Constellations of Collaboration: the Hidden Foundations of a Successful e-Learning Project

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes and compares two developmental projects at Coventry University through stories told by individuals who were involved in the projects or had a close interest in them. Through these stories, and in some cases through interviews, the author seeks to gain a 'composite' picture of these developments and an understanding of how they interface with and relate to the University as a whole. Both projects can be regarded as having been highly successful. However, only one of them succeeded in producing a 'ripple' effect of new projects and further developments, involving other groups of staff. The paper seeks to identify some of the reasons which account for these differences in bringing about effective institutional change.

Keywords
Change agents in HEIs, work-based professional development, embedding changed practice in HE.

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents research carried out as part of the EU EQUEL project by a Special Interest Group (SIG) with a focus on institutional change. In an initial phase, members of the SIG collected and shared 'stories' about successful developments in e-learning in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This approach to data gathering was inspired by the appreciative inquiry method to project development (Ludema et al., 2001). The value of the stories is that they provide for spontaneity, allowing contributors to express in their own words what they see as the salient parts of a project from their perspective. This bears strong similarities to Etienne Wenger's (1998) descriptions of how the work-related knowledge of employees helps them make decisions in processing insurance claims of cases which do not easily fit a standard schema. The stories bring out the perspectives of different players involved in a project and therefore create, collectively, a multi-dimensional description of a project. In addition, these diverse views help to give a sense of how a project 'interfaces' with different people and units and their agendas within an HEI.

Two developmental projects are compared, both from Coventry University. The author of this paper has been directly involved in the development of both projects. The first is referred to as 'The Library Project' (Patalong & Courtney, 2001a, 2001b; Courtney & Patalong, 2002; Courtney & Syson, 2001). It involved the creation of an online resource to support the teaching and assessing of information skills of 700 students from the School of Mathematics and Information Science (MIS), using WebCT. The second, referred to as 'The Technicians' Project' (Grant et.al., 2002), involved a programme designed in response to perceived changes in the role of technical staff in HEIs. Its objectives were both to enable technicians to be better prepared for their roles and give recognition to technical staff for the contribution they make to student learning. Both projects must be described as successful within their project boundaries. While the Library project seemed to generate new projects and therefore continued to drive institutional change beyond the confines of its internal objectives, there seemed to be no opportunities for the Technicians' project to growth beyond its boundaries. Why should this be so? We hope to be able to gain at least a partial insight into the issues behind this question through a closer examination of the projects and the foundations on which they were built.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE LIBRARY PROJECT

There are four authors who have contributed stories on the Library Project. Two of these were centrally involved in the project – Sally Patalong, who was then Subject Librarian and the current author, Kathy Courtney, who is an Educational Developer in CHED. The other contributors are Pat Noon, who is the University Librarian and Professor Liz Beaty, who was Director of the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHED) at the time when the Library Project was being developed.

The Educational Developer's Story

It seems wise to start with the Educational Developer's story which gives an outline of the project, going back to its very beginnings. Sally and Kathy met up, not for an initial discussion about a potential project, but in the context of an introductory course on WebCT. It was the customary invitation to course participants to share with the group their reasons for signing up to the course that Sally's desperate need for a new approach to teaching information skills came out. One of her tasks as Subject Librarian for MIS was to teach information skills to first year MIS students. The number of students had risen sharply – from 150 to 700 over a period of four years. The material to be covered had increased in complexity, with the use of the Internet and the emergence of subject-specific online databases. Contact time with students was too brief to do justice to this teaching task. Worst of all, the traditional way of assessing information skills through a 'written exercise' resulted in Sally having to mark nearly 700 hand written scripts. It was an experience she simply did not want to repeat ever again. She was hoping, therefore, that WebCT could somehow offer a solution which would allow her to do the job while keeping her sanity.

The Educational Developer's story reveals her reactions to Sally's situation and the reasons for her interest in it. She sees Sally's situation as *desperate* and her immediate and strong reaction is expressed in the following statement:

> "It took the two of us very little time to agree to work together in order to exploit online learning and assessment as a means for bringing about change. It was clear that we would both be getting into a largish project which required considerable commitment. It all seemed worth it; we did not hesitate and we never looked back."

The story reveals that she sees the development of this project very much as "*a staff development project*" and the collaboration with Sally as a "*partnership venture*". She points out that a solution to Sally's problems might "*transfer to other subject areas*" and that generally, the use of WebCT will offer a "*common platform for collaboration and engagement*" between library staff and academic staff. But her vision also takes in the wider picture: "*There seemed to be an opportunity to affect more generally the ways in which Library staff worked. This was a development which would contribute moving the Library towards a 'hybrid library' (Godwin, 2001)*". Later, she goes on to state how the project has enabled her to "*align objectives… at various level*". This includes benefiting students, herself, Sally, other Subject Librarians, the Library and relations between academic staff and library staff, whilst satisfying a number of objectives stated in Coventry's Learning and Teaching Strategy (Thomas & Beaty, 1998). Finally, she states her satisfaction in seeing Sally's pioneering work recognized by the University through giving her a Teaching Excellence Award at Coventry's annual staff development conference, ELATE 2002.

The subject librarian's story

Sally's story is just half a page. She was cornered during a workshop and given just 20 minutes to write her story. She begins her story with a focus on student use of the resource:

> "Although I really enjoyed developing the Information Skills tutorials with Kathy, the real excitement began when I used the tracking facilities in WebCT and realised how heavily the students were using the resource. The survey results too, were astonishing, with nearly half of the students responding. And those responses were very positive. It was then that I felt that I was doing something worthwhile…"

She goes on to comment on the overwhelmingly positive responses she had from peers, both at Coventry and further afield. She identifies the challenge of embedding information skills into the curriculum as *"the hot topic in academic libraries at the moment"* and notes how the project has helped to provide ways of achieving this. She highlights team teaching and the adaptation of her approach to information skills teaching in other subject areas as positive further developments.

It is best to use Sally's own words to illustrate the tremendous difference the project has made to her work and her sense of job satisfaction:

"At a presentation I gave last year, one of the members of the audience commented that he had recently come across the phrase 'an elated academic' and that listening to me he realised what it meant. That is what discovering online learning/teaching has meant to me! Moving from the sidelines in the Library to becoming someone who feels that they have been an instrument for change."

The librarian's story

Pat Noon, the University Librarian, had not been directly involved in the development of the project. His story shows that he was well aware of Sally's untenable teaching situation before the start of the project. Pat reveals a strong personal interest in the teaching of information skills, seen as an important part of the Library's Strategy. He talks of the introduction of WebCT as something which could have important implications for the Library, but an uncertainty as to how this might be achieved. Against this background, he was very pleased to support Sally's project.

Like Sally, Pat refers to the importance of integrating of information skills into a subject area and pays tribute to Sally for achieving what he calls "*the holy grail of information skills*". He expresses his view of the effect of the project as follows:

"The outcome after a great deal of hard work was a programme that showed not only how we could integrate effectively with WebCT on one level, but also how we could enhance information skills delivery by providing programmes that can be accessed whenever they are needed by students. From Sally's point of view of course it solved the problem of coping with growing demand and static time. It meant that we could retain a model piece of collaboration without Sally going mad in the process."

Enormously gratifying is Pat's view that "*the impact (of the project) in the Library has been tremendous*". He lists the uptake of Sally's approach by other subject librarians, close involvement with CHED, learning about the potential of WebCT and understanding what kind of help is available from CHED as some of the benefits beyond the intrinsic value of the project itself. He connects Sally's work to other collaborations which include the Digital Library and library staff studying for the SEDA Associate Teaching Certificate. He closes his story by saying:

"Winning one of the University's Teaching Excellence Award (won by Sally) last year was a just reward for work that has enabled us to move in a completely different direction and further cement the Library's place as a major provider of learning support."

Professor Liz Beaty's view on the library project

Professor Liz Beaty agreed to be interviewed in order to give her perspective both on the Library Project and the Technicians' Project. Liz had been Director of CHED when these projects were under development. What emerges from the transcript is that although Liz was never directly involved in the Library project, she was strongly aware of it happening and that she had strong views on its various characteristics. Strikingly, she echoes many of the themes which surface in the Educational Developer's story.

Liz talked at length about the collaborative nature of the project – not just collaboration of two highly motivated and committed individuals, but also of the "*collaboration between ideas*", by which she meant overlapping and complementing ideas held by the Subject Librarian on the one hand and by the Educational Developer on the other. Referring to the partnership nature of the project, she talks of two colleagues engaging in "*collaboration which is very very respectful of each other's role*".

Repeatedly, Liz refers to the 'live' nature of the project – it's ongoing nature over a considerable period of time. "*This was a live project being run now, being action researched and developed and then run again, it's live, it's very organic.*" This quality she attributes to the 'dedication' of the project participants and to the fact that work progressed both through face-to-face meetings and through contacts in virtual space. As Liz expressed it: "*it was almost like a full-time project, although it was actually marginal in terms of time for both of you.*"

The interview shows that Liz was also very sensitive to the 'ripple' effect of the project. The project had attracted great interest both from library staff and academic staff and as such was able to bring people together. Liz recalls:

"I was aware of it being a positive thing in all sorts of ways….. I remember the ELATE conference session we had, and in the past when we have put things in about the library, you know, you get two or three people turning up and what was amazing about that session was not only that it was full, you could hardly get another person into the room, but there were a number of librarians in the room who had never actually met before, subject librarians and people from the academic community in those

subjects. And the potential partnership working between those groups because of this project, really was enriching, I think. They were very positive towards the project."

Constructing a Composite Picture of the Library Project

An examination of the four accounts given of the library project through the stories and interview reveals that the project was viewed in highly positive ways by all parties. Great energies were poured into the project by the two active participants and the project was regarded with favour and satisfaction by management in both the Library and in CHED. The need for the project was clear to all, as was the collaborative, partnership nature of the engagement in the project. There is good evidence of the usefulness of the resource to the students. The professional development dimension of the project adds another substantial layer of success. But highly significantly, all speakers on this project talk of its power to establish collaboration beyond the narrower purpose of creating the student resource. The project had the effect of increasing communication and collaboration amongst Library staff. It gave rise to increased collaboration between subject librarians and academic staff. The Library has benefited greatly – it has strengthened its transformation into a hybrid library, which increasingly makes electronic resources available. All kinds of existing network connections between different individuals have been strengthened. There is an increased connection with CHED. There is increased dialogue with academic staff. The Staff Developer was keen to support a project with the potential to bring about change in accordance with the University's Teaching and Learning strategy. In these ways the project offers many 'ripple' effects, providing starting points for new developments which go beyond its original boundary definitions. As the project progresses, all can see multiple positive outcomes. There are no major discrepancies in the perception of the project as seen by the different story tellers.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE TECHNICIANS' PROJECT

In this section the author is able to draw on a story provided by Elizabeth Grant, Teaching Fellow in CSAD, two stories from participants in the project, Elizabeth Turner and Hazel Hancock, and an interview with Professor Liz Beaty, conducted by Kathy Courtney. Quotes are also taken from Grant et.al. (2002) to increase the coherence of the account given of the Technicians' project.

Elizabeth Grant's Perspective

Elizabeth is the Teaching Fellow in Coventry School of Art and Design (CSAD) and also the main instigator and architect of the Technician's programme. Technicians in CSAD had become 'disgruntled' for reasons relating to the changing nature of technicians' roles. Elizabeth linked this to a statement in Coventry's Teaching and Learning strategy, which talked of technicians' roles becoming 'increasingly hybrid'. She felt that something should be done to give recognition to these changes. She conducted a needs analysis amongst technicians in the CSAD (Grant et al., 2002) and then devised a developmental programme in response to the identified needs. Five technicians from CSAD participated in the pilot programme. Elizabeth recounts that "*the programme ...developed and changed on the basis of participants' comments and suggestions.*" She reports that initially, there was "*less enthusiasm*" for the project amongst participants then she expected and that "*from the outset the technicians stated that they did not feel comfortable with a traditional learning environment*" (Grant et al., 2002). In response to this, she decided that "*an integrated and non-traditional approach to learning would be beneficial*". The breakthrough came with Elizabeth's inspirational idea that the technicians should produce an exhibition which celebrates their own work. She recounts "*The identification and development of appropriate exhibits, organising the gallery and making arrangements for a Private View and opening the exhibition to the public breathed new life into the programme.*" The technicians deliberated on a title for the exhibition and agreed to call it 'Shadows'. They felt that this reflected the nature of their work – always in the background, never centre stage. The exhibition which was held from 12-15 March 2002 was a resounding success. Visitors were greatly impressed with the quality and range of the work exhibited. In Elizabeth Grant's words "*it was as if the room had been sprinkled with fairy dust and these five technical staff were lauded for their work*".

The programme was offered again the following year to technicians across the University. This time round it included a residential 'away day' reserved for the planning of the exhibition. All participants from this group were awarded an Excellence in Learning Support Award. In spite of this, Elizabeth closes her story with a statement of regret: "*So it would appear that the programme was successful, that the technicians have been recognised and that the programme can indeed – as the Vice Chancellor stated – 'be rolled out'. Sadly, this has not been the case. In part, because there is no role in the University to be responsible for it, the programme*

does not 'fit' into any traditional programme specification and it is not credit bearing. How then can it be funded?"

CHED Perspectives

The section is based on an interview of Liz Beaty by Kathy Courtney as well as annotations of the interview transcript by Kathy Courtney, made for the benefit of the EQUEL project group with whom the document was shared. This interview was more like a conversation which focused on the Technicians' project and therefore reveals both Liz's views on the subject and Kathy's.

Liz Beaty explains how she has long been interested in the problem of giving technicians recognition for their contribution to student learning: "*I was aware from having had people in my courses at Brighton before I came to Coventry, who had these roles ...very appealing to do something for such a group ...".* She immediately goes on to highlight the difficulties in addressing such problems. "*There is all sorts of background in that, like unions, and you know descriptions of jobs, and salaries and status and it's actually really, really tough.*" Kathy explained her interest in supporting the project as follows: "*This was another opportunity to support a member of staff who was prepared to address an issue which needed addressing. Involvement in the Library Project had made me realize that Librarians feel undervalued in the institution-wide framework. Here was another group of staff, technicians, who felt the same way.*"

Both Liz and Kathy dwelt on the incredible success which this programme was able to achieve for the participants involved. Kathy recalled how "*it was like a struggle struggle struggle all the way through until they started working on the exhibition and they got really very motivated. And when it was over, they saw themselves differently, the technicians and it was like we had achieved something we couldn't have hoped for….it was the best possible outcome".* Referring to a staff development seminar after the exhibition in which these five technicians took part, Liz said "*One of the successes of the outcome is in self-esteem. When I went and heard them talk about what they were doing, they were confident people that called their exhibition 'Out of the Shadows' ".* This last point is indeed something remarkable, which illustrates better than anything else the substantial change which had occurred in the way these technicians perceived themselves and their roles. Previously, they had chosen 'Shadows' as the title for the exhibition. When the technicians were asked to repeat the exhibition as part of Coventry University's ELATE conference in June 2002, they made minor changes to the exhibition, but very significantly, now chose to name the exhibition 'Out of the Shadows'.

A Participants' Perspective

Elizabeth Turner, a Geography technician with a great interest in pollen, starts by dwelling on the first week of the course which consisted of a series of workshops which clearly made her and fellow participants feel that perhaps they had taken on more than they had bargained for. She moves on to discuss the task of selecting a project which could be exhibited at the Technicians Exhibition and observes that "*apart from the first week the course was totally different to any other I had encountered. In effect the participant was given a blank canvas and told to fill it….The objective of the course was to kick-start the individual to achieve an objective way outside their usual sphere of operation (and) to acquire new skills….".* She concludes that "*there was a definite sense of achievement when the exhibition was staged….Because of the nature of a technician's job the open ended, partially structured nature of this course is ideal as the individual can incorporate material derived from his/her own interests…".* Later she added: "*On a personal level it gave me the satisfaction of knowing I could attempt unusual projects, come up against obstacles, and still manage to see them through to their conclusion. I am of the opinion that a number of my colleagues on the academic side were surprised (pleasantly I hope) by the display, and have tended to regard me in a more professional light.*"

Hazel Hancock, a technician in Civil Engineering, gives us some insight into her reasons for joining the course. She wished to see technicians throughout the University to network "*on a casual basis to exchange information and skills.*" She adds that technicians "*hold a great deal of knowledge, skills and the common sense to adapt to their ever changing role within their areas"* and she felt that they could provide considerable support for each other. She talks of the fact that the small group of technicians on the course did not know each other initially and like Elizabeth Turner, she mentions that "*as the days went on, it became apparent that we had taken on more than we knew.*" She reflects that "*the experience was interesting from the point of view of learning how varied and diverse were the day to day tasks of the technicians.'"* The other 'great part' for her was relating to academic staff on the programme. She says it was 'nice' to be given the Excellence Award for Learning Support, but concludes that "*for me the best part of the whole programme was making new friends within the University*". As a final thought she adds: "*should there be any future programmes… please note that I may be interested in participating.*"

Getting a composite picture of the Technicians' Project

Elizabeth Turner's story gives a sense of someone eager to have an opportunity to learn new skills. She appreciated the open ended structure of the course and she talked of a sense of achievement and satisfaction in being able to see her project through. The other message which comes across is that the programme, and especially the exhibition within it, has had a positive impact on the way she feels regarded by academic colleagues. Hazel sees technicians as having varied and valuable skills and she would like them to 'network informally' so that they may better support each other.

What needs to be said most of all is how successful the programme was from the perspective of all who participated in it. It was a highly collaborative project. Elizabeth Grant had sought to implement "an integrated and non-traditional approach to learning" and later found that "everyone who worked on this pilot learned something from the programme that in may ways was managed by the participants and one which proved to be quite a remarkable journey for all of us." (Grant et.al., 2002). This is emerging as a strong theme – the collaborative nature of the programme, technicians and academics working *together* in order to learn and bring about change. Hazel, for example, states explicitly: "The other great part of the programme was relating to staff in other areas of the University, i.e. CHED and the School of Art and Design." Shaun Spain, after completion of the first pilot programm, expressed his insight by saying that academics and technicians needed find ways of learning new skills together.

COMPARING THE TWO PROJECTS

A striking difference between the two project described here is that the Library project went on to spawn new developments, involving new groups of people, while the Technicians' project has so far not been embedded in institutional practice. This is particularly surprising when we consider that the two projects shared many similarities. Both were in the hands of two highly committed professionals who worked collaboratively towards a common vision. Both projects were extremely successful within themselves. Both addressed a problem which was not unique, and as a consequence, this should have meant that an emerging solution should transfer, at least in part, to other, similar contexts.

In the search for differentiating factors, we may examining the stance or orientation of the educational developer in the context of these two projects. Essentially, she aligned herself with a range of educational development orientations (Land, 2000). Initially, she acted opportunistically in choosing to support both these projects when they presented themselves, but later took on other roles, moving flexibly between them or merging different approaches to suit the moment. The 'romantic' orientation is another ingredient in her professional makeup, manifesting itself in striving to make 'clients' independent through the acquisition of new skills and confidence-building activities. Finally, the 'interpretive-hermeneutic' stance possibly exerts the strongest influence through a respect for other people's expertise and an appreciation of the value of their local knowledge. However, the way these influences mix and match in the two projects has differed, in response to the different demands made by the projects. With respect to both project, her motivation has been to promote organic change in practice.

One success factor which stands out in the Library project is that the main player, the Subject Librarian, is part of a group of subject librarians who share similar problems and concerns. This meant that her colleagues watched with interest her foray into online learning. When it became evident that WebCT could provide answers to Sally's teaching problems, it was an easy step for them to look into how they might adapt the approach to their own context. Furthermore, each of the subject librarians has links with a set of academics they work with. It is on the basis of these existing networks that academic staff were drawn into this web of development which followed in the wake of the Library project.

Why did the same thing not happen in the case of the Technicians' project? After all, the main player in this project is a Teaching Fellow who has Teaching Fellow colleagues in each of the Schools. It is reasonable to assume that technicians' roles are changing across the University. Perhaps part of the answer to this question can be found in exploring the role of the Teaching Fellows. Teaching Fellows occupy a new position in the University. They do share a broad agenda set by the Teaching and Learning strategy. However, in many ways, it is has been up to the individual concerned to define his or her role in the context of their respective Schools. In contrast, the role of the subject librarians has been long established and the teaching of information skills is central to their role. They have all experienced pressures due to changes associated with larger student numbers, greater diversity in the student population and factors relating to the Information Age. In contrast, the changing nature of technicians' roles is one that Personnel have sought to address, and therefore it may or may not be on

the agenda of Teaching Fellows. For this reason, perhaps, their interest in the Technicians' project could not compare with the level of interest by other subject librarians in the Library project.

CONCLUSIONS

What these findings are telling us is that being able to build on existing networks is crucially important for propagating change effectively. However, the nature of a network is also critical. We need networks based on strongly shared interests which are centrally important to a group of professionals, in the way information skills teaching is to subject librarians. Ideally and in addition, members of such a group should have strong links to other groups, as individual subject librarians have to members of academic staff in their subject area. It also suggests that when new groups of professionals are created, such as the recently created posts of Teaching Fellows, it would be advantageous to set up common agendas and priorities for them at least in part, in order to ensure that they have a common interest in the solution of problems which need addressing across an institution.

It is not enough for policy-makers to realise that changes in working practices have to be made. As we have seen, the need to re-conceptualise technicians' roles has been recognised in the Dearing report (NCIHE, 1997) and taken up in Coventry's Teaching and Learning strategy. But even when a committed group of people, in this case inspirationally led by a Teaching Fellow, demonstrates how such objectives can be achieved, this is still not sufficient to bring about change institution wide. It is as if 'grooves' have to exist in the structure of the institution along which change can flow. New practices need space in which they can establish themselves. Perhaps it is the case that suitable 'grooves' are silently and invisibly establishing themselves precisely through projects like the Technicians' project. A final comment from Liz Beaty has been that we need to "exercise patience". Hopefully, this project will have an impact, not just locally, but nationally, which in turn will open and deepen the kinds of 'grooves' which will make institutional embedding of programmes which address changing roles a reality in the near future.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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