

Networked Professional Development: Issues for Recipients and Providers.

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Abstract: The Computer Based Collaborative Group Work (CBCGW) Project is based in the Department of Educational Studies at Sheffield University. The aim of the project is to help raise awareness and to support the development of practice amongst those interested or involved in collaborative networked teaching and learning. The Project team has delivered a range of different resources and activities to different audiences within Higher Education. This support, labelled as the Rich Professional Development Environment (RPDE), is one strand of the project. As part of the RPDE, this paper describes an online workshop for academics and a support initiative for staff developers. Finally some consideration is given to our collaborative networked teaching practice as another aspect of networked group learning and an emerging form of practice.

The project

The CBCGW Project is based in the department of Educational Studies at the University of Sheffield and Centre for the Study of Networked Learning. The project aims to support and research the development of networked group learning (for an overview of the project see Lally et al, 1999).

The project is conceptualised into 5 strands:

1. Rich Professional Development Environment (RPDE)
2. GroupWare Review
3. Virtual Professional Development Centre
4. Institutional Readiness for Networked Learning
5. Case Studies

In this paper, we describe the professional development needs of those interested or involved in networked learning and then go on to detail ways in which the CBCGW project is addressing the need to support both academics and staff developers.

Staff Development Needs For Networked Learning

There are growing expectations of staff to offer more flexible forms of provision using technology, yet often with little or no training or support (Lynch & Corry, 1998). To meet these expectations, there is a need for more staff development (Collis, 1997, Wills, 1998, McConnell, 1998). The range of professional development needs is complex and goes well beyond technical skills, to include pedagogical and managerial skills/knowledge. For instance, the provision of technology-mediated learning at an operational level indicates various professional development needs that include (Thompson, 1997):

- conducting successful group discussions
- new class management techniques
- managing online commitments with other responsibilities
- developing appropriate assessment strategies
- changing administrative processes

This places considerable responsibility on staff developers to provide appropriate forms of professional development that reflects the diversity of needs and different forms of possible provision. Indeed, the

staff developers may also share the same professional development needs themselves (Isaacs, 1997). The CBCGW project is therefore interested in providing experiential support to both academics and staff developers. The project has developed the RPDE as one strand of the overall provision to address these needs.

The RPDE Strand

As part of the project, the RPDE strand provides information, tools and events. A range of information resources is made available on its web site (<http://collaborate.shef.ac.uk>). Various tools have been provided for different purposes including a discussion list (named Collaborate), synchronous systems and different conferencing technologies. A range of events have also been provided/planned by the project including a series of list-based group learning activities and an online workshop for mainly local academics (details below). We are also about to deliver another online workshop aimed specifically at staff developers.

The overall provision being made by the project is described in more detail elsewhere (Lally et al, 1999). In this paper, we review an online workshop already delivered by the project and then a support initiative for staff developers.

Online Workshop For Academics

As the first of a series of online events offered by the Project, we have completed the delivery of an online workshop for academic staff. The aim of this workshop was to raise awareness and provide experience of networked group learning strategies, using an experiential model. The details of the workshop and the findings are covered in more detail elsewhere (Bowskill et al, 1999). Here we offer only an overview of the workshop and findings. The workshop had 29 participants (including two from different institutions) and lasted 12 weeks. Various technologies were used including synchronous systems.

Research Method

The data from the transcripts of the online environment were analysed together with additional sources such as email messages and transcripts from a face-to-face meeting held at the halfway point. Questionnaires were also sent to participants after the workshop and responses were also added to the data collection. The analysis of each unit is given below followed by a brief discussion of some of the main issues.

The Findings

A detailed discussion of the findings has been presented elsewhere (Bowskill et al, 1999). Here we offer a brief summary of the main findings. They are:

- Continuity versus Scheduling of Provision
- Levels of Active Participation
- Difficulties in Decision-Making Online
- The Structuring of the Online Space
- The Value of Sharing Experience
- Developing Awareness of the Student Perspective
- The Form of Provision
- Transfer into Practice
- Experiential Approaches to Professional Development

Continuity/Scheduling of Provision

Although our provision allowed considerable flexibility, participation around exam time was still problematic for some people who had also planned to take leave shortly afterwards.

Levels of Active Participation

A core of people participated regularly across the whole duration while several others seemed to be spectators. This differed across the workshop but overall participation –meaning the input of messages to the discussion–was moderate to low.

Decision Making in Online Environments

We found that decision-making was difficult amongst a group of distributed participants who participated at different times thereby increasing the amount of time taken to complete collaborative activities.

Structuring the Space

From our workshop experience, the number of spaces in which learners work should be kept to a minimum to avoid confusion and delays. This problem appears to be exacerbated with learners new to technology.

The Value of Sharing Experience

The online workshop provided a flexible framework for participants to meet each other. This in itself was valued and provided additional opportunities to discuss ideas and good practice. In this case, we found that assessment issues were of particular concern along with the frequency of the tutor's responses to students.

Developing Awareness of the Student Perspective

Participation in the CBCGW online workshop gave academic staff the opportunity to gain insights into the experience of students in an online learning environment. This was greatly valued and caused people to reflect on current practice.

The Form of Provision

Some staff wanted to be told how to deliver networked group learning. This highlights different learning styles amongst academics and the need for providers to offer a range of formats and entry points in their overall provision. Discursive, collaborative and experiential approaches did not suit everyone.

"What I feel I need is a How To guide to do this i.e. meet my needs and at the same time see how I might advance what I do. Starting from thinking of a problem and then going on is no helping me."

Transfer into Practice

There were a number of indications that experiences from the online workshop would transfer into the practice of participants in various ways.

"It has brought me face-to-face with...why some of my students were giving me a tough time...if nothing else it has made me change my mind about how we will tackle our own web stuff in October and that is incredibly valuable"

More typical however were indications of interest in further exploration and development of some of these introductory experiences.

The Need for Experiential Approaches to Professional Development

Several people echoed this in our workshop commenting that there was a need for support from those having both technical skills and pedagogical skills. People thought /more provision of this kind was needed.

"It does worry me that the pressure is on to develop on-line distance-learning initiatives, without the infrastructure and the time that are really needed to deliver a good-quality experience for all concerned..."

There is clear evidence, from our workshop and from the current practice elsewhere, of a considerable need for more support in this area of work. As Taylor comments "There appears to exist a professional development "blind spot" ... in the preparation and support of teachers, especially those who work in distance education." (Taylor, J.C., 1997). The role of staff developers amongst others is therefore vital and the project has also sought to research and address this audience.

The Support Initiative for Staff Developers

Following a review of traditional support practices for academics interested in ICT, the Talisman Report (Alexander, W., 1999) pointed to the need for a forum in which staff developers could share practice and discuss issues arising from their support for academics wishing to explore the use of ICT. In addition, the report suggested that a "training the trainers" initiative would be needed in order to help staff developers address the pedagogical issues in ICT.

The CBCGW project is interested in providing support for staff developers for various reasons. The first of these is our recognition of the vital role staff developers play in dissemination of innovative ideas and practices. Secondly, our project seeks to develop a national centre for the support of networked group learning and as such, staff developers play a key role as local contacts and co-ordinators in any outreach programme.

We aim to try and develop experiential approaches to staff developers around networked group learning practices as part of supporting their involvement and understanding of the issues. We have therefore implemented a support initiative that aims to survey current practice in networked staff development, particularly using networked group learning practices and to develop the idea of further collaborative work between the project and this audience.

Description

Three regional workshops were organised for staff developers. These workshops were held at:

- Birkbeck College, London -17th Feb. 2000
- University of Edinburgh -29th February 2000
- Sheffield University -16th March 2000

Around 60 staff developers, from different institutions, attended this series of workshops. The aim of these workshops was to identify current networked staff development practices and professional development needs and to share these amongst both the participants in the workshop and the wider UK audience of staff developers. The findings from these workshops will be assembled into a report and made available online for participants to share and discuss.

Much provision for networked learning is delivered collaboratively. Networked collaborative teaching is therefore something recognised by the project as important and as a contribution to the research in this aspect of emerging practice we have begun to research our own practice.

Collaborative Networked Teaching

Computer networks offer considerable potential to support a team of tutors not only to deliver a collaborative provision but also to learn together as they do so. Team-teaching or collaborative support is a common feature of networked learning provision (Van der Veen, 1999; Bloxham, 1999; and Sherry, 1996 for example). As such, collaboration may be an additional professional development need for those interested in networked professional development. The provision of a learning event by a team may therefore be considered as authentic form of professional development for individuals and teams.

"My feeling is that learning technology support teams are in fact doing the most learning and on that basis they are engaged in a highly effective learning strategy." (Harasim, 1990)

We are aware as a team that the collaborative provision of an online workshop represented a number of opportunities. Firstly, to constantly review and improve our provision for our audience and to explore and develop our own collaborative practice and understanding about working together as a team. Through a process of collaborative action learning we hoped to seize both these opportunities. We therefore began with a tape-recorded review meeting of team teaching prior to the start of our collaborative tutoring experience. Some of the early findings from the review meeting are outlined below.

Our Review Meeting on Team Teaching

We organised a review meeting with a member of our steering committee and another member of academic staff in the Centre for the Study of Networked Learning. This meeting was recorded on tape and transcribed for analysis. The meeting was an attempt to pool our experiences and thoughts about the practice of teaching with others. It was an attempt to identify issues of concern and interest before our first experience of tutoring together. Some of the issues arising from this review were:

- The Distribution of the Team
- The Relationship between Members
- The use of Technology
- The impact of team work on individual practice
- Training and support for Working in Teams
- Collaborative Teaching as a Learning Opportunity

The Distribution of the Team

The location of each member of the team was seen as something that might impact on the effectiveness and efficiency of the collaborative provision.

"Now the last one for instance, the management were all part time -they had other duties in other words- and they were on different floors and even being on different floors introduced a slight break in communications."

It was also recognised that teams might work be increasingly remote from each other and that this was already happening.

"Many of the projects and increasingly many teaching teams will be in different institutions and different countries...certainly a lot of the online courses are being delivered by multi-national teams."

The Relationship between Members

The team discussed the centrality of good working relationships between members.

" I can recall us all...meeting to talk about who the next team might be and that being really important because trying to work with people that you think you have something in common with and whose values you share then it becomes a different experience and perhaps a richer one."

The team was also aware that the nature of the relationships amongst team members could impact upon the experience of the learners.

".....it depends on individuals some people like it because it's a good safety net for them others find it difficult ... And it can cause real problems and it can cause problems for the student experience...."

The use of Technology

Experiences of using technology amongst team members were shared. These included a means of bringing together separated tutors with a shared interest as well as small team collaboration.

".....all the new tutors ... talk to each other through FirstClassSo they are in effect team working helping to become teachers in HE in a particular discipline."

Technology was already being used to develop reflective practice amongst a team of tutors.

"...the staff team has a database for itself...where we meet 2 or 3 times a week in order to talk about whats happening in the course and we talk about whats happening as its happening - you know this thing about looking at our practice in action."

There was a common awareness of the ways that technology could make individual tutoring public to other tutors. This was seen as controllable, beneficial.

".. In virtual environments, if that's the way you allow things to happen, then its possible to learn by looking at other peoples work in a way that I don't think is possible in face-to-face."

The impact of team work on individual practice

It was interesting to see ways in which participants recognised that working with others had also caused further reflection upon individual practices.

"...one of the strongest influences of working in a team is the effect on me of questioning and re-questioning my own actions and values some of which have changed as a result and some of which have been well not re-enforced but re-affirmed as a result."

Training and support for Working in Teams

From our review it became clear that little support had been offered/available for tutoring in teams. Some views were given about where the emphasis of any support should be.

"Yes there are ways of working which you have to learn but I'm not so sure as the stress on the team as the dynamics of working collaboratively."

The best way to develop and address professional development needs for collaborative networked tutors was also considered and the answer was plain.

"Be in a team!"

Our own collaborative reflective strategy also aimed to support our own professional development. A further meeting has been scheduled to review what has been learned about our practice and the overall findings will be reported elsewhere in the future.

Collaborative Teaching as Group Learning

There was little doubt that teaching with others constitutes a real learning opportunity.

"..... We each had a set to tutor but it was a privilege if you like to have this window on another tutor and the way they went about interacting with the set members."

"...because we could engage in a discourse as well. It wasn't just student-tutor interaction"

Collaborative provision is an emerging form of practice for both academics and staff developers. Our review of our own previous experiences and concerns suggests this will become more common and that good working relationships will be important. Collaborative networked tutoring also offers a learning opportunity and might be considered as effective professional development particularly where support is lacking from elsewhere.

CONCLUSION

This paper has reviewed the support for networked group learning made by the Computer Based Collaborative Group Work Project at Sheffield University. This support has addressed both the needs of academics and those of staff developers. This has been organised within the projects Rich Professional Development Environment and taken the form of resources, tools and events.

The project team itself has adopted a reflective approach to its own practice within an action learning framework. This approach has been used to explore our collaborative teaching practices in an effort to revise and constantly improve our overall provision whilst also addressing some of our own professional development needs. This collaborative tutoring practice is being explored amongst the team and is the focus of further research as a form of group learning itself. Collaborative provision amongst networked teams is emerging as an important area of work demanding further research.

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