



# Refocussing support on locally connected, digitally enabled communities of practice

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Investigation of a new support model for professional development in the pedagogical use of technologies found that local communities of practice were preferred over a pan-university online community of practice. The support model was refocussed to digitally enable the development of locally connected communities of practice. This poster displays the two models, the research findings which supported their development, and recommendations for future developments.

**Keywords:** professional development, communities of practice, technology support

## Introduction

Introducing new technologies university-wide poses the problem of creating effective professional development opportunities which go “beyond the provision of technical information and training to encompass the development of a deeper understanding of the capability of learning technologies based on sound teaching and learning principles” (Gosper et al., 2011, p.92). A community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) approach to professional development offers the opportunity for community members to learn from practitioners who have developed that deeper understanding and to share their practice with others who can, in turn, learn from them.

## Description

Professional development in the pedagogically sound use of a video capture technology (Echo360) at the University of Canterbury was initially provided through a model of support centred on a digitally enabled online community of practice (CoP). An easily accessible online space, structured around common teaching and learning problems, was developed to encourage lecturers to connect with each other and to share their practice with colleagues from across the university. This top-down approach included shared examples of lecturers’ good practice solutions, with supporting explanations, alongside opportunities for engagement in forum discussions.

Research was conducted on the first six months of this model’s implementation (Tull, 2014). Qualitative data collected from a purposive sample of nine lecturers from across most colleges of the university, and quantitative data collected from the online space, gave little indication that an online community of practice had developed. A strong preference for interacting face to face, rather than with an unseen body of peers, was expressed by lecturers. Non-judgmental personal support from known colleagues was highly valued, and was identified as a low risk way for lecturers to improve their practice in the use of this video capture technology. Lecturers who worked in teams or collaborated with colleagues in their use of Echo360 spoke highly of the benefits of doing so. Small local CoPs had developed where practitioners had become known to each other, and these groups had been able to provide both support and encouragement.

The support model was refocused to take account of the research findings. New elements were incorporated alongside those of value from the initial model. Most significantly, rather than seeking to foster one pan-university online CoP, the new model supports practitioners in making connections within their local context. A restructured home page includes the addition of a ‘Colleague support list’ database, in which practitioners can volunteer their willingness to support others, and local practitioners offering support can be found. The database provides volunteers’ location information and preferred means of contact, as well as the areas of Echo360 use in which they are happy to provide collegial support. The areas are chosen from a prepopulated list, and those offering support can choose a primary support area and supplementary area(s). By enabling connections with ‘local’ users the site facilitates the development of local CoPs as a peer support network.

The success of this new support model is contingent on faculty being made aware of it, as well as on the degree to which practitioners choose to become involved. Alerting all Echo360 users to the existence of the online space, its purpose and its facility to enable local peer support, is recommended. Future community development should be driven by the practitioners, enabling the bottom-up development of digitally enabled, locally connected communities of practice.

## References

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