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The Changing Role of Tutors: Forming a Community of Practice in a Distributed Learning Environment

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Abstract

An evaluation of a distributed learning environment (DLE) of a regional NSW university provided the context to examine the changing role of tutors in new learning environments. It examines how the tutors started to form a community of practice in the first year of operation. The distance from the main campus made communication difficult for the tutors, lecturers and students and the use of information and communication technologies (ICT), at times, added to the challenge. This paper identifies ways that the tutor role changes in a DLE and how the development of a community of practice can support this change.

Introduction

An evaluation of the inaugural year of an interdisciplinary Arts degree examined the perceptions of the students, tutors and lecturers in order to capture the experience of teaching and learning in a new distributed learning environment. The evaluation did not seek specifically to examine the notion of learning communities, however the analysis of the data identified this as a theme and highlighted the importance of being part of a learning community for those involved, especially for the tutors.

This paper examines the learning community created at one of the centres through the perceptions of the students, tutors, and lecturers. Rather than focussing on the learner-teacher relationship, the paper focuses on how the tutors created a community of practice to inform their teaching practice and their social relationships with other members of the institution. It also examines the perceived challenges to using communication technology to support the new development with a view to expanding the learning community within and across the centres. Finally, it offers recommendations for future research on how learning technology can be better utilised to support the development of learning communities, specifically in a distributed learning environment.

Background

The major discourses identified in the literature as having significant impact on the changing face of higher education in Australasia include reduced funding by government bodies [17], [15]; competition

between institutions [3]; the globalisation of education [4]; the emergence of the need for lifelong learning with the consequent changing student profile [5]; the changing role of the academic [6] and the impact of emerging technologies on the provision of quality teaching and learning [7]. The impact these issues had on the University of Wollongong led to expansion to include a regional campus and access centres in order to increase access for students and to increase funding allocation. It also led to the development of an interdisciplinary arts degree, which moved beyond traditional methods of teaching and learning to incorporate new technologies including videoconferencing and web-based teaching and learning.

The degree and teaching methods

The first year of an interdisciplinary Bachelor of Arts (Community and Environment) is the focus of this research. This new degree is one of several degrees the University of Wollongong offers to students studying at the Shoalhaven Campus and at access centres in Bega and Batemans Bay. Lecturers for the subjects were based at the Wollongong campus and local tutors were located at each of the centres. Students were required to attend tutorial sessions either once per week or once per fortnight for each subject. Their learning was supported through such things as paper-based materials, video, videoconferencing and web-based content and/or communication.

The new degree required flexible teaching and learning methods to be incorporated in the subject design because of the distance to the new campus and access centres and the perception that technology could support teaching and learning in this new learning environment.

Research methodology

This study provided the context for a naturalistic evaluation [8] and was undertaken using a case study methodology [9] [10]. Data was collected through focus groups, interviews and surveys and analysed to identify major themes [11]. Whilst a review of the literature identified a number of national and international studies in the area, little could be generalised to this study in this specific context [12]; [13]; [14]. Perceptions of participants in this case were

quite different to perceptions of those in other cases, due to the difference in context. The focus was on the process of implementation that was unique to a particular institution, thus the implementation was viewed through the eyes of those involved, in order to understand their experience. The research was designed to improve institutional processes and to support further development of the Arts program in particular, but also to examine staff development needs. Therefore the study does not attempt to generalise the understandings to other contexts, though recommendations for more formal research were generated as a result of the study. In order to protect the anonymity of those interviewed, the specific centre for this study is identified as The Centre. The tutors, students and lecturers are identified by their role only and specific subjects are not identified.

Participants profile

There were a small number of students enrolled in Bachelor of Arts at the Centre, including part-time and full-time students, with an age range from 19 to 60. The students were predominantly mature-age students. Seven subjects were offered within the Arts degree and an elective could be chosen from within the Faculty of Commerce degree, which was also on offer at the Centre. There were six local tutors and one tutor, who was based at another centre. This tutor used technology and some face-to-face visits to support the tutorials. The majority of the tutors did not have teaching experience in tertiary education, though some had experience in vocational and secondary education areas, or in running workshops for community activities and groups. The lecturers or subject coordinators were all based on the main campus, an eight-hour return journey by road from the Centre. Two of the subject developers were on study leave, which meant their subjects were coordinated by experienced academics who had not been involved in the subject development. One of the other coordinators was a part-time lecturer and was not at work and contactable on the day the tutorials were held in the centres. Six of the lecturers/coordinators were experienced tertiary educators, though not necessarily in flexible teaching methods.

The nature of the community

The Centre is situated in a small, isolated rural town. Many of the tutors knew each other prior to the opening of the university centre through their involvement in protecting the environment, in political groups and in other educational contexts in their local community. The opening of a new tertiary education centre provided an opportunity for employment, for a support network for some for their postgraduate

studies and for their obvious commitment to their local community. They were keen to make a success of the Centre and were aware of the need for this if the Centre was to survive beyond the initial funding. At a tutor workshop they attended, prior to the opening, they identified 'strong relationships and personal support' as key factors in the success of the Centre. They also identified that the Centre should be "alive, vibrant and interesting" and that it should have an "awareness of a sense of belonging to the [Wollongong] campus."

The development of community would seem integral to achieving these goals but led to a number of questions for the researcher. What kind of community developed? How did it inform teaching practice? Who were the members? How can this membership be expanded? What role did technology play (if at all) in supporting the community?

Community in tertiary institutions is described variously in the literature as learning communities, professional learning communities [15] and communities of practice [16]. Palloff and Pratt [17] state "people seeking commonality and shared interests formed groups and communities in order to pursue the interests that distinguish them from other groups (p21)." Kim [18] asserts that "a community is a group of people with shared interest, purpose or goal, who gets to know each other better over time (p 28)." Both support the notion that people want to feel a sense of belonging and to connect for a greater purpose as lifestyle changes bring changes to the way we perceive family, neighbourhoods and towns. Community can also be described as a "dynamic whole" that emerges when a group of people share common practices, are interdependent, make decisions jointly, identify with something larger than the sum of their individual relationships, and make long term commitments to the well being of themselves, another and the group [17]. The notion of community, in this sense, is not new to the tutors at the Centre. However the development of a learning community in a new centre was something they had not been involved in before, and the incorporation of technology to support the community was also outside their experience, and for most required the development of new skills, with a little introductory support.

Community of practice is the term which probably best describes this kind of learning community. This involves people who share their expertise and experience, in this case for teaching, and regularly interact to enhance their learning in this area. This term is attributed to [19] to describe how people share their understandings of work, responsibility, and knowledge within the workplace. Wenger later identified that for this to happen three essential characteristics must be in place: mutual engagement, shared repertoire, and joint enterprise [16]; [20]. Mutual engagement implies that the members of the community are involved in shared activities, whilst maintaining their identity through developing social

relationships, and providing reciprocal and overlapping capabilities to the group. The boundaries and ideas about practice can be extended through joint enterprise as the members share a common purpose. A community negotiates meaning through its shared repertoire, that is the “pool of resources that members not only share but contribute to and therefore renew” [20] p 388).

Evidence of a Community of Practice

The tutors and the centre coordinator at this Centre formed a community of practice as they developed knowledge and understandings of the larger organisation of which they were a part. The opening of new centres required new policies and procedures to be put in place at the University. Despite several years of planning, there were many issues to be addressed in the first twelve months involving administration, technology, pedagogy and student support [21]. Whilst espoused administrative and pedagogical practice at the main campus appeared to work well, the actual practices, when used in distributed environments, did not. New knowledge, understandings and procedures are required for such initiatives and the tacit knowledge of those in Wollongong of how the system worked was not readily available to those at the new Centre. Consequently the ties between the members of this particular centre were strengthened through their isolation and their ability to support each other in the first few months after the Centre opened. A community of practice developed out of a need, a need to belong in a new learning environment, a need for a shared understanding of the practices at the distant campus so members could access knowledge and support as they required it, and a need for professional development to improve their teaching practice.

Various tutors describe their developing relationships in the face-to-face environment in the following extracts, and the level of trust that was developing:

I went through finding my own feet in it. I didn't quite know what was expected and I was thinking 'Oh, this is because I actually haven't done an arts degree – I've done a science degree' and so I talked a lot with (tutor), and (tutor).

(Tutor) and I have chatted over heaps – we felt we moved from tutoring to teaching, and we felt we had to move fast into that. The first few weeks, we thought we were in the role of tutors, and very quickly that wasn't enough. We had to actually teach!

So it was really left up to the tutors, and I ended up, just because I really wanted to do the right thing by the students and I wasn't sure whether I was being too harsh or too generous, I spoke to a tutor from the first session who looked over some

of the work, and we talked about what marks she would have given them.

Just, for staff development, I think that, for particularly for new tutors, with our training we didn't actually look at what we do on that first day. I mean, I worked it out by talking to other tutors and sort of did myself a kind of, a plan.

We just had this theorem on the board, we had half the commerce students in here trying to do it as well, and we still couldn't get the same answer as the computer. So fortunately (tutor) arrived, so I sort of, drawing on all the university resources available in (the Centre) and he came in and found our simple error in one column and away we went.

As they developed relationships within the Centre, they were able to develop their understanding and roles as tutors. The ties with the other centres were not as strong however:

We really haven't had a lot of contact, actually. I'd rung both other tutors, but they've not rung me. (Tutor) rang me back after I rang her, but they haven't really been pro-active. I tried to get a WebCT thing happening where our students met on line at a certain time, and they couldn't really join in through circumstance. I really think it needs to be a closer team between the tutors and between all of the students.

I spoke to another...the tutor from (other centre) for the same subject and she read a couple of the essays to compare them with her students so that was a bit of process which I had to work out...we had to work out ourselves, there wasn't any sort of centralised comparative exercise going on

Although technology, such as email, bulletin board and videoconference, was available to support communication, most did not use it for this purpose. As one of the tutors from the other centre stated; “I was in the classic terror mode and did not really understand (how to use computers).” Another stated “Yeah well I had a lot of trouble even finding out what my password was”. Certainly a need for training in using technology inhibited its use for communication and for improving teaching practice.

Another inhibitor included the tutors' experience in using these new technologies in their teaching:

Pretty early on we videoconferenced with (other centre), that went easily and well, but it was very tentative, you know, like, another time I'd know more how to...I'd try and get the two groups of students relating more to each other and build up a community feel between them...Oh, we didn't do that, it was more like 'hello, how are you' and, you know it was so new with the technology we weren't confident with that, but if thinking about the technology wasn't and issue then you could think more about the dynamics of what's going on.

Ties between the tutors at the Centre and the lecturers/subject coordinators were not very strong either. One tutor, when talking about the relationship with the lecturer stated:

A relationship where, if something was more solid in a relationship....that I could have just said look 'I'm a bit lost, I don't know what's required here' but when you can't even come up with a question...

Another tutor commented:

Not very regular contact – at the beginning we were sending email and we had a couple of phone conversations just to talk about the first tute and what he would like covered in that first tute, but I mean, my main contact with (name) has been just reading his responses to students on the bulletin board.

The tutors realised that there were other issues that impacted on those in Wollongong and were relieved that they were far enough away not to be involved:

There's a fabulous 'little community' feel in that place – that feels great. And, you know, we'd even comment about how busy and stressed that all seemed up there (in Wollongong), whereas while we were busy and a different kind of stress, it wasn't that pressure stress, that 'unsettling' locally. Yeah – so in a way we felt, yes, there are a few loose ends, but to me it felt like we've got such a much better atmosphere here, we feel like the privileged ones from my perspective. I hope further down the track, with (the Centre), it's a success and continues and strengthens, and I hope that work never impinges really.

There were some obviously strong ties developing with the tutors at the Centre, not surprising given that the Centre is small and isolated. Ties, albeit weaker ties, also exist with tutors at the other centres and with the institution and its members, however there is a strong need to improve these connections across the centres and with the institution.

At this stage the community is starting to form and recognise their potential as they explore their connectedness, define their joint enterprise and negotiate community [16]. By strengthening the links identified, particularly between the tutors and those at the other centres, and between the lecturers and the tutors, this small community has the potential to expand so that the members participate further in their professional development through their membership.

Expanding the community membership – how can technology help?

The tutors at this centre showed their willingness to include others in their community of practice. However, many were still novices at using the available technology and described their difficulties with using it in their teaching. Their skills improved greatly over the year of the study, so in future they could start to make more use of both

videoconferencing and web-based systems to develop their community of practice.

As the community grows, the members need to take the lead to instigate further communication with other tutors and with the lecturers. “Out of sight, out of mind” was a problem one lecturer identified. Increased numbers of students on the main campus, an increased workload and a requirement to research and publish has meant that lecturers have other constant and competing demands on their time. They may need frequent reminders and invitations to participate as a member of the community; occasional videoconferencing with the tutors could develop the social relationships and build the trust needed between the groups. The tutors themselves may benefit from a shared web space where they can talk about their teaching in a safe environment and share teaching materials. Stuckey, Hedberg and Lockyer [22] identify the hallmarks of communities of practice as

- A clear purpose driven by the members,
- employment of appropriate technologies and styles of communication,
- membership of a social network where their expertise, leadership, content and contributions are valued, and
- providing ongoing discussion, sharing of, and collaboration on, commonly valued things.

It is clear that the development of this community of practice has been driven by the needs of the members who value each other's contributions and their ability to share their knowledge and expertise. However there is a real danger that people in the centre may not expand their horizons and the potential of the group if the community doesn't include those from other centres, thereby compounding the sense of isolation for this distant centre. Relationship building in a distributed learning environment requires greater effort on the part of all of those involved. Leadership and planning by the members is required to encourage this development. The use of appropriate technologies for communication and sharing artefacts such as material on shared marking procedures could benefit the expansion of the community.

Technology can be used to strengthen the links between tutors and lecturers through such things as videoconference meetings to encourage the development of trust. Increased communication between tutors/lecturers through email, listservers could also serve to enhance this development. Finally a website could provide a place for community members to discuss teaching and learning strategies and to access information about teaching. Improved communication, supported by technology, will assist tutors to look outside their own centre to expand their knowledge and understanding of the tutor role, and also to provide them with opportunity for input to future development of the subjects, since they have the greatest opportunity for interacting with the students.

Conclusion

The Centre members have begun to develop a community of practice. Their enthusiasm and commitment have proven integral to the success of the first year of the new degree. If the institution can nurture and expand this enthusiasm through developing skills in using appropriate information and communication technologies, it will not only support the professional development of the community members but also highlight the role technology can play in their teaching and communication. A distributed learning environment requires people to change their practice. A community of practice may well provide an avenue to support people through this change by providing stronger links between all of those involved in teaching and supporting the teaching and learning activities. Further research on the changing tutor role and how learning technologies can be better used to support the growth of effective learning communities should identify useful strategies and also support innovation and change specifically in distributed learning environments.

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