Online Community Engagement through Simplicity, Relevance and Connection

Susan Tull

E-Learning Lab, School of Literacies and Arts in Education
University of Canterbury

This paper reports on the first stage of a phased approach to the development of an intervention which aims to support adult literacy educators in developing e-learning for their learners. The intervention is being implemented within an online environment created using Moodle, and studied using a design based research methodology. This initial iteration of the intervention was designed to encourage the members of the extant community of adult literacy educators to develop an online community, and to engage with the online environment. Engagement was encouraged though the facilitation of communications within this physically spread community, and the provision of online access to their community resources. Simplicity, relevance and connection were the elements found to be central to participant engagement within this first phase of the intervention.

Keywords: professional development, online community, design based research, e-learning

Introduction

An intervention to support the vital work of adult literacy educators, by enabling them to incorporate e-learning for their learners, is being developed using the learning management system Moodle. Its phased implementation will allow the environment to develop alongside the growing skills of those within the community it supports. A study of the intervention is being undertaken using a design based research approach, similar to the Integrative Learning Design Framework model proposed by Bannan-Ritland (2003), which allows for its collaborative development and widening scope. The phases of implementation will take place within the iterative cycles of design, use, evaluation and redesign of the study. Two theories underpin this intervention; the situated learning theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation developed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and the Learning/Adoption Trajectory of Sherry, Billig, Tavalin and Gibson (2000). Using a combination of these theories, to investigate how an online environment for adult literacy educators can support the development of e-learning for their learners, this research aims to develop a self sustaining model of professional development and relevant design principles.

This first phase of the intervention focused on supporting the development of an online community for the geographically spread members of an Adult Literacy Education Centre (ALEC), and their engagement within the Moodle environment. Future phases aim to develop the environment to encompass the provision of e-learning for their clients, alongside this community area, in such a way that an online community of practice develops. The ALEC at this time had a staff of twenty. The participants in this first phase of study consisted of the manager of the centre, the office administrator, and seventeen tutors working in three different types of

location. Tutors whose work was 'at base', each taught one class in a set classroom. 'Community' tutors taught small groups of clients in locations provided by community organisations. 'Workplace' tutors taught individuals or small groups of clients in locations provided by workplaces. Community and workplace tutors may have taught several groups in several different locations each week. A small group of tutors worked at the ALEC base developing resources for use by other organisations. The staff's initial engagement within the environment was encouraged though the facilitation of communications within this organisation, and the provision of online access to community resources. Simplicity, relevance and connection were the elements of the design and use of the intervention found to be central to engaging the ALEC staff with their range of needs and skills.

Simplicity

Interviews, site data analysis, and the designer's narrative journal indicated that several design choices had simplified the participants' introduction to the environment. Access to the Moodle site was given to staff only, so that they could focus on collegial interaction and collaboration within this new environment. The less complex 'student' level of access to the site was given to the majority of tutors, to help them engage within the site more easily. The designer's narrative indicated that this was done to encourage the tutors to actively take part in the site without being concerned about 'breaking' it, or having to learn too much before it was possible for them to participate. Tutors were able to view and download material made available to them, and contribute through forum posts and replies, but they could not make any changes to the site or upload content except within forums. The manager, office administrator, and four tutors who had added leadership responsibilities within the organisation, were given greater levels of access to allow them to take up their responsibilities within the online environment.

The simplicity of the design and navigation of the Moodle elements which were combined to create this environment, were successful in engaging the participants. Preece (2001) tells us that the "usability" of a site is largely dependant on the ease with which its users can find what they are looking for. The designer was very conscious of the need for participants to be able to easily navigate the site, and to be able to find the content they required. Keeping the environment simple accomplished this. As a tutor commented, "It's so useful, and a simple design, that it's a pleasure to use" (Participant G).

The ALEC Moodle site opens with a plain login 'Welcome' page from which members can access all areas in which they are enrolled, from a list on the left. All staff were enrolled in what was called the 'Tutors Only' space, which was to become the central point for staff in the Moodle site. The design of the Tutors Only space was kept as simple as possible. It consisted of three areas; the 'Main Page', the 'Resources', and the 'How to…' areas. Each of these areas was created using a Moodle 'course' and the designer provided consistent navigation between them at the top left of each area, to link them as one space.

Navigation, one of Preece's (2001) four design criteria for usability, was developed in this space to provide the clarity and simplicity most valued by participants. The collaborative nature of this design based research allowed the incorporation of tutors' suggestions for improvement, which highlighted their preferences for organisation in this space. "I think for me it's just that sense of clean and really simple with lots of transparency … and easy to follow, and I think the foundations of that are there. I suppose at the end of the day it's just being able to have those designated areas well marked" (Participant B). The changes made to the Main Page, following consultation with staff, were typical. This area was created with supporting textual instructions and an additional form of navigation, to aid new users. While initially this worked well, after a few months of use tutors felt that it cluttered the area, and they preferred the simplicity of the one form of navigation without the textual support.

One of the most crucial elements in participant engagement was the support to enable tutors to engage. One-to-one sessions and small group training were the preferred methods of face to face training, over larger group sessions, for both designer and participants. "We just need training, as far as I'm concerned, and not in a huge group" (Participant F). The designer noted that tutors using their own computers simplified the training process by focusing the learning on the site, rather than the equipment.

Sahin and Thompson (2007) found, in their study of technology adoption, that "there is a need to provide high quality resources for faculty to learn about technology in a self-directed environment" (p.182). Supporting resources, such as documentation on how to use the site and its tools, were provided within the 'How to…' area of the Tutors Only space. This area provided easily accessible just-in-time support for tutors who wanted, or

needed, to learn to use the site on their own. The support documentation was carefully structured in steps with accompanying graphics of the site itself. These documents, with their strong graphic element, were found to be very helpful by participants, especially the administrator who needed the broadest understanding of the site to support both her own use, and that of tutors who sought help from her.

> I learn by steps so I find your printouts really good. I can do anything as long as I have your printouts on how to do things… I know that a lot of the other tutors, that don't use computers a lot, do as well. Because it's so much easier to 'see' and 'do' than it is to listen for once and try to remember. (Participant S)

'Tutors Only' was designed as a functional work space. As such the designer gave it a clean, business-like format, with very few distractions. Through the interviews it became clear that the functionality of a simple design should be provided without making the site too plain. Preece (2001) includes an aesthetically pleasing design as one of the user satisfaction determinants of information design, and aesthetics were important to these participants too. For some staff the initial design was too plain and this proved counter-productive, "If I have too much white space and just words, I tend to just switch off a bit" (Participant A). A number of staff members showed a marked preference for a livelier space. "We should make it more colourful - that encourages me" (Participant E). "[It would be good to have] more images on it so that it's an exciting place to look at" (Participant M).

Relevance

Koch and Fusco (2008), from their work encouraging online community development within 'Tapped In', tell us that "getting started involves translating activities regularly conducted face-to-face into a form that works well online and serves a purpose" (p.10). Staff commented that having the weekly newsletter, and the forms and templates vital to the record keeping of the organisation available online, was very helpful for administration, and allowed them to be more self sufficient. "Just knowing that there is a central repository of current Unit Standards, and all forms that go with them, and I can just download them and print them, that's the shining thing for me" (Participant B). "I can go online to Moodle and know that what's there is the right version, the right thing to use. [I can] download it and use it confidently, so it's been massively useful in that sense" (Participant G). Having the documentation and resources relevant to the tutors' practice easily available in this online environment, not only encouraged engagement, but was seen as an advantage over the previous paper-based system, even by those who were initially reluctant to use it. This enthusiasm was however tempered with an awareness that the people responsible for keeping the resources up to date needed to be accurate in their work.

While the availability of resources was seen as one of the site's most positive contributions, the relevance of the resources was at times a matter for concern. For those tutors considering adding resources to the site, the biggest challenge was, "finding out what's relevant to other people" (Participant N). Concerns were expressed by tutors, that the resources they add may not be relevant in the future, or seen as relevant by others, particularly when they considered the wide variety of teaching content and contexts amongst the staff. "There's not a lot of things that we can put up that are generic for everyone" (Participant Y). This highlighted the importance of clear, simple organisation within the resource area of the site, which enabled relevant resources to be added in an easily accessible way.

Tutors have appreciated the ability the site gave them to share both information and opinions. Information was shared in the form of resources and suggestions of practical teaching methods, and opinions were shared in the form of encouragement and dialogue as well as constructive discussion of the issues they face. Tutors commented on the ability they now had to broaden their teaching practice by accessing resources and teaching strategies used by tutors from other parts of the organisation, and the recorded activity within the Moodle site shows this shared access. They also recognised the ability these shared resources have to provide new tutors with appropriate, useful resources, "I think it's a good place for new tutors to be able to look at things and say, 'Well, somebody's put it on there [Tutors Only], obviously they find it useful.'" (Participant O).

Not all tutors saw the site as something which was relevant to their work. "I'll use something that is relevant to me and is useful, and I haven't quite seen the relevance yet" (Participant N). Tutors, who did use the site regularly, commented that other tutors would increase their use of the site once they could see its benefits. They suggested that the site itself could be used to encourage further use. As one tutor put it, "Once they are [using it

more] there'll be more stuff there and there'll be more reason to go on and it will become more of what it's meant to become. It's a sort of chicken and egg situation" (Participant K). The relevance of the forums seemed to have been clearer to tutors and the choice to become actively involved, easier to make. "I'll browse the news, like the staffroom, but I usually go into it because I want work related, not personal … What's in the newsletter? What's happening in the resource site? And then I'm in and out" (Participant A).

A design decision made to encourage 'sociability' (Preece, 2001) was to force participant 'subscription' to all forums. This meant that a copy of all forum posts was emailed to all staff. The designer made this choice "to encourage people by letting them see what is happening in the forums" (Design Narrative, 24/6/10) while the community was being established. Many tutors have found that having the forum posts emailed to them meant they could easily ignore items which hold little relevance for them.

> [The email] is really helpful, because that reminds you that there is a space and you know what people are thinking. And you can sort of follow up with that. And you can think 'Well that's relevant to me', and yes, I'll go and perhaps fire off an email or go on there and go and check Moodle (Participant C).

These forum emails helped tutors to both be aware of what was happening within the community, and feel connected to it, without them having to remember to login and check recent activity. The emails also provided an easy electronic link to the site.

> I think the fact that we were notified of anything that went on there through email was a really good reminder for me to go back in to it … Now every time I get an email notification I go 'Oh, that's great' and you go back onto the Moodle site (Participant A).

Connection

Through their engagement in the 'Tutors Only' area tutors felt a growing awareness of each other in this widespread organisation. The potential the site has for helping them to grow closer as a community was recognised by staff. At the manager's request a section on the 'Main Page' was set aside to highlight achievement by staff and their clients. Tutors suggested using the site to help them learn more about each other and their roles within the community through the addition of staff details such as who they teach, what they teach, and their contact details. The connectivity available through the site also helped to improve face to face experiences within the wider community. As one tutor explained, "if you've had a few online conversations, or even dropped in a little on online conversations of these people then when you see them again you feel a little bit more connected, you know, a little bit more comfortable around them" (Participant G).

During this phase of the research 'Tutors Only' was also seen as a way of drawing the individuals in the community together and keeping them connected. Many tutors appreciated having this new ability to easily keep up with events and information. "Keeping me in touch really….It probably wouldn't have happened before" (Participant C). "It just puts your finger on the pulse really, of what's going on" (Participant T). "Being able to tune in to the buzz of people communicating through Moodle is quite fun, and quite informative, so it adds to my sense of communication with people I don't see" (Participant G).

Enabling better connections between the tutors by facilitating more open communication was an important step in increasing engagement and aiding the development of a community within the environment. Network diagrams of the forum discussions have shown that the connections during this phase of the research are very much centred on the manager, and highlight the importance of engaging organisational leadership in developing this online community. The manager appreciated the ability the site gave to communicate openly with staff because it was "a more public forum for people to see each others' ideas and become more of a group that way" (Participant M). The three parts of the organisation did not often work together, which made it difficult for them to feel as though they were one community. "We were overdue for something to pull us all back with something central as a focus. We have been desperate for something for a long time" (Participant O). 'Tutors Only' has been recognised as having the potential to provide this. "[It's] bringing more communication between the 'community', the 'at base' and the 'workplace' [tutors], … Everyone sort of did their own thing … but now it's come together" (Participant S).

Future Directions

Koch and Fusco (2008) state that, "Demonstrating the immediate value of an online [Community of Practice] CoP is crucial: the majority of people will not spend time now if a CoP only has future value" (p.6). The site activity logs and statistics showed a gradual increase in activity within the site and a growing level of engagement by staff in both its use and its development during this phase of the research. However, while the amount of activity within the site continues to increase, it appears unlikely that the depth of participant engagement will develop much further until the intervention becomes more relevant to their practice. As the intervention progresses to the next phase of its development, and some tutors move into the Learning/ Adoption Trajectory stage of Teacher as Adopter (Sherry, Billig, Tavalin, & Gibson, 2000) the Moodle site will incorporate the provision of e-learning for their adult literacy clients, and should become more relevant. As a tutor commented, "If there was some way that our learners could use the space, I could see heaps of use for it, but … it's not there" (Participant Y). In the next phase of the intervention it will be.

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Author contact details:
Susan Tull susan.tull@canterbury.ac.nz

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