

Cultural Sensitivity in Voluntary Virtual Professional Development Communities

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Abstract: This paper explores some of the issues in working across time and space boundaries for professional development of online educators. It focuses on voluntary aspects of professional development within the context of networked learning communities. It also places an emphasis on ways of respecting and acknowledging cultural and individual difference within such voluntary communities in ways that also respond to the wider needs of others in the community. A sampling of current practice in networked learning communities is offered as a backdrop to a more detailed review of our own collaborative practice and the development of the World Association for Online Education (WAOE) as one example of a virtual community. As a way of describing our design and response to cultural diversity that exists within our community each of us also offers our own individual 'story' of our involvement in the collaborative development process. This is offered to illustrate the way that our provision will function and also acknowledge ourselves as a sub-community seeking to research and understand our own collaborative practice.'

Introduction

This paper considers professional development for the use of technology in teaching and learning. It considers the idea of professional development within a voluntary context. It offers a view of voluntarism as a specific self-directed approach to collaborative professional development that seeks to address the post-modern problem of disruption to careers and lives. This is a disruption that also fractures personal and social identity. We believe that voluntarism in online communities may offer a learning opportunity and a vehicle that might acknowledge and seek to understand and respect individual and cultural difference.

At another level this paper is very much about a small group of highly distributed individuals who, having found each other on the Internet, developed a shared interest and need that resulted in a particular product: an online course design. This paper is

therefore a witness and record of a 6-month period of collaboration using e-mail, MOO, and courseware tools. More importantly, it provides the perspectives of those involved by recording their experiences and observations. This use of a biographical approach is appropriate to the research of ourselves as a culturally diverse, self-directed and highly dispersed voluntary learning community.

The paper begins with a sampling from current practice in the development and delivery of professional development communities in networked environments. This review is used to highlight the collaborative nature of much of this provision that in turn identifies the ability to collaborate as a professional development need. More importantly, this review provides the context and background for a discussion of our own practice in seeking to develop our own online community for others interested in cross-cultural diversity within networked learning as well as ideas around voluntarism collaboration and self-direction in networked environments.

Set against this background, a description of the work of the World Association for Online Education (WAOE) as a voluntary and virtual organisation interested in learning and technology is provided. The WAOE is a mutually supportive virtual organisation that seeks to promote and develop a cross-cultural view of learning within virtual environments. Respect and sensitivity to difference is at the heart of our activities in recognition of the highly distributed and optional nature of the membership.

The World Association for Online Education (WAOE)

The WAOE (<http://www.waoe.org>) is a non-profit public benefit corporation registered in the state of California. However, membership spans five continents without being dominated by any geographical region. The WAOE is mostly a virtual association serving the needs of academics and educators concerned with turning online education into a professional discipline. The WAOE focuses on combining dedication to online learning with social and cultural exchange. The objectives and purposes of the WAOE explicitly promote humanistic ethics and global collaboration in online education, specifically:

- (i) to maintain a global perspective as a world organisation, supporting multi-lingualism and multiculturalism in online education, preserving human rights to diversity and mutual respect despite differences, and encouraging intercultural sensitivity and world reconciliation through intercultural communication among global citizens,
- (ii) to be as inclusive as possible in scope, serving the aspirations of all members and working for equitable access to online education and to membership.

For more information see: <http://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/seehaferj/waoe/bylaw.htm>

For the Online Educators Course design, recently piloted by WAOE members in four countries, a collegial virtual learning environment was sought where educators could learn from each other globally in mutual respect. Thus the Online Educators Course constitutes one manifestation of collaboration towards the WAOE's stated goals.

Review of Networked Learning Communities

This section covers activities and resources that are provided in an open-ended form of provision. This form of networked professional development is made up of a fluctuating membership and one that is often composed of participants from all sectors of education. They may also involve students as well as staff. These communities are often working in online environments that offer a range of tools as well as offering events and other resources. Above all, they offer a sense of continuity or persistence beyond a single course.

There are examples of online communities constructed within a single institution. One such example is at California State University where an online environment was set up to support collaboration between teaching staff, students and schools so that everyone could experiment and explore issues and needs together (Casey, 1997). This project ran for one year and was reported as successful with people sharing ideas and experiences freely. This kind of example hints at ways in which a cross-sectional audience of teachers, tutors and students might collaborate to explore different issues and opportunities. A similar example was set up at the University of Ohio that also involved scheduled weekly online meetings (Hall and Gathergood, 1996).

There are other examples of online communities that are constructed and managed between different institutions. The TeleLearning Professional Development School in Canada is interesting for the way it works across institutional boundaries (Breuleux *et al.*, 1998). It brings together Faculties of Education at different universities in an online learning community space. This inter-institutional community had different institutions taking different roles and responsibilities according to different areas of expertise.

Other examples work across different sectors of education. An example here involved collaboration between the University of North Carolina and Maths school teachers elsewhere in that state seeking to develop innovative teaching practices and explore the outcomes together (Shotsberger and Spell, 1996). The TappedIN project (Schlager, 1999) also offers an online environment that combines both real-time, and asynchronous technologies, and includes the provision of online events and individual private spaces. These services are free of charge. In this instance the use of the online space is available to anyone from anywhere with an interest in education. The project has constructed its community from different sectors of education and brings together teachers in schools, tutors in higher education and colleges as well as management representatives. Roles and responsibilities for teaching and support are also shared amongst providers and members of the community space.

Although communities take many forms they can usefully be divided into those with closed or limited participation and those operating an open-door policy. Of those allowing anyone to participate we begin to recognise the development of voluntarism in networked professional development. This is where people can be entirely flexible about their use of the facilities, make no reservations, pay no fees and participate at whatever level they wish anywhere they wish.

The NetLinkS Project offered a range of resources, tools and events online and although some of these events were for a closed audience others were open to anyone interested or involved in the topics being explored (Levy *et al*, 1996). People participating in the list based discussions for instance were free to drop in and out of the activities as they wished and members were drawn from different countries and institutions. In an extension of this idea of voluntarism in online professional development we can also see evidence of it from the providers' perspective. The TappedIN example is interesting in the way that many of the online support staff are also volunteers marks this example out as distinctive in ways that will be discussed later below.

At another level, course teams, support teams and service providers often recognise themselves as learning communities seeking to explore and understand their collaborative practices and using the network to provide for others and to support and research their own activities. Due to the number of tasks involved, online communities are nearly always managed by teams and these teams are often highly distributed. We might think of these teams as sub-communities of collaborative providers.

The providers of the TappedIN service, for instance, are highly organised and have a duty rosta to provide online help and support for all visitors to the real-time environment. Each of these providers in turn has access to a set of resources to support them in guiding others including various guides and tutorials from a virtual vending machine and further support is offered to individuals involved in providing that support through virtual meetings.

The LabNet Project offered a similar community-development idea but one focused upon those interested or involved in Maths and Science (Moscella and Di Mauro, 1995). This is an example of a highly distributed community operating at different levels. Each individual in the support team was involved in liaison with a local group of schools over the use of technology. Those involved in providing the support were themselves a learning community and very specific strategies were evolved for collaboratively sharing and reflecting on their support practice. Elsewhere, in an on-campus context, Sherry also recognises and highlights the learning opportunities for collaborative providers to work as a sub-community within an institution (Sherry, 1996).

This sampling of current practice in networked professional development communities brings a number of aspects into view. First is the practice of working within a defined boundary in a communal manner as in the cases of intra-institutional communities. As an extension of this there are similar closed communities working across different sectors of education and between different institutions. There is increasing recognition that providers constitute sub-communities of learners and methods of researching their practice are being developed. Finally, there is an emerging trend of voluntarism in networked professional development. This means voluntary participation and voluntary support/provision. The WAOE, as a voluntary virtual self-help organisation are very much aware of this and we are seeking to develop methods of providing for others as well as ourselves whilst recognising the temporary nature of some people's involvement.

From the examples above, it is reasonable to understand voluntary participation in networked professional development communities as one manifestation of self-directed learning within a community and as a response to the disruption of post-modernity. The

WAOE recognises this potential for collaborative and individual self-direction in a voluntary professional development community. What follows is a review of our attempts to design a provision for others and an attempt to research our own collaborative experience in doing so. We use biographical methods as a research method for looking at our design practice to point to a sensitivity in researching a diverse group working voluntarily together. As a way of describing our design and response to cultural diversity that exists within our community each of us offers our own individual 'story' of our involvement in the collaborative development process.

Towards the Development of an Online Learning Community

The History and Context of the Development of the Course Design

With a developing understanding of what it means to learn online, educators can more effectively use various technologies. The Online Educators Course design is a direct result of the WAOE's efforts to meet members' professional development needs in this area. For educators wishing to gain professional development experience in online learning, using the technology — learning online — is the best way to learn about its potential (Baird and Monson 1992, p. 69). The WAOE itself is an ongoing opportunity for professional development; its membership comprises a resource of networked educators. Learning networks are an important part of ongoing professional development, allowing educators "to stay abreast of developments in the field and to gain access to peers and resources relevant to their work. Global learning networks composed of professionals from all parts of the world enrich the world's knowledge, enabling those in the Third World to access information, peers, and expertise and facilitating two-way flows of information and ideas, rather than the one-way flow in which a foreign expert brings or transfers knowledge" (Harasim et al, 1995, p. 245).

The WAOE's directive to acknowledge multiculturalism within globally distributed learning networks is an important step towards ensuring that there is a free flow and interchange of information regarding online learning, as "learning networks enable global collaborations. The opportunity for cross-cultural global contact can help to build mutual respect, trust, and the ability to work together" (Harasim et al, 1995, p.275). There is significant potential for online learning networks to effect broad, global changes in education. However, there are many issues related to the economics of access that can prevent citizens of developing nations from participating with parity in these kinds of learning network processes. It is true that "the nature of networking technologies tends to democratise participation and enable increased interaction among learners and their facilitators/ teachers. But the democratic potential of networks is not guaranteed" (Harasim et al 1995, p. 277), precisely because there are many nations, groups, and peoples who simply cannot afford the investment needed to get online and access these learning environments.

A notable feature of online learning is that it allows for place-independent learning. The intellectual apparatus of education within the online setting can be constantly updated and adapted to the needs of a particular community, regardless of its geographic location. In fact, "learners find that the flexibility of the asynchronous and place-independent CMC [computer mediated communication] access offers a bridge between learning

and its application, between theory and practice, between the "school" and the workplace" (Harasim *et al*, 1995, p.111). This interactive praxis of ongoing professional development creates a room for learning that is always open (provided there is access to appropriate technological resources). Sharing human resources ensures the success of collaborative learning in conjunction with physical infrastructure: "transfer, what we are trying to do with the technology of distance education, is not simply moving technology from one place to another. It is adapting the technology, the knowledge, to a different setting" (Holloway and Ohler, 1991, p. 262). This is a key point for the Online Educators Course design. The adaptive pedagogy is the technology of learning itself — learning about learning online while cultivating the virtual community. Within online learning networks, "friendships are formed as the network becomes a 'place' to share insights and concerns, problems and solutions, enthusiasms and fears" (Harasim *et al*, 1995, p.32). This 'place' is the community of course participants, collapsing 'place' as a geographical location and creating an interactive pedagogy as a locus of educational identity formation. "Computer conferences should be thought of as spaces that can be shaped by topical structuring and sequencing to form an educational environment" (Harasim *et al*, 1995, p. 139). It is this idea of space (worlds constructed in words within a text-based medium) that constitutes a challenge to centre-periphery models of intellectual exchange. Participant-learners construct the learning culture on an equal footing, and participate in creating the textual space where the interaction takes place in an open, active learning environment. Building a community in an open learning context fosters a self-reflexive posture of peer evaluation and cultural exploration. (Please see <http://edtech.oulu.fi/t3/wp05/material/intro/p2.htm>)

The WAOE recognises that members work across cultural and physical borders, and this is reflected in the collaborative tutoring model. Collaborative tutoring is "active rather than passive learning," (Harasim *et al*, 1995, p. 275), and "is premised upon a learner-centered model that treats the learner as an active participant, interacting with others in the group" (*ibid.*, p.276). This breaks down traditional barriers to learning and communication, instead emphasising process over product, a continuous educational (re)definition that takes place in the Online Educators Course design. Global participation is invited in the Online Educators Course with a view to collapsing any centre-periphery power structure resulting from unequal access to computer technology. The course content is not based on information imparted from an assumed centre to a periphery, but rather from globally distributed educators themselves; that is, their collaboration in mutual respect is the focus of the course. There is never a static body of knowledge that must be "possessed" in order to pass the course, as the course participants constitute the material – a virtual reality in the sense that this material is not really material at all, but rather a fluid negotiation of identity (evaluation, formation, education) within the electronic infosphere. While the WAOE does not presuppose that online education is simply a good in itself, the Online Educators Course provides a vehicle to experiment with the technologies available and to assess their appropriateness in achieving pedagogical goals across cultures.

The Course Design Details

The ability to work collaboratively is a key skill for networked teaching and learning (see for example, Sherry, 1996; Tompkins, 1997). Inrecognition of this need, the course design offers a collaborative, experiential approach to understanding and working in a dispersed teaching team. It is also an online apprenticeship, as learners experience the course to understand the content and structure before perhaps having an opportunity to apply their learning from the course in tutoring roles as they support another generation of learners.

As learners, the participants proceed through the course and discuss concerns about online team teaching as well as completing related activities in each unit. Having completed the course, participants are invited to become part of the teaching team (subject to their having satisfied the assessment conditions) in order to teach what they have experienced to the next generation.

The Course Structure

The course contains a set of 5 online units that model different online teaching and learning strategies along with a discussion space. During the 16-week course, real-time chat sessions are also held whenever required.

Unit 1 : Acclimatisation and introductions

Unit 2 : Collaborative Tutoring

Unit 3 : Reflecting Upon Real-Time Sessions

Unit 4 : Online Guest Expert/Case Study

Unit 5 : From Learning to Teaching

Assessment

Participants are required to complete a written report discussing their experiences during the course and setting this experience in the context of their own working lives. This contribution is then made publicly available for all future generations of course participants in the Library of Experience. Participants must complete the activities and the reflective report before being eligible for consideration to join the tutoring team next time round.

Ourselves as a Learning Community

In this section, we review the process of collaborative design and pilot implementation as one record of how the product was developed amongst this highly distributed group and over a 6 month period of time. Following this is an attempt to reflect our own differences and learning, goals as well as our individuality by offering a brief 'story' of the experience of working together on this voluntary project. In offering our stories we aim to exemplify the way that the course is intended to respond to cultural sensitivities in a voluntary online professional development context.

Course Development

The course design has gone through a number of cycles of development and changes of online environment/location. An invitation was extended to members of the WAOE's Ring discussion list (board and committee members' list) along with a request for volunteers to role-play a sample unit.

A core group of 5 members from California, Arizona, Canada, New Zealand and Japan role-played a chosen unit over a 4 week period. All participants successfully completed the unit activities and a resource-base was collaboratively developed as an outcome. Two real-time sessions were held one between participants in Canada, England and Japan and another between participants in California and England.

Pilot Implementation/Environment

The course was constructed on Blackboard (www.blackboard.com), which is an integrated courseware environment for hosting online courses. Blackboard was chosen for the WAOE Online Educators Course because "Blackboard.com is a FREE service that enables instructors to add an online component to their classes, or even host an entire course on the Web. Without knowing any HTML, you can quickly create your own CourseSite – a Web site that brings your learning materials, class discussions, and even tests online" (<http://company.blackboard.com/Bb/index.html>). Since the WAOE is a virtual organisation with limited resources, Blackboard was the most attractive alternative that would enable us to get the Online Educators Course up and running while at the same time eliminating the need to administer our own environment.

Listed below is an overview of the implementation for the Online Educators Course that covers some basic features of the courseware:

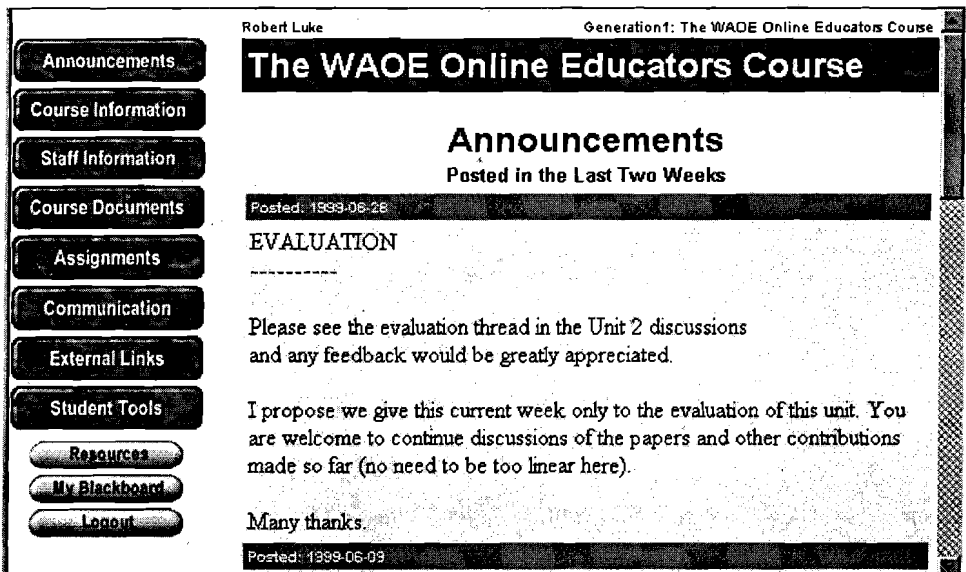


Figure 1: The WAOE Online Educators Course home page

Researching Our Practice

We have used biographical methods for researching our collaborative design practice. This corresponds closely to the notional design of our online course in the way it invites participants to contextualise their course experience in their own lives to give it meaning for themselves and to contribute towards a developing understanding of our membership in a continuous fashion. To this end, we each provide a personal account of our experience in working as a group of volunteers trying to understand and explore our distributed design work.

Course Authors Reflections

In this section each of the course constructors offers their own 'story' of their involvement in the same way that course participants would be invited to do likewise. We offer this as a record of our activity and involvement together on this voluntary project and as an illustration of how the concept of a 'Library of Experience' might evolve. To further indicate the 'Library' idea we also include the 'story' of one of those participating in the pilot implementation of the course to add an important voice to this collection. The views expressed are those of the individuals concerned and are not meant to reflect in any way the views of their institutions or local colleagues.

Being part of a Virtual Voluntary Self-help Organisation:

Nick Bowskill, England

To paraphrase Virginia Woolf (1929), the WAOE has provided me with a room of my own in professional development terms. This is a very special virtual room or space in which to collaboratively design an online course as part of my own and other team members' professional development.

I have worked in various teams developing open learning materials and online courses. The members of these teams were in different locations and the membership of the teams changed during the life of each project. It was this range of experience that generated my interest in professional development for tutoring teams supported by and concerned with the use of technology in teaching. I learned that each team experience is different in terms of the members of that team and their audience and context. More importantly, support for working in teams and appropriate professional development opportunities were only available from the experience of provision with little resource elsewhere. This highlighted the need to be self-motivated and self-directed in seeking to address my own professional development.

Each of my collaborative tutoring experiences has been as part of a research project that once completed saw the team broken up. They were a series of temporary experiences. This has resulted in the loss of some of the developmental knowledge accrued as part of those projects. In addition, as each of my contracts has been short-term I became interested in the possibility of developing an online space for my own professional development and for those like me in temporary employment. The WAOE offers such a space as well as the possibility of some continuity of personal development in a lifelong learning model. Participating in this voluntary community provides me with accessible support from anywhere at any time.

Co-developing a virtual course design therefore represents an opportunity to address my own professional development needs and interests as the team of volunteers discussed and constructed something meaningful to us all. At the same time, we aim to create an organisational and intercultural memory for all those involved as we address our own needs together and contribute personal reflections to an online Library of Experience that is available to others that may follow.

Applying Experience of Collaborating Inter-culturally:
Steve *McCarty*, Japan

As can be seen with my life work online at: http://www.kagawa-jc.ac.jp/~steve_mc/epublist.html, I engage in specialised collaboration in Asian Studies and bilingualism internationally as well as nationally and locally in Japan, while my generalist aspirations to reconstitute Academia in cyberspace are reflected in the WAOE. This leaves little time for ongoing projects, but the groundwork by Nick Bowskill in the UK has made my participation in this whole project possible. As I begin to assist in the Global University System Asia-Pacific Framework (see http://www.kagawa-jc.ac.jp/~steve_mc/asia-pacific/), the Online Educators Course provides useful experience in collaborating inter-culturally towards a global virtual university.

My experience elsewhere has shown that damage can be done on the intercultural frontier of distance education by **unscrupulous** e-mail marketing and persuasion techniques without reflection on the values being transmitted along with the technology. One widely touted Internet event based in California conflates knowledge with information commodified in the so-called education market. Non-native users of English can be particularly victimised by such schemes that export the dark side of a certain culture in the name of a promising technology.

Evaluating the virtual learning environment for the WAOE Online Educators Course design piloted so far, I notice a pattern that is like adjusting to another culture. First there is bewilderment at the new environment, then overrating it when one finds some success in navigating the new territory. But then one becomes increasingly aware of its faults or limitations. Finally, there is a realistic acceptance of both sides, that it is worth the effort and that the experience is what participants make it to be. This course design is not about how to teach pre-packaged material online; it is more the collaboration itself than the imparting of information that can be quantified. Our communication subtly constructs knowledge, but then it would be another matter to collaboratively tutor the same unit without reifying the knowledge into information. For this course will always be different depending on the cultures and personalities involved. This in turn argues for the primacy of experience by informed practitioners where neither a canon of literature nor the parameters for investigating virtual learning environments are well established.

It may also prove difficult to research the subtle variegations of collaboration and to isolate all the variables. Among the factors are the media and access thereof, which form certain constraints even while online media make collaboration possible like never before. It is partly the prior strength of the relationships versus those technical and time

constraints. There will always be the logistics of bringing the participants together in asynchronous and synchronous modes. Each participant needs to follow through on his or her determination, limited by other commitments and distractions, yet motivated both by the desire to succeed in the learning goals and by the sense of responsibility to be there for the others. Then there are cultural differences, along with the urge for mutual understanding and reconciliation. In any event, educators would do well to continue collaborating to build and apply shared experience, leveraging new technologies to accomplish time-honoured pedagogical goals more effectively, and contributing to turning online education into a professional discipline.

Learning from others — Locally and Globally:
Kinshuk, New Zealand

I have been involved in the development and implementation of computer based learning modules for more than five years, and have also reviewed a number of commercial online courses. It has now become evident to me that the field of online education is full of challenges and careful steps are required to exploit the real potential of emerging technologies. Two major issues are of special interest to me: how to authenticate the applicability of courseware in a larger context (local cultural and social requirements, accommodation of typical learning and teaching styles etc.), and how to achieve economy (preventing reinventing the wheel by reusing core subject material across geographical boundaries).

The WAOE, and in particular the collaborative course development exercise appealed to me as a way to gather better insight of the above two points along with many other practical issues of online education. At the time of developing the course, I did not have any prior experience of collaborative tutoring, to say the least of collaborative tutoring in a virtual environment. With the current interest in embracing online learning, I eagerly anticipated such an experience under the auspices of an organisation, which is virtual as well as dedicated to online education!

For me, the course was a great learning experience. It gave me the opportunity to have first-hand experience at developing a course that builds its components from the varying experiences of many individuals. I was, at the same time, confronted with the typical problems of online learning such as: how to ensure that the experiences gained by one generation of learners are successfully transferred to a subsequent generation.

Throughout the collaborative creation process, I had very interesting experiences. Besides solutions to problems, I encountered a sharing of personal experiences and a feeling of trust in the virtual environment. The benefits were multifaceted, not just in online learning, but also in collaboration theories and group dynamics. For me, the next step is obvious - participate as a learner. I can't wait to see what surprises are in store for me then!

Online Collaboration and Global Virtual Learning Environments:
Robert Luke, Canada

As an instructor of online learning, I keep informed through network learning: a vast,

interconnected, inchoate 'field of awareness' that makes me a part of the whole of online education. My involvement with the WAOE and my interest in the Online Educators Course stems from a desire to see how online education can become a tool for the integration of culturally relevant curricula irrespective of time and place, and to participate in the construction of the educational technology culture. My experience in the course was very positive, as it allowed me the opportunity to learn and put into practice the theory of online learning. Learning about the online learning environment was like learning a new culture, notwithstanding learning about other people. It was the personal side of learning that made it a fun learning experience. The course pedagogy reflects the needs of the participants to learn together in a shared space. And, while I was not always able to participate at the level I would have liked, I did get at least as much out of it as I put in, if not more. As the course evolves and we get a better feel for what we can do with this formula it will get even better. I like the idea of process versus product learning, and sharing experiences with online learning in an online learning environment is an excellent way to learn and develop a sense of community.

Working on establishing the course was a good educational experience for me, as it gave me the opportunity to use the many ideas and theories of online instructional design that I research as part of my job. I found that the collaborative process of brainstorming the course structure and content forced me to think carefully about what it means to learn online. I was also required to negotiate the collaborative process of learning and working with others around the world. The logistics of this alone was a challenge to implement at times, but I found that a shared sense of community and common goals helped to pull us all together to create the space to which we then came, together, as learners.

Participating as a learner in the course was also very beneficial. I enjoyed helping to create a shared space for the development of ideas. I found the course environment easy to use (except that the chat feature on Blackboard was down when we tried to use it), and I was able to meet all of the learning objectives. The Library of Experience will be a touchstone and reference for me as I put into practice the lessons learned in the course.

The whole process of development and then taking the course has been a valuable professional development experience to me as an online educator. I have gained new understandings of what it means to learn online and to share a collaborative learning experience with people from around the world. The differences and similarities in our perspectives on online learning helped shape a shared enthusiasm for learning in a comfortable way. This has been carried over to the writing of this paper, itself a collaborative event. I have found that the course lessons have served me well as we have continued to work together to synthesise our thoughts and ideas. ensuring that the learning process continues: as part of the course, and beyond.

Course Participant Reflections

Coordinating Ring Member's Reactions to Pilot Course:
Kate Hand, Canada

I see the Online Educators Course as an opportunity to not only discuss issues regarding

online learning but also to get to know fellow WAOE members and add a personality to the names and words I read on the discussion lists. Overall, I am pleased with the initial attempts of the pilot course. The content is open and flexible so that learners can share experiences and shape the learning and direction of the course. The tools available in Blackboard are generally very good and met many of my expectations. I have used a number of different online learning packages and while I had a few reservations about the Group Discussion Area, I was still impressed by the tool.

When I evaluate online courses for clients I look at three core areas: Pedagogy, Human Computer Interface (HCI) and Functionality. In my estimation, the WAOE Online Educators Course scores well in each of these categories. The following list provides specifics for each of the three areas:

Pedagogy

- The Pedagogy allows for different learning styles, as the content is fluid and open to interpretation.
- Although content is introduced through textual references only and in a linear fashion, participants are able to jump around to different subjects, giving them the freedom to move ahead or review information.
- Objectives are clearly stated at the beginning of each unit and evaluation is also clearly defined.
- Some content screens are very long and involve a lot of scrolling, which can annoy users and distract from the message.

Recommendations

I recommend adding visuals to concepts where possible for visual learners.

Consider "chunking" the content into separate pages to allow for increased flexibility and to provide natural breaks in the information.

Human Computer Interface (HCI)

- The HCI elements of the course are consistent and ought to meet most users' expectations.
- The navigation within screens is satisfactory. The Back button is text only and a bit small, but it is consistent.
- The layout is clean and simple to understand.
- The colours used to differentiate read and unread messages in the Group Discussion Area are confusing.

Recommendations

- Confirm that the colours used for read and unread messages cannot be changed. (I think this is a Blackboard issue.)

Functionality

- The Functionality of the course is reliable and I did not have any trouble during the pilot course accessing the site or features within the course.
- There are no external plug-ins necessary for the course, so users are ready to start once they know their login name and password.
- I think that the Library of Experience is an excellent resource for collaboration and knowledge sharing, as is the opportunity for participants to tutor future groups.
- Since the online chat feature is not working, the DaMOO function is a good alternative, however, I think explicit instructions need to be added to the course so that first time MOO users are not confused.
- To get the most recent messages in the Group Discussion Area is a minimum of three clicks away from the home page. Some users might find this annoying and cumbersome to quickly read the latest postings.

Recommendations

- I would like to see a general improvement to the Group Discussions area, however, we may not be able to manipulate this feature in Blackboard.
- Ensure that all users know how to locate and participate in the DaMOO chat site.

Discussion

We hope our experiences will help ensure the successful implementation of similar Internet based courses for large and culturally diverse audiences. As online learning environments, like any other type of learning systems, rely heavily on language specific explanations, in the foreseeable future the WAOE will need to address the necessity of offering this course in other languages, providing translation services so that the ongoing content evolution can be accessed by learners from different cultures. Since the WAOE's goal is to address a culturally disparate group of online educational practitioners, effective translating and web source updating can ensure the future success of the Online Educators Course as a multicultural reality. Addressing educators across cultures will enrich all of us, and see that the free flow of information, techniques, and pedagogy reaches all corners of the web. Just as "learning networks provide the opportunity for a rich interchange of information and ideas in which all users can participate actively, learning from one another as well as from the teacher" (Harasim *et al*, 1995, p.173), so too might the WAOE online course's biggest asset be the network of educators who will make up its participant base and contribute to the subsequent database of educational experience(s).

The Library of Experience is an excellent way to ensure that each iteration of the course can improve, instilling self-reflexivity as a main component of the overall pedagogical design and learning process. Evaluation is an important part of the process of both teaching and learning online; it is the reflexive component of any learning system, encouraging both participants and teachers to communicate learning goals and outcomes

more effectively. "In keeping with a learner-centred approach, evaluation and assessment should be part of the learning-teaching process, embedded in class activities and in the interactions between learners and between learners and teachers" (Harasim *et al.*, 1995, p.167). Incorporating evaluation into the body of learning material ensures that the online course will grow and evolve to suit the needs of each user/group. Participant learners create the course and contribute to its development, fostering a sense of the educational process that transcends the limits of teacher-student semantic construction. The collaborative nature of online learning is reflected in the language used to describe these experiences as much as the experiences themselves. In the course we were participant-learners, not students, a linguistic turn that allows the learner equal footing in what was once an educational hierarchy. Online networked learning can reconfigure the balance of power within the educational structure, as "educational hypertext redefines the role of instructors by transferring some of their power and authority to students. This technology has the potential to make the teacher more a coach than a lecturer, and more an older, more experienced partner in a collaboration than an authenticated leader" (Landow, 1992, p.222).

Online learning environments comprise a radical departure from traditionally defined education (see Harasim *et al.*, 1995, p.237; also Holloway and Ohler, 1991, p.261), and the shift from product- to process-centred education represents a dramatic turn in how we learn and how we conceive of learning. While traditional western education systems are based on linear and static principles, the new knowledge economy is based on change as a constant process. Just as "interactivity is restructuring the very way we think and relate to the world" (Pearce, 1997, p.17), new avenues for learning are developing which educators must be able to assess. The Online Educators Course allows educators to share ideas and resources on online learning while acknowledging cultural exchange. The WAOE is about this research and networking, and the Online Educators Course provides a place for 'learning by doing'. The open, group learning facet of the course lets participants share their own individual transformative learning experiences and to be involved with those of others. The creation of a collective intelligence that draws on the latest research and practice of computer-mediated education can "bring many minds together for deeper, creative, imaginative collective thinking. It can empower thinking-in-community, collegial thought in which participants organise their energies to achieve the sum of more than their separate parts. CI [collective intelligence] can deal with complexity in ways no one mind alone, nor even one team alone can do." (Rossman and Maxwell 4.2 <http://kabir.cbl.umces.edu/CrisisResearch/U-4.pdf>). The WAOE exemplifies this kind of collective, connected intelligence, and reinforces the 'learning-as-community' as an ongoing process, rather than simply (re)producing a product based on a rigid set of evaluative criteria.

The implications for the WAOE and online education of this kind of experiential learning include the potential to fashion culturally relevant curricula that transcend national boundaries. This will provide educational opportunities that can circumvent centre-periphery colonial relationships and facilitate professional development opportunities to all who wish to learn more about knowledge networking. Adaptive approaches to curricular construction ensure a focus on relevant ideas. Subjects can be maintained for each user base; as the course is updated frequently, it avoids the lag often seen as

educational institutions try to keep pace with rapid technological, pedagogic change (Romiszowski, 1994, p.161). Education is not the same as information; it must provide the tools to disseminate, navigate, and integrate information into the overall structure of learning in a knowledge-based society. Given access, those who have traditionally been marginalized can participate equally in a global education system that appreciates difference and diversity as integral parts of the whole learning process.

Summary

The practice of networked learning and indeed the term networked learning means many things to different people. For some it is an approach that allows the packaging of learning materials for self-study while for others it is centred upon discursive approaches to learning. This aside there is probably common recognition that there is potential through technology to inter-connect people from anywhere and to be similarly flexible about times of participation. This potential of networks to involve anyone with access to the online space raises the possibility of international participants working together online. Although it may be true to say that networked learning itself offers some aspects of a common vocabulary it is important to also recognise that each participant is anchored within their own culture and context and if we are to avoid attempts to colonize the world with a single cultural perspective it is therefore important to build in respect for difference within any online community.

For many people interested or involved in networked education the idea of careers are often disrupted by changes in employment patterns in a post-modern world. Gone are some of the certainties about continuity and in come ideas about portfolios of jobs and work. This disruption may be in conflict with the idea of continuous learning and continuous professional development. With this new set of circumstances come ideas about self-directed learning and the need/opportunity to shape one's own identity and development. Where continuous learning may be realised it needs to bridge the gaps in employment that may arise between jobs and contracts.

Voluntarism may offer some solutions to collaboration and mutually supportive professional development in an online community context. These are voluntary communities comprising individuals working together across the gaps in each others lives. How are these two inter-connected ideas about developing respect and individual identity to be sustained within such disrupted lives? How are identities retained within networked learning communities that may be distributed across vast areas? How do we research and begin to understand these communities?

These are some of the questions that we as a group of individuals sought to consider as a professional development exercise couched in our efforts to co-design and construct an imaginary course for others. In a collaboratively self-directed initiative we sought to explore the development of a notional online course for fellow members of our online voluntary professional development community. Over a period of about 6 months we worked together to discuss and explore the design and construction of an online course as material and as a mechanism for our own collaborative professional development. In designing such a course as a learning exercise, we were particularly keen to give special

consideration to respect for cultural difference both amongst ourselves and amongst those who might be involved in the course as participants. The mechanism for achieving this was to adopt a biographical method.

Our interpretation to biographical methods was to develop the idea of a Library of Experience as a resource for current and other generations of our voluntary community. Participants on the course would not be assessed as this would be in conflict with both voluntarism and difference. Instead they would be invited to contribute an account of their 'selves' at the intersection of the course experience. The idea of writing to relate a learning experience to their own lives represents a learning opportunity for the author and at the same time offers a window and witnesses those involved in this self-help community for different generations of members. We believe this approach respects the individual and their authority to write their own identity and response to the course. This paper is a collaborative document that makes the first contribution to our Library of Experience. It records our work together as members of a highly distributed voluntary and self directed professional development community. It attempts to understand the shared experience of collaboratively designing the course in both a collective view and from the individual perspectives of those involved in the design activity. It is also an attempt to research ourselves as a group within a voluntary self-help online community and in publishing this work to make a case for the development of a Library of Experience that may begin in this journal but be developed and continue online for those with disrupted access to such journals.

Our hope is that this might then facilitate a better mutual understanding of online communities, the potential of voluntarism within collaborative professional development and offer research methods that respect cultural difference and understanding.

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