

Thinking, researching and living in virtual professional development community of practice

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This paper is a comparative case study of two virtual professional development (VPD) communities of practice established and maintained to support teachers in their learning and development. Each community was studied and evaluated by its facilitator. The purpose of those studies was to identify behaviours and capture shifts in educators' professional identity as they engaged in VPD. The researchers were interested in those practices that indicated embedding of practice, co-construction of knowledge, and development of skills and values. Many of the factors identified in the VPD initiatives explored the link to the wider conversations that are occurring around education in general in a time of change.

Keywords: virtual professional development, communities of practice

Introduction

Educators today are working within an environment of continual change, with influences from both external and internal sources. Teachers are challenged to justify their curriculum, methods, and approaches to student learning. Under this intense pressure each teacher has their own way of coping and their own unique identity. Each teacher, busy with a full workload, is trying to address these issues within their own context. As such, there has never been a greater need for teachers to be supported by like-minded educators and leaders, who are connected in networks. This paper explores the initiation, development and leadership of two virtual professional development communities of practice in a time of great change in education. The research conducted in each community is also described and compared. The commonalities and differences of two online CoPs provide rich insight into educators' community development, participation, learning and developing identities.

Background

Communities of Practice (CoPs), that enable situated learning are based on previous research into learning in professional practice. (Lave & Wenger, 1991 & Lai, et al, 2006). The CoPs include facilities of knowledge management and professional growth for a group of people who, via a common space on the Internet, engage in public discussions, interactions, and exchanges (Tilley, Hills, Bruce, & Meyers, 2002, Wenger, 1998, Owen, 2011b, Lave and Wenger, 1991 & Flagg & Ayling, 2011).

Central to participation in an online CoP is the concept of an educator's identity. Wenger (1998) explained, that "issues of identity are an integral aspect of learning and are thus inseparable from issues of practice, community and meaning" (p. 145). Identity is the 'pivot point' between the social and the individual. Westfall (2000) suggests that "the idea of truly departing from social hierarchy and restriction does not occur on the Internet...with identity construction still shaped by others" (p. 160), in particular in response to each individual's literacy and communication skills within the online context. Identity according to Grey, (1994) is a project of self. There are two types of identity Common and Common Bond. The Common Identity is commitment to an enterprise or a value, where as the Common Bond is to the people involved in the enterprise (Prentice, 1994). According to Handley (2006) we derive our identity from the communities to which we belong and are accepted. Utz and Sassenburg (2002) suggested that membership of a community relates to identity and identity relates to purpose.

To further understand the ideas that underpin VPD engagement and participation in online CoPs, the work of Schlager and Fusco (2003) provides a useful structure. In their research into a large, multi organisation VPD project, they used the Activity Theory Framework (Engestrom, 1987, 1999; Cole & Engestrom, 1993) to analyse

how individuals and groups engage in a VPD. Schlager and Fusco explained that participation in online community is a new project (activity), designed to support and develop members (subjects), to use new activities and information (tools), to improve their performance (object). To undertake these activities using tools and objects, members must take on new collaborative roles (division of labour) based on values and norms (rules). The members are encouraged to develop trust in, and form lasting relationships with, one another (community) as they implement new ideas in their practice.

The authors believe educators find the pace, nature and demands of change from external and internal sources extremely challenging. Ann Austin, (2012, p 57) says the work teachers do must be understood within, and connect and respond to, a rapidly changing world. As such, teachers should offer both vision and practical paths to aid students and the broader society in moving forward with hope, wisdom, integrity and courage. William G Tierney, (1992) believes educators need to create communities that recognise and honor difference, cultivate respect and foster dialogue. In these communities, communication as a concept is in constant negotiation, dialogue and reformulation, and the process is characterised by the 'politics of hope'. In such dialogues individuals retain their unique identities, while meaning is created for the organisation. The challenge for the leaders of these communities is to create online community spaces, which aid and promote conversation, are key elements to fostering communication.

Context

The authors of this paper are community facilitators/leaders of two online CoPs, which, between them, have over four hundred educators and leaders as members. These virtual communities were formed to support educators and help them develop professionally by providing access to resources, connections and support. The members of these communities are located over a broad geographical base, working in diverse organisations, and across a variety of educational levels, from primary through to higher education. The communities have grown organically over a three year period and become lively, vibrant and safe spaces that encourage conversations around professional practice, identity and student learning, as well as being containers of 'things' (Ashton, 1999), such as resources, conversations, videos, podcasts and images.

Community One:

This CoP, 'The Teaching and Learning Community at Unitec' (T & L Community - <http://tlcommunityunitec.ning.com/>) was established in 2009 and had, by early 2011, evolved into New Zealand's largest and most active online teaching and learning CoP, with over 360 members engaged in higher education from across New Zealand and around the world. The focus of this community is higher education and the community is drawn from a range of different organisations, although the predominant membership is from one large institute of technology in New Zealand.

Community Two:

The Virtual Professional Learning Development (VPLD) online community was established in November 2009, and now has one-hundred-and-thirty-five members located in and around New Zealand. Members of the community are mainly from the primary and secondary sector, although there are a few members from tertiary or associated PLD providers. Most members are located in a variety of schools and education institutions, although the core focus of the community is the VPLD programme, which directly involves thirty-five of the community members.

Aim

Each VPD was evaluated at different points in their development. The purpose of those studies was to identify behaviours and capture shifts in educators' professional identity as they engaged in VPD. The researchers were interested in those practices that indicated embedding of practice, co-construction of knowledge, and development of skills and values.

Method

Community One:

The development of this site had been based on the work of Wenger, White and Smith (2009) and was structured on findings from White's Online Community Builder's Purpose Checklist (2009). The study was three months duration. It employed a single survey and an examination of the Teaching and Learning Community website using platform observation and Google Analytics. At the time of the survey there were 280 members of the community and 23 members responded to the survey. The return rate of less than 10% is not uncommon in online environments, where a small core are fully participating members.

Community Two:

The VPLD initiative has been underpinned by a research focus since its inception (October 2009), which performs an iterative feed-forward function as well as providing outcomes and comparative longitudinal evaluation data. Data has been collected from all areas of the VPLD online CoP, from project documents, recorded discussions and notes from mentor meetings, and from Webinar sessions, as well as via three online surveys per year in 2010 and 2011 (conducted in January, June, and November/December). The main question pertaining to the VPLD online CoP was: How are participants' opinions of the value of the VPLD pilot affected by participation in the VPLD CoP?

To assist in the comparison of results across the online VPDs, only data collected using the online surveys of 36 participants will be reported. Designed with mainly open-ended questions, the survey aimed at gathering richer, fuller understandings of the experiences of the VPLD participants as well as gathering suggestions for the future of VPLD.

Results

In both communities the members' responses to the surveys provided insight into members' participation in the communities. The research findings are examined within the structure of the Activity Theory Framework (Cole & Engestrom, 2003). Using themes from the Activity Theory Framework the authors have categorised responses relevant to themes of activity, subjects, tools, object, division of labour and rules. These themes provide valuable insight into participation, learning and identity.

Participants (Subjects)

Overwhelmingly, the participants in both VPD communities were teachers and/or leaders within education. Some members were managers, and some had professional development roles. The majority of members were teachers with full time teaching responsibilities and they were diverse in knowledge, experience, skills, locations, and teaching contexts. To fully understand how the VPD environments support teachers it is essential to understand their nature and characteristics. Both CoPs studied had variable levels of participant engagement, which depended on the members' confidence, capabilities (digital literacy), motivations, access to technology, and available time. Not all members had equal opportunities to fully participate in the VPD environments.

Community One respondents in the higher education environment had very different levels of participation. As the literature explained (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 2009), more than three quarters of the members of any online community take the valid role of passive consumers of community cultural artifacts (resources, knowledge, skills and values). Interestingly, just over a quarter of the members (27%) uploaded a photo of themselves to their profile page on the CoP platform. By uploading a photo teachers were more likely to be ready to participate in a VPD. This could be seen as an integral part of teacher identity, as well as being indicative of existing skill sets.

Community Two, at the time of publication, has seen 100% of participants upload a profile picture, and contribute some information about themselves and where they are working, suggesting a strong sense of belonging, or desire to belong, as well as indicating the positive modelling by existing members of the community. While some might point to a reasonable level of digital literacies as one of the reasons there is such a high rate of profile development, the survey responses indicate that participants have a wide range of technical skills, familiarity with social networking, and access. For example, during the course of the pilot project (2010) it became obvious that there was not equality of access to the technology itself, or in the level of technical support provided by the institutions.

In any self-motivated learning environment participants are provided with the freedom to choose whether to engage (with or without genuine enthusiasm), and some will decline to embrace the opportunity (Bruckman, 2003). This is an important part of identity. The aim of the VPD's was to find a balance or compromise between

self-motivated and socio-constructivist environments, where engagement and up-skilling were the ultimate rewards, and a more traditional perspectives where professional development was directly linked to performance reviews and promotion. It was challenging for the facilitators/leaders to find the right balance, especially as work commitments ebbed and flowed for participants.

Learning about practice (Object)

The object of both CoPs was to support teachers' professional development, in part by removing barriers of time and geography. The CoPs delivered both formal and informal (spontaneous) learning. While not specifically delivering online professional development (in the sense of generic workshops), the VPD environments were established to support situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As such, the aim of the facilitators was to create environments where educators could learn *from* and *with* each other (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009, p. 7). Practitioners were encouraged to share and reflect on their day-to-day experiences, stories, and ideas. Key to this approach is a willingness to learn more about practice.

Community One

The respondents in this community recognised the professional development purpose of the community and the need to assimilate new learning into professional practice. One respondent spoke of the positive sense of innovation and creativity provided by an online community.

The Ning is quite liberating, because in a sense, it enables us (participants) to leave the box (figurative or actual!) in which we work, and cast off the restrictions and 'urgency' of our day to day roles to reflect, explore and give commentary on those issues which are important in our practice, or about which we are truly passionate.

The facilitator/leaders were an experienced and active presence in the CoP. Resources were created and developed by members through blog posts, while discussions on speciality topics in education were held in groups. Members with a 'strong online presence' had created and shared, and participated in a variety of discussions in the community groups. However, it was the norm for members to consume rather than contribute and collaborate. In terms of Activity Theory, this disconnection between members' perceptions about their competence and behavior was important to understanding their participation. As higher education is a competitive environment with individual rather than group rewards, it is not unusual to find members learning from the community without feeling any obligation to reciprocate by contributing to community outcomes and resources.

Community Two

The VPLD online CoP has developed into a space where practitioners feel comfortable reflecting about their experiences and their practice. Furthermore, by being immersed in an experience that models aspects such as valuing existing world views and skills, as well as making it OK to 'make mistakes', participants were often encouraged to use such approaches with their own learners. One member commented that "I often get...rejuvenated [sic] to focus on certain aspects of my teaching, which filters down to the learning of the students" (survey response, 2010). There was also a sense of re-invention and renewal expressed by participants:

What a difference a year makes. Prior to becoming a participant in the VPLD I had been reflecting for a few years as to whether I even wanted to continue in the teaching profession. I was tired of asking students to 'copy this down' and I was sometimes struggling to engage students as participants in their learning instead of just passive recipients. My reflections and my timely introduction to the VPLD started me down the path of 'what if' (end of year reflection, 2011).

The VPLD sessions, activities and programmes were designed by the facilitators/leaders to be culturally responsive, take into consideration aspects such as accessibility (physical, technological, and geographical), while also being relevant to the wider community of education. A by-product of teacher engagement was that students became empowered co-constructors of outcomes and facilitators of sessions, as well as more confident, engaged learners who were "*empowered ...to learn on their own terms*" (Survey response, 2011).

I think that I as a teacher [I] am now obsolete but my role as a facilitator is primordial and very active. Because the students are now in charge of their own learning, I am no longer at the front of the class. Instead I am sitting among them and I can go around and help them. I actually now have

more time to spend with the kids to enhance their learning (reflective post, 2011).

A culture of trust (Rules)

Both VPD communities were under pressure from internal and external influences that could increase or decrease the relationships of trust between the facilitators and the members. Trust is enhanced when teachers believe they are operating in an authentic learning environment in which members are open in their profiles and are willing to engage not only online but face-to-face. While teachers need to understand and represent their own perspectives they also need to listen to and honour the perspectives of other members. Teachers need to go beyond consumption to contribution and ultimately to implementing new ideas and technologies in their own practice. Palmer, in *The Courage to Teach* (1998, p 12.) explained "Good teachers... are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves. One way of doing this is through dialogue." He goes on to explain that "identity and integrity are more fundamental to good teaching than technique - and if we want to grow as teachers - we must do something alien to the academic culture: we must talk to each other about our inner lives - risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant and the abstract."

Schlager & Fusco (2003) explained that a VPD CoP would benefit from fostering trusting relationships, and the formation of a lasting community where teachers encourage each other to apply what they had learned and disseminated their learning to their colleagues. Roberts (2006) suggests that in most conventional management-led organisations it is difficult to foster an environment of trust. Any such developments need to be grown within the VPD CoP. The facilitators/leaders have an important role to play in supporting both the community and members to foster their relationships with other members and to build the community. However, they cannot negate an external hierarchical and managerial approach common in educational institutions. Although none of the respondents of either online CoP identified issues of 'trust' explicitly, it is clear from the literature that trust is a key element for a successful online community of practice (Roberts, 2006; Schlager, 2003). Members of an online CoP have to believe they are learning and sharing in a collaborative and respectful environment.

Community One

The public/private exposure afforded by a VPD CoP was important for some members. The online CoP was open to the public and included a small section for members only. Some members would have preferred the whole site for members only, with no public access. One of our respondents stated,

A good example is the opening of the CoP to members outside Unitec - a decision which I had no say in and which constrained my willingness to participate. (Survey response, 2011)

Clearly, members are challenged in an environment that requires publicly sharing of ideas and activities in an online environment. Over all 66% of respondents indicated they wanted the site public. The members gave no reasons for their preference, and this could be the subject of further research.

Community Two

Trust in Community Two gradually built as the VPLD CoP matured. The sense of collective identity strengthened, and the feeling of socially-mediated shared understandings and experiences increased, thereby helping to strengthen resilience in the face of change.

Being geographically diffuse the creation of a community of other teachers who are progressive in their development and practice both affirms and supports the collective confidence in the validity of our projects.

Another participant wrote:

Sometimes you feel very isolated (e.g. I am the only French teacher in my school) and you feel you are the only one doing what you do. Being part of the VPLD made me realise that I am not alone and gave me the opportunity to grow...as I could read what others were doing. This gave me great ideas to try in my own class (End of year reflection, 2011).

Social Learning (Community)

Schlager & Fusco, (2003) acknowledged that the VPD CoP model did not fit within the existing infrastructure of their members' organisations. While teachers may have been familiar with CoPs they were not used to participating in an online environment to learn more about their practice. This is somewhat ironic considering most education organisations use some form of online student learning management system, and have certain expectations of student learning, collaboration and performance within online spaces.

Community One

One respondent, from Community One raised issues of reasons and purpose of the online community stating,

I want to know what the aims and/or objectives are, so that I can assess from the outset whether my time is best served participating in such a forum. (Survey response, 2011)

Similarly, another respondent stated,

It's all a bit too vague and airy fairy for me in terms of my precious time. I like to know beforehand what I will get out of any time I put in. (Survey response, 2011)

In terms of activity theory it is clear members want to know the purpose of the community before fully engaging. It is therefore the role of facilitators and technology stewards to encourage the negotiation of roles, rules and purposes of a community. Community one developed organically and these matters were not clear as the community was being established. Once more people joined and began to participate, the need for clarity was increasingly evident. Community two supported members to develop their own learning plans and goals around a project of interest to them that they would work on in their own context. As such, it is suggested that the reasons to engage in the VPD were much more transparent to members. The VPD became a valuable resource for critiquing ideas, exploring thoughts and gaining feedback, and the VPLD community became another tool for participants in their toolkit. It gave them more than they had in their own context and fostered their engagement and their change in identity.

Implications

Based on the evaluation of both Community one and Community two, and observation of the communities over a period of time, the authors conclude VPD supports teachers' engagement in professional learning. A healthy and active community can support educators and leaders to undertake transformative learning experiences that can result in a shift in professional identity, and in turn to meet many internal and external challenges. The research has provided insight into the factors that make VPD relevant and useful.

Participation and non-participation are behaviours that are based around affective factors such as identity, belonging, and trust. Such affective factors are something that contributed to what Dron (2010) refers to as 'Social Velcro' - the elements that help a community to form and 'stick' together in a way that enables them to learn effectively, but then to 'un-stick and reassemble'. The social structures that are established are underpinned by agreements about interactions, processes, norms, and rules - although these too are in a constant state of flux, being re-negotiated, re-evaluated and altered. It is likely that as more VPD groups become established, it will be the serendipitous encounters and overlaps between groups, as well as what occurs within them, that will have the potential to encourage diversity, which in turn should ultimately lead to vibrant and creative social learning (Dron, 20120).

Particularly important is the feeling for teachers and facilitator/leaders that they are part of a meaningful community of professional practitioners who share similar interests and goals. A genuine, supportive, safe, friendly, knowledgeable community, can provide opportunities for educators to take responsibility for their own learning, as well as discuss learning and teaching, troubleshoot when they face problems, and share advice, support, resources and tools. It can also provide a space for the celebration of the robustness and alternative points of view from other disciplines and sectors. VPD environments have the capacity to positively engage teachers in their own learning and practice. This engagement has positive effects for teachers' identity as self-managing professionals negotiating their role in a constantly changing and challenging education environment. VPD communities offer authentic support for teachers grappling with change and technology.

Conclusions

Many of the factors identified in the VPD initiatives explored above link to the wider conversations that are occurring around education in general, and social learning in particular. Questions are being raised around what actually should define a programme of education, as well as the role(s) of educators in social networks and learning. The general shift appears to be toward personalised learning environments, self-paced learning, and social identity (Owen, 2012). The teachers who are trialling these approaches are discovering the types of skills that they as educators, and their students as learners, need. It is here that PLD offered via CoPs will come into their own. There are affordances built into the VPD model that encourage and enable practitioners to move at their own pace, in a supported, supportive environment, with access to all that they need to scaffold their learning journey (Owen, 2011a).

Results reaffirm learning as a social phenomenon, while also indicating some members of these online communities took the valid role of passive consumers of community cultural artifacts (resources, knowledge, skills and values). Benefits reported by participants include a change in their own role as educators, as well as improvements in student engagement, and increases in the quantity and quality of collaboration and communication. While it would be simplistic to draw a direct relationship of cause and effect with the online CoPs and these reported shifts, there is an indication that an effective approach to PLD provision is one that does not divorce the educator from their context, or add to significantly to their workload, but which does enable them to be connected and professional *learners*.

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