Towards community based learner support: A case study

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This paper reports on the preliminary results of a heuristic evaluation of one learner support community in the BEd(Teaching) Primary programme in the College of Education at Massey University. It examines the use of an online community structure to support a programme delivered in blended modes for both internal (face-to-face) and external students. The presentation includes a description of the context for the case, the development of a learner support community including key feature of the community design and development process and issues arising in the early phases of implementation of the design.

Keywords: online community, learner support, community development

Introduction

This paper focuses on the provision of learner support though the creation of an online professional learning community which serves the BEd(Teaching) Primary programme in the College of Education at Massey University. The presentation includes a description of the context for the case, the development of a learner support community including key feature of the community design and development process and issues arising in the early phases of implementation of the design.

Background: Learner support

Although formal learner support structures are generally considered an artefact of distance education, learner support is becoming more common in a range of formal and informal learning situations. *Learner support* refers to the process of meeting the needs that learners have related to learning. It includes "all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process" (Thorpe, 2002, p. 108). In contemporary educational programmes, learner support adds value for learners by addressing their needs and promoting learning experiences which are more personally relevant and allow learners to define learning in their own terms.

The use of networked computing and communications technologies has created opportunities for the provision of learner support (Kehrwald, 2005). With emphasis on social activity and social connectivity through interpersonal interaction in the form of dialogue, productive collaboration and the development of social structures (functional networks, groups), learner support in online and blended learning has shifted away from a systems-based model of support to an active (or interactive) learner-centred view which is consistent with the constructivist and other socially situated pedagogies that feature prominently in blended learning. More specifically, blended learning which involves networked technologies creates opportunities for support in the workings of networks of individual social actors which function as online learning communities. These systems place greater responsibility for learner support in the hands of participants in the learning community. Moreover, they leverage the power of networked communications technologies to provide a powerful combination of supportive community infrastructure and a responsive peer group.

The design and development of productive online communities is informed by a growing body of literature which aligns community development with the purposes of education and learning. Generally, functional, productive communities are seen to have the following characteristics:

- *Commonality*, including shared histories, knowledge, values, beliefs and purposes. This includes common tools and communicative techniques which constitute common practice. Commonality binds members to one another (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Hung & Chen, 2001; Reil & Polin, 2004).

- *Situativity*, including a shared context which contains interconnected webs of relationships among individuals, practices, groups and particular events. Situativity implies context in which meanings are made through the identification of relationships between the constituent elements (Barab, MaKinster, & Scheckler, 2004; Hung & Chen, 2001; Reil & Polin, 2004).
- *Interdependence*, which is predicated on a variety of particular needs, skills and abilities within the group and creates both need and opportunity for interactions with others (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Barab, Kling, & Gray, 2004; Hung & Chen, 2001, 2002).
- *Infrastructure*, which includes the processes, roles, rules and tools which support and facilitate the processes which define the activity of the group (Hung & Chen, 2001, 2002).
- *Methods of reproduction*, which allow the community to endure. These include the recruitment and retention of members, the movement of members from the periphery to central positions in the community and the evolution of community activity over time (Barab, MaKinster et al., 2004; Hung & Chen, 2002; Reil & Polin, 2004; Wenger, 1998).

Taken together, these characteristics inform the development of community structures in the service of learning.

Posing the problem

A community-based learner support model has significant implications for the design and development of community based blended learning systems (Kehrwald, 2007). In addition to attention to (a) technological aspects of design which create functional, user-friendly environments and (b) pedagogical concerns such as an emphasis on learning as a participative social activity in a rich, authentic context, designers who wish to employ community models of learner support also need to develop (c) consideration of support in terms of both static and dynamic support structures which meet learners' needs and (d) community structure and function in the creation of vibrant communities. In order to achieve the aim of high quality learner support for blended learning, educators and education providers must consider community models and explore the functioning of productive communities to identify supportive structures which can be incorporated into designs for more supportive online learning communities.

Approach and method

The following is a case study of the design, development and preliminary implementation of an online community to serve the learner support needs of a whole programme. The approach taken in this case study is that of heuristic evaluation in which usability problems are identified with the intention of improving design (Neilson, 1994). In this approach, evaluators apply a set of recognised principles to judge the usability of particular technology-mediated systems. The principles applied in this heuristic evaluation are the characteristics of functional community structures identified above (Commonality, Situativity, Interdependence, Infrastructure and Methods of reproduction). These were applied to a formative heuristic evaluation of the programme support community online environment for the BEd(Teaching)Primary. The evaluation considered patterns of activity of students, teaching staff and support staff within the online environment and compared them against intended patterns and levels of activity from the community design working party.

Case Study: BEd(Teaching)Primary

The BEd (Teaching) Primary is a four-year pre-service teacher education programme at Massey University. As a result of a programme review in 2005/6, the programme was targeted for redevelopment. One of the recommendations of the review was a move from functionally parallel internal (on campus) and external (distance education) delivery options to a fully blended learning situation in which internal and external students shared a common set of electronic and print-based learning materials and a common online learning environment. As part of the redevelopment, the programme implementation committee identified an opportunity to shift from a course-based to a programme-based infrastructure to (a) improve the quality of delivery through the standardisation of design, development and delivery mechanisms across the programme (b) realise efficiencies in the delivery of programme-specific content (c) enhance the creation of context and situatedness of programme content through the creation of a programme community and (d) ensure equitable access to support across the programme. A working party was established to design, develop and implement a central online community for the programme.

Development of the online community

Informed by the framework above for the characteristics of functional community (commonality, situativity, interdependence, infrastructure, methods of reproduction), the working party conceptualised and development the central online community in the following ways: *Commonality* was achieved through the shared purposes within the community stakeholder group and the identification of particular topical activities (e.g. needs for support, teaching experience days, community service days) which were relevant across course and year cohorts within the programme. The intent of the design was to get stakeholders to identify themselves with the new programme and catalyse cooperative and collaborative activity through the realisation of common goals within the programme. *Situativity* was supported by both the creation of a virtual space within the learning management systems and the identification of programme-specific contextual elements such as programme documents, programme-centred discussion facilities and messages from the programme coordinator which were relevant to all programme stakeholders. *Interdependence* was achieved through tacit and explicit acknowledgement of common needs which were addressed with a central programme resource. These included reference to cohorts with the programme, conceptual strands which crossed year groups and the establishment of mentor-mentee relationships between members of different year groups. It also include collaboration between students on issues of learner support in the answering of support requests and the provision of affective support within the ongoing discussions in the community space. Community *infrastructure* was created by a combination of participant roles; artefacts and other tools (communications tools, electronic forms, programme documents) which supported and structured participant activity; and the establishment of protocols for behaviour, accountability mechanisms, policies, procedures and other forms of 'rules' sought to encourage 'on task' activity and promote productivity within the community. *Methods of reproduction* were related to mechanisms for memberships and participation of all stakeholders in the programme (teachers, students, support staff, invited guests). This was supported by the progression of year cohorts and the entry of a new group of first-year students at the beginning of each academic year.

The community was established in an online space within the programme's learning management system. Stakeholders were 'enrolled' in the community automatically following enrolment in any of the courses within the programme. The virtual space was structured according to a set of topics related to general categories of activity within the community: a 'getting started' section, programme business, the common room, the whanau (family) community, learner support, the student lounge, the notice board and a section for professional resources. Within each section of the community, a combination of static and interactive resources were includes or added progressively and dynamic content was generated via ongoing communication and interaction amongst the group. From the outset, teaching and support staff assumed facilitation roles in sections related to their respective areas of expertise.

Issues arising

In evaluating the success of the design and development of the programme community in the first year of implementation, the community characteristics framework used to inform the design was applied to the evaluation of the programme community system in operation. In many ways, the programme community can be considered a success. However, as a result of the heuristic evaluation conducted at mid-year, a number of issues have come to light regarding the infrastructure of the community in general and the roles of participants in particular.

First, while participation by students is increasing in the first year of implementation, students have not been afforded the opportunity to play leadership roles within the community. They are relegated to relatively low power, low status roles which do not allow them to take responsibility for their own learning through activity within the community. As a result, they often become consumers of information rather than contributors to the collaborative production of information. There is limited evidence of peer support or collaborative activity within the programme community. Unless students are given a greater stake in 'their' programme community, the community concept may be reduced from productive collaboration to superficial interaction and information sharing.

Second, amongst staff-stakeholders in the programme, while some have taken on learner support roles within the community as part of their professional responsibilities there has been limited participation by other stakeholders in the programme, including teaching staff. This is attributed to a combination of factors including (a) lack of explicit role identification within the community, including lack of community leadership, (b) conflict between traditions teaching roles within individual courses and new teaching roles in collaborative teaching teams within the programme and (c) limited sense of

commonality with students in the programme as evidenced by an 'us and them' mentality. In short the concept of 'community' is undermined by limited staff presence in the online community space.

Third, and following the two issues above, students have increasingly come to use the programme community to bring course-specific issues to light and see guidance from support staff on course specific issues. While this provides an important outlet for such issues, it has shifted learner support roles from teaching staff to support staff and disconnected teaching staff from their students. Given the low level of teaching staff presence and participation in the online community, there is danger of emphasising the 'us and them' relationship between students and teaching staff.

Recommendations

Together, these issues highlight disconnect between the intent of the programme community developers and operation of the community. The community has not realised the 'new' vision of an active learner-centred form of learner support which involves learners in the development of supportive social networks and promotes interdependence. While the factors which underpin this situation are beyond the heuristic evaluation, there is evidence that status quo practices have been transferred to the new environment and that all stakeholders, but particularly teaching staff, have not reconceptualised their roles and responsibilities in the online community.

Recommendations for the improvement of the existing community structure include:

- Define explicit roles for both teaching staff within the programme community which emphasise power sharing and the operationalisation of participatory approaches to learner support within the programme.
- Define roles which empower students and let them share responsibility (and reward) within the programme community, then identify students who are willing and able to contribute to the ongoing development of the community.
- Emphasise rules (protocols, policies, etc) which appropriately divide learner support activities between the programme community and individual courses. These should follow the purposes of the programme community as a functional professional network which provides benefit for its members whilst also requiring commitment from them.

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Please cite as: Kehrwald, B. (2008). Towards community based learner support: A case study. In *Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology? Proceedings ascilite Melbourne 2008*. http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/melbourne08/procs/kehrwald.pdf