learning and teaching with technology. Our particular device for achieving this is co-mentoring around the

informal learning projects that members bring to the organisation. It is anticipated that this will provide focus within an informal highly distributed and voluntary community.

There is a concept in the literature of ‘community capacity’ (Goodman et al, 1998) that is important here. Part of being able to assess capacity involves being able to audit the resources within a community to understand its potential and abilities for development. To develop capacity a community needs to be able to plan, implement and review its activities. The following extract from another web site is interesting here:

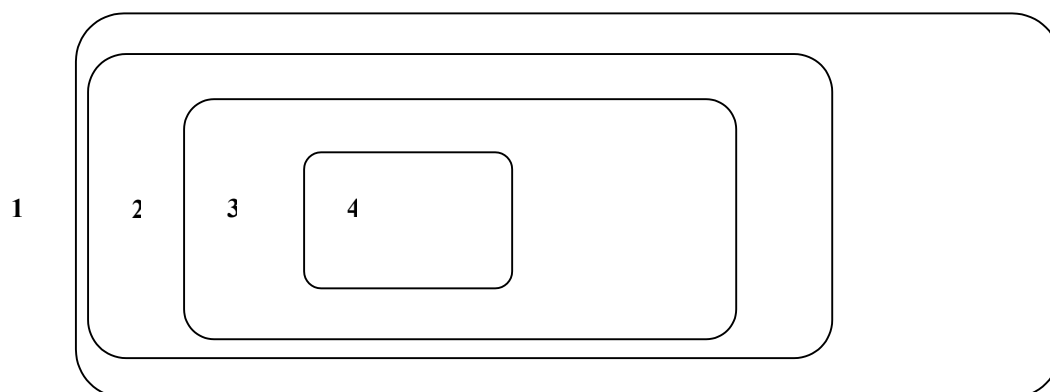
“The term ‘capacity building’ refers to the identification, strengthening and linking of the community’s tangible resources such as [.....] with intangible resources such as the community’s get up and go attitude.” (Strengthening Communities Web Site)

Part of the method for developing motivation (the get up and go mentioned above) is by generating expectations that are visible and achievable. This is in tune with expectancy theory (Brophy, 1987) and ideas around self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2000). By constructing an initiative within an online community that is clear in its structure and methods allied to it having benefits for all concerned, it is possible to develop community capacity and also to develop motivation.

In addition, community identity is both a side-effect of and a feature of community capacity. This is particularly true once an audit is done. A number of questions arise here about how to conduct an audit of a virtual and dynamic community and also how to develop identity and capacity within such a community. Partly to address these issues we outline the profile of our community membership within this initiative. This is not a profile based upon particular individuals but rather it is one based upon a structural view of participation.

Through the adoption and implementation of this initiative we have recognised our community as a potential support system for an apprenticeship around learning technology. Figure 2 below shows this apprenticeship in concrete steps:

Figure 2: A Model of Apprenticeship within an online community initiative



In the above model, the different levels of apparent involvement are presented. I say apparent because involvement is treated as a subjective concept that may be different in the researcher’s eyes and in the eyes of each person in the participant community.

The levels portrayed above are:

1. Those making enquiries about the initiative by applying for the application form online or by contacting individual members of the community
2. Those joining the mentoring list as volunteers
3. Those involved as mentors in projects
4. Those proposing a project

From this view we can understand our initiative-community as participants working at one or more of these levels of participation. This could be used as a map of our community of practice in line with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) conceptual framework.

Our purpose here however is to construct a community audit by treating the initiative as a sub-community or a micro level view of the whole.

This map is useful for identifying the whereabouts of different areas of activity within the community. We have audited the key points of activity and identified the nature of the activities within those areas. Other documents

will also cover the details of the initiative and the expectations and hopes for each stage as well as outlining the nature of activities that might arise. Goodman et al (1998) also refer to the value of community history as part of the development of capacity. When the project-holder is content and there is broad agreement that the project has gone as far as is realistically possible a case study of the informal event is constructed for entry into a database (currently being planned and developed). This case study will contain the proposal, any relevant documents arising from the support activity and personal narratives reflecting on the collaborative experience of addressing the project in this highly distributed context. The narratives are a means of providing participants with a voice and an opportunity to be represented in their own terms.

This framework of activity and the resulting archive allows all interested or involved to understand the collaborative experience over time and to develop a sense of identity for the community as it changes over time. We refer to the emergent set of case studies as a Library of Experience from within the community. To this set of documents others will be added including artefacts from the project interactions and activities. Research carried out by anyone involved in a project or with the initiative as a whole will also be included to create a project-web that witnesses involvement and creates a resource for others.

The Library is awaiting the completion of the first 4 projects from this initiative. These are all still in their early stages of development. A further 3 projects are in the early stages of negotiation. This overall framework provides an audit facility in the way it zones activity into different levels of involvement each of which can be assessed at any particular time. This is furthered by the development of the Library of Experience that supports the development of community capacity in the way it displays what has already been achieved and in the way it signals what is possible for others.

CONCLUSIONS

I have demonstrated the clear potential of online communities to do more than provide resources and meeting places. I have defined, within this initiative an apprenticeship scheme using co-mentoring. Members of the community are able to engage in this professional development framework according to their interests, available time, and expertise. The model has potential benefits for all involved.

Informal learning projects can be developed as intentional self-directed learning within a networked environment. Furthermore online communities now have a framework for offering support that includes professional development and opportunities for all involved. I have mapped out an apprenticeship within our community of practice for progressing from one zone of activity to another within the online setting.

Of enormous importance is that this kind of strategy is achievable within a practical self-help informal framework. It is not always realistic for a group to construct/maintain a VLE and for this model it is not a good strategy with the possible increase in transactional distance that may arise with complex systems used in an informal voluntary setting. Likewise such technologically complex settings may militate against the goal of accessibility in so called 'developing' countries.

Researching informal learning in networked environments must be similarly achievable if we are to empower lifelong learners online. For this reason action research methods have been adopted utilising small scale interventions as cycles of action research and working in collaboration with others in learning conversations (Rowland, 1993). Through dialogue and the sharing of narratives I hope to empower and involve others individually and collectively and to give ourselves a voice (Winter, 1998). I have also demonstrated how community capacity and history can be developed at a concrete level within an online setting. Looking at our overall model we have also addressed change through identity development and support at the individual, collective and organisational levels. Finally, this article is conceptualised as an entry into our Library of Experience.

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