



Professional development and Web 2.0, can the space make a difference?

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A professional development (Summer School) with over two hundred teachers of English participating in the activity for over six months, was supported by an online social software website. The employment of Web 2.0 technologies to facilitate the delivery of the summer school was reasonably successful, but other benefits were realised. This poster presentation will show how scaffolded learning along with new experiences and knowledge, can potentially have added long-term value when sustained in an authentic, supportive learning environment.

Keywords: professional development, interaction, learning environment, web 2.0, social software

Introduction

Learning is a complex activity and can take place in a number of forms and settings - actually learning can happen anywhere and at anytime. In 2008 a professional development activity was undertaken over an extended period of time that involved over 200 participants from all over Australia. The choice of software platform to support this activity was an important one, and was based on purpose, needs, functionality, accessibility and available support. A social software site was established to support this activity as "a space for participants to get to know one another, to access resources and materials, to share information and to participate in the extension programme once the summer school finishes." (Summer School website introduction). The exposure to new technologies and tools, as well as having the opportunity to learn how they worked, added value to the experience of participating in the activity and enabled some powerful learning by the participants.

The context for the project: What happened and why

The Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR - formerly DEST) called for tenders in late 2007 for the development of the Summer Schools for Teachers. The Summer School was aimed to provide teachers with the opportunity to access professional learning to enhance their knowledge and skills in one of the priority subject areas of literacy and numeracy, English, mathematics, science and Australian history. Deakin University, (in conjunction with Murdoch University and the Australian Association for the Teaching of English [AATE]) was successful in attracting the funding to organize and deliver the Summer School for teachers of English.

The Summer School was to provide teachers of English with the opportunity to focus on key issues and debates confronting teachers of English in the twenty-first century. The Summer School offered a range of keynote presentations from outstanding national and international speakers, forums, breakout sessions, computer lab-based work, social excursions, opportunities for informal contact and networking, and an extension programme. The Summer School consisted of five modules: Leading Change; Literature and the Canon in the Twenty-First Century; Multiliteracies, Multimodality and Design; Children's and Young Adult Literature; and Commonality and Assessment.

Putting it all together: What worked and how

The social software application decided on was a Drupal and the university already had some programming expertise to help with the development of script for managing user registrations. While

there was a lack of experience and knowledge of the system, the project team was committed to providing a well-developed 'space' where participants could see an overview of the program, be able to access material and communicate freely with others.

A programmer was able to develop a script that exploited some functionality within the system to enable us to email all participants with an invitation to register, set their password, and fill out their profile. Participants were able to log into the website before the summer school began and were encouraged to complete a profile and access readings before the official beginning of the summer school. Facilitators were also keen to support participants and acknowledged problems and frustrations while providing a calming influence for those users who were having difficulties. McConnell (2006, p. 189) writes "that the cornerstone of online learning communities lies in the presence of 'socially close, strong, intimate ties', the developing of trust, and shared values and social organization." Experienced users were also willing to provide help and guidance to newcomers and this instilled a welcome sense of community and collegiality that supported the common outcomes and purpose of the group (Chalmers & Keown, 2006).

The experience: What we learned

To determine whether the site was successful in achieving the goals of supporting the professional development activity and developing a community of learners, an online survey was collected that had a 40% response rate from participants. Key indicators showed that on a scale of 1-5 (with 5 being strongly agree) participants (n=78) thought that the site was suitable for 'supporting the professional development activity' at a mean of 4.32 for the site's 'effectiveness in creating a sense of community' at a mean of 4.01. While these factors may indicate a level of success, there were a number of factors that made it work.

As can be seen in the following comments, participants were able to highlight aspects of their experience that helped achieve positive outcomes. When asked to respond what they thought about whether the website had the capacity to support community, participants said that;

- 'both social and professional networking was possible',
- liked the 'facilitators' quick and engaging responses',
- the ability to 'read responses from other participants and the facilitators enhanced understanding'
- I 'felt a part of a group with common interests, goals', and
- the site ensured the 'whole experience was both very personal and rewarding'.

Should universities consider taking this professional development model that enables a longer time frame with the ability to develop a community of learners? Effective learning often requires a relationship and an extended period of time interacting with others can develop the circumstances where learners feel comfortable, supported and are open to being challenged in ways that help their acquisition of new knowledge. The ability of communication, sharing and feedback allows for more voices be heard and this can be confirming for those who deem themselves as novices or students compared with facilitators and experts.

Conclusion: Where to from here?

The capacity for applications such as Drupal to provide the structure to support a community of practice such as teachers of English, ensure that the value for participants can be more than the sum of individual parts. "The activities of a community of practice differ along several dimensions – face-to-face: formal to informal; public to private ... These activities form an ecology of interactions that provide value on multiple levels." (Snyder & Wenger, 2004) We have seen in this professional development activity that these conditions have been met and that participants may have benefitted from the synergy provided by the range of functionality to support their communication and online activity. The Summer School site was able to support the activities (such as discussion, reflection, development of action/research plans) required to work through the modules as well as subsidiary activities (such as social networking and communication, sharing of resources and learning) that develop the community and lead to deeper understanding of how the environment could support learning.

Through the experience of this project, we've come to understand that the ability to participate in the use of these technologies provides the user with a new understanding of the capacity of social software to facilitate the contribution, connectivity, and collaboration between participants. The ability to contribute (rather than just consume) content of an online environment is an important factor in maintaining the interest, value, and validity of participants in a professional development activity such as the summer

school. Future considerations will be focussed on whether this model would be useful for in-house professional development and that longer-term projects might be a more suitable means of providing deeper, more contextual learning. This could be done via such activities as course re-design or development that are undertaken through a collaborative online environment supported with appropriate scaffolding by learning designers and technologists.

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