

Digital communities – contexts for leading learning into the future?

Shirley Reushle, Jacquie McDonald
University of Southern Queensland

In 2011, a robust, on-campus, three-element Community of Practice model consisting of growing community, sharing of practice and building domain knowledge was piloted in a digital learning environment. An interim evaluation of the pilot study revealed that the three-element framework, when used in a digital environment, required a fourth element. This element, which appears to happen incidentally in the face-to-face context, is that of reflecting, reporting and revising. This paper outlines the extension of the pilot study to the national tertiary education context in order to explore the implications for the design, leadership roles, and selection of appropriate technologies to support and sustain digital communities using the four-element model.

Keywords: digital, interaction, collaboration, leadership, community of practice

Introduction

McLuhan's (1968) claim that we live in a "global village" has certainly proved correct. Digital communities can provide opportunities to engage with a national and international community of learners or colleagues around a particular domain of practice. However, research and experience reveal that many of these digital communities are not sustained, and the authors propose that effective leadership and a sound design framework may be the key elements for success.

This work-in-progress builds on research conducted with an established three-element model that has proved robust to guide campus-based, face-to-face Communities of Practice (CoP). This initiative has been successfully operating at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) since the pilot project in 2006 and the number of successful CoPs has grown to twenty (McDonald, 2010; Star & McDonald, in press). The three-element model structures interactions according to Wenger's (1998) combination of three fundamental Community of Practice elements:

1. A domain of knowledge that creates a common ground and a sense of common identity (builds member capacity);
2. A community of people who care about the domain and create the social fabric of learning (grow a learning community);
3. A shared practice developed to become effective in the domain (innovations are noted by the participants and this saves reinventing the wheel).

In 2011, the three-element CoP model was trialled in a digital environment with the ascilite Community Mentoring Program (Reushle, 2011). Outcomes of that trial suggest that appropriate leadership in a digital community can create the conditions of motivation (inspiring members to be involved), attachment and identity (keeping members involved). The authors are extending the trial to include national digital communities, researching both the design and leadership aspects of digital communities. To effectively support the digital communities, appropriate technologies will also be identified.

Moving from local to digital communities

Participation in communities of practice builds on the premise of social learning theory that we are social beings, who learn best in social contexts (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 2010). CoPs can foster peer interaction, changes in practice and build learning communities. At USQ, the three-element model of growing community, sharing of practice and building domain knowledge has been used as a unique organising framework for CoP gatherings and has provided an effective working model for professional development to support academics in the reshaping of higher education theory and practice (McDonald & Star, 2008). Communities of Practice do not have formal institutional structures or hierarchical leadership and reject meeting-style activity, preferring to refer to any synchronous activity as gatherings. The focus for any activity generally emerges from member negotiation and there is continual potential for new direction. Active participation and collaborative decision-making is encouraged and members may assume different roles with hierarchical, authoritarian management

replaced by self-management and ownership of work (McDonald & Star, 2008). The community focuses on authentic tasks and activities and members are able to share ideas and resource, debate and build expertise within a safe and supportive community. Six years' of experience and research in the Australian context by a co-author of this paper has identified that leadership (as opposed to "management") is a crucial element for CoP success and sustainability (McDonald & Star, in press).

Learning and teaching in higher education is changing rapidly to address the imperatives of digital futures. Developing knowledge and experience of how to effectively lead and support digital communities is critical to enhance skills and practice that can be applied across diverse learning and teaching contexts. However, in an ever-increasing digital environment (influenced by events such as the roll out of the National Broadband Network, increasingly diverse cohorts of students, collaboration with colleagues across the world), it is imperative that educators have the confidence, skills and motivation to effectively employ digital communities in their daily work. It is also critical that they model the effective use of digital communities for their students and address the disconnect highlighted by Ohler (2010) who notes that many educational systems still force learners to have "two lives", their "traditional educational (lives) within school" and outside of school, their "digital lives".

In 2011, the USQ three-element model was trialled in a digital environment with the pilot asclite Collaborative Community Mentoring Program. A preliminary evaluation of the pilot revealed that the digital CoP enabled peer support and collaboration by providing access, convenience, flexibility, utility, speed, and cost-effectiveness. On the other hand, some participants indicated a lack of sustained engagement with the community. One participant noted the difficulty in "making the program a high priority. It kept slipping down the list of 'things to do'. I often felt distracted from my project goals and, due to conflicting demands on my time, this made me feel frustrated that I could not progress my project outcomes. Although I felt fully supported, I was not fully committed" (Reushle, 2012, p. 5). Further informal investigation of these issues suggests that the effective operation of digital communities also appears to be highly dependent on visible, consistent and astute leadership. CoPs have emerged as a non-hierarchical structure that attempts to re-engage academics in learning and collegiality and yet, there is little research about leadership and role definition within such structures.

The evaluation also revealed that the three-element framework, when used in a digital environment, required a fourth element, that of reflecting, reporting and revising, something which appeared to happen incidentally in the face-to-face context. This four-element model (Figure 1) provides the basis for the design of a digital community and will now be tested for application to support productive connections in other Australian tertiary contexts.

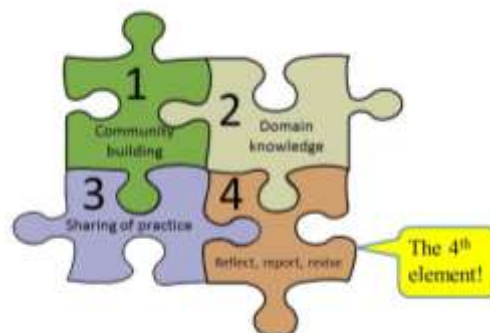


Figure 1: 4-element Community of Practice model

The digital community design and research plan

The authors will proceed through an iterative, reflective, action learning approach. The four-element model - community building, sharing practice, building domain knowledge, and reflecting, reporting and revising - will provide the design framework for the next stage of the digital communities' trial. Collegiate structures, including CoPs, seem ideally suited to the style of leadership espoused by Kotter (1990, cited in Anderson & Johnson, 2006, p. 3) who suggests that "leadership is about influencing and engaging others to effect change". Thus, the role of leadership in community building, orchestrating the sharing of practice and the building of domain knowledge and expertise are important for CoPs to lead change and transform practice.

Leadership of digital communities must also recognise the special conditions of this social, community-based form of engagement. Facilitating community is not a static, one-time event related to switching on an electronic

platform or suite of technologies. There also seem to be a number of significant questions to be answered relating to the digital literacy skills of the community members and what is regarded as productive engagement within a digital community, particularly the affective level of that digital literacy. Do people feel attached to online collaboration sufficiently? If so, which people and why? At some level, leadership may fail if those who are to be part of that digital community are not in tune with the modality of interaction, even while agreeing to its importance. Do digital communities bring members closer or, for those less experienced in the digital environment, can the very tools being used lead to a greater sense of separation? What is the fit between engaging in a digital community and the learning to be a member of that community (where learning may be the sense of becoming adept at its modes of operation)?

While technologies can assist in providing a platform for communication and collaboration, even more important is the social construction of the community. The technical architecture supports the community, while the social architecture enlivens it. The roles, processes, and approaches that engage people - whether face-to-face or online - are essential in relationship building, collaborative learning, knowledge sharing, and action. Together, technical and social architectures create the container for the community (EDUCAUSE, 2012). Through mediated interaction, distributed in time and space, with many less formal markers of community, the environment tends to involve more numerous, but weaker ties between participants and ensuing bouts of passive engagement or occasional bursts of activity. This apparent weakness, compared with more traditional communities can also be a strength, where leadership focuses specifically on promoting the ties between people, based on common interests and affiliations at the individual level.

The authors propose that the tenets of distributed leadership (Scott, Coates, & Anderson, 2008) may be more appropriate for digital communities and investigation of participant expectations and appropriate leadership activities will be a focus of this research. A crucial feature of distributed leadership is a focus on empowering colleagues that leads to capacity building. Through the practice of distributed leadership, people at all levels engage in action and demonstrate leadership in their own areas of expertise.

The authors will review the current literature and conduct surveys to identify key leadership issues and needs of members of digital communities, and identify key informants for follow up focus groups and interviews, if required. Qualitative data will be collected through these interviews to identify key themes regarding the leadership requirements of digital communities. A number of trial digital communities are being established which will use the four-element model and be facilitated through the application of the leadership skills identified in the literature, and through the data from the surveys, focus groups and interviews.

Identification, evaluation and implementation of technologies to support the four element design will operate concurrently. Further surveys and interviews will be conducted post-pilot, with the findings used to develop a model for digital communities' leadership capacity building and the refining of the design elements for digital communities of practice.

Conclusion

The authors contend that leadership in the digital context must promote links between individuals within the community (enabling community to emerge), rather than focusing only on linking all individuals to a single collective entity, "the community". This implies that digital communities need to have mechanisms for members to share resources, ideas and expertise, thus building the capacity of its participants as well as building strategic collaborations within the community. Laycock (2012, para. 6) has noted that "many well-meaning leaders in fact strangle their communities through their zeal to direct all communication between participants through its platform" and believes that this is "unnecessary and denies the multiple ways in which we as human beings naturally interact". The aim is to foster a culture of shared ownership and commitment noting that there is strong evidence of the close relationship between shared leadership, responsibility and capacity building (Crowther, 2011). This enhances the capacity not just of one or two people but of many and enables a broad distribution of leadership functions, talents and responsibilities.

The authors will investigate the application of a four-element model, a number of identified leadership skills and range of technologies to determine which is most effective in providing a framework and platform for communication and collaboration to support the social architecture of the digital community. The project will address leadership questions and build leadership capacity for digital communities and has the potential to generate sectoral wide benefits by providing validated, generalisable examples and opportunities to influence practice.

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Author contact details:

Shirley Reushle, shirley.reushle@usq.edu.au
Jacquie McDonald, mcdonalj@usq.edu.au

Please cite as: Reushle, S.E., & McDonald, J. (2012). Digital communities: context for leading learning into the future? In M. Brown, M. Hartnett & T. Stewart (Eds.), *Future challenges, sustainable futures. Proceedings ascilite Wellington 2012*. (pp.761-764).

<https://doi.org/>

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