

# **Learning to learn online - Box Hill Learning Network**

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An initiative funded by the Office of Post-compulsory Education, Training and Employment (Victoria)

The Box Hill Learning Network (BHLN) was funded in September 2000 by the Office of Post-compulsory Education, Training and Employment, Victoria (PETE). The aim of the funding application was to

develop a robust learning model that will have longevity and widespread application in the participating organisations. ... to develop a learning culture that is accessible to groups of workers who have previously had difficulty accessing formal education...  
(Application Document 2000, p 3)

The project has two arenas of activity – i) to enable the BHLN to become sustainable and ii) to develop an online learning system that caters for the needs of the network.

The partners in the BHLN are Box Hill Institute, Box Hill Hospital, Box Hill Senior Secondary College, the City of Manningham and the City of Whitehorse. As a group these organisations have not previously worked as a whole. However each has had varied dealings with other partners such as through work-related networks or vocational education and training (VET) relationships.

Within this partnership the BHLN aims to i) develop a community of practice; ii) deliver work-based training through the use of online learning; and iii) support the host communities as they develop strategies to become learning organisations. This paper will discuss how the BHLN has begun to work towards these aims and the challenges it faces.

## **Community of Practice**

The term Communities of Practice (CoP) is applied to the social organisation of the workplace. Whilst not in common usage, the term refers to much of the work done especially within the context of workteams (The Distance Consulting Company 2000). By enabling learning communities to proliferate, the host organisation officially recognises

the importance of - and strengthening - the informal networks that are at work, the quality of interpersonal relationships, the sharing that goes on automatically and naturally in a healthy community of people who are doing related work. (Johnson 1999)

The aim to create a CoP reflects a philosophy of democratic involvement in workplace activity to achieve negotiated outcomes. In order to do this the CoP requires a 'requisite variety', where a self-organising team has the capacity to absorb multiple functions to enable them to become more effective in dealing with their

environment. As a result, the team is empowered to find innovations around their issues that also resonate with their needs (Morgan 1997). Organisations support their CoPs that staff work within. To do so is strategic. CoPs are where best practices and innovations first emerge and where the solutions to shared problems are first identified (Nichols 2000).

According to Nichols (2000) there are two indicators of a CoP. Firstly, that there is a strong sense of identity tied to the community. To work within a CoP means that the members have ongoing business to achieve 'work', and have an understanding of where the work fits within their organisation(s). Secondly, the practice itself is not fully captured in formal procedure. People interact to complete work and also engage in dialogue that clarifies, defines and even modifies or changes how the work is done. They learn how to do what they do and become seen as competent (or not) in the course of doing it with others.

To enable the BHLN to begin as a collaborative venture and to develop into a CoP, it was necessary to engage in a range of activities. In particular, the partner facilitators BHLN were asked to share information about themselves and their host organisations and to clarify for themselves what the Network should become. To do this, each facilitator was asked to complete a SWOT analysis that considered what skills and other resources they and their host organisation brought to the BHLN. When the aggregated responses were discussed at the first BHLN facilitator's meeting, it was noted that the strengths and opportunities exceeded perceived weaknesses, and that threats were virtually non-existent.

At the same first meeting, facilitators were asked to bring along an object that they felt best represented what they thought the BHLN could or should be. Whilst the objects were quite different – a coffee cup, a bracelet, a potted plant - what they represented was remarkably similar; an organic and nurturing partnership. The purpose of this activity was to look at how the BHLN needed to organise itself to undertake its work, and how the partners saw their involvement and contribution. The BHLN meets on a regular basis, and there is considerable communication between facilitators outside of meeting times. Hosting and minute taking of the facilitator meeting is shared. Visiting other partners' sites has assisted in all gaining clearer understandings of the constraints and idiosyncratic nature of each site. Decision making is done in a collaborative manner and no one partner has any more say on the Network's activities than another. The production of the *BHLN*News is a joint venture, and every facilitator has responsibility for making at least one contribution per year and contributing to the distribution list for the newsletter. Facilitators also keep a diary where they take time to reflect upon the work of the BHLN and their contributions to it. The BHLN has been funded as an action research project.

The BHLN provides a social context for the work of the facilitators. Despite not sharing a common workspace, the facilitators do engage in a shared context for their work. The creation of the BHLN and the need to create an online learning facility and support is work in common, irrelevant of the varied work locations. There is a mutual engagement in the work in that there are the same needs to establish space, identity and acceptance in their host organisations for online training. At meetings the facilitators are able to explore how outcomes can be achieved in other locations and to discuss applicability at their location. The very nature of the BHLN being

different to their 'other' work means that the facilitators interrelate with each other to discuss the use of shared resources, using common language and thereby creating a new and unique identity for themselves.

## **Work-based training online**

In setting up the BHLN, the first 2-3 months has been focused primarily on establishing the Network and creating viable relationships between the facilitators and the host organisations they represent. More recently however, the Network's attention has been drawn to the provision of online learning – the principal reason for its funding through PETE.

The premise of the funding application for this research project was the opportunity to 'meld formal online learning using the TAFE Virtual Campus with workplace action learning' (Application Document 2000, p 8). Access to and use of the TAFE VC is still at the early stages in the BHLN. At present the BHLN is identifying and accessing modules/units and assessing them for their suitability for the work of the Network. The aim is to provide training for Community Services (Aged Care) online, however other suggestions for courses or stand alone units are increasingly presenting themselves. This is inevitable as the facilitators become more familiar and confident with the use of the TAFE VC and online learning and as (potential) students seek more options.

At present the BHLN is completing surveys designed to elicit any student concerns and their interests in/for online learning. Due to the needs of the current and potential students, the Network is cognisant of the need to have a student friendly online environment. The Network aims to achieve this by having access to computers in a pleasant environment; to give students plenty of opportunity to explore the web and online learning in an interesting, non-threatening manner; and to have queries responded to in a timely manner.

Work has also been undertaken in creating a communication hub on the TAFE VC platform that is able to meet the students' needs. The hub is the linchpin of communication and activity for the Network. It is through the hub that Facilitators communicate, students access units/modules, submit assessments, converse and debate with other students, and where tutors make regular contact with students.

## **Learning organisations**

Morgan (1997) discusses organisations, and the way in which work is structured and managed, using a number of metaphors. In one metaphor - organisations as brains - Morgan draws on G W Taylor's (1979) work to ask: is it 'possible to design "learning organisations" that have the capacity to be as flexible, resilient, and inventive as the functioning of the brain?' (p 74). To achieve this Morgan uses imagery about the brain to describe organisations, and he proposes that to become a learning organisation it must be able to undertake four activities. These activities or competencies are to varying degrees becoming recognisable within the activities and work of the BHLN.

i) To scan and anticipate change in the environment

Environmental change is the norm; organisations need to develop new ways of seeing their environment and be able to envisage and create new possibilities.

All of the host organisations recognise the changing nature of work and their commitment to the well being of their staff. Whilst all are not viewing this in the same way or to the same degree, there is an understanding of the importance of investing in staff. The benefits in investing in staff could be perceived as increasing their skills and knowledge, allowing staff to try new and varied work opportunities, enabling career advancement within the organisation rather than to outside organisations, and conveying to staff that they are valued. To get to this situation, the host organisations have come to recognise that they have to support staff in new ways, and in doing so, create different workplaces.

ii) To develop an ability to question, challenge, and change operational norms and assumptions.

This involves becoming skilled in understanding the paradigms, metaphors, mindsets or mental models that underpin how the organisations operate. To do this requires self-reflective practice, the ability to develop a new mental model when required and to create new capabilities to extend their ability to create the future.

Within the Network it is possible for the facilitators to step outside the mind set of their host organisations. By considering the possibilities as well as how to deliver, monitor and assess the training, facilitators have to be aware of both the opportunities and limitations within their organisations. Involvement in the Network enables them to analyse and reflect upon typical practice and to consider how that practice may constrain. Facilitators become skilled in reflective practice within the safe environs of the Network, where there is an expectation to trial, explore and consider options. In many ways the Network is a 'playground' for experimentation and practise before trialling an innovation in the workplace.

iii) To allow appropriate strategic directions and patterns of organisations to emerge

The behaviour of intelligent systems requires a sense of vision, norms, values, limits or reference points to guide behaviour. However, it is also important that these reference points also create spaces which enable multiple actions and behaviours, including those which question imposed limits!

The early focus of activities for the BHLN has been to create a Community of Practice. For the Facilitators there has been considerable opportunity for them to have a say in the way in which they want and need the Network to look and operate. The earliest activities were about identifying the shared vision and articulating the values that would guide the daily operations of the Network. It was very clear at the outset that each host site would be able to respond according to its needs and imperatives. The host organisations did not all enter into the Network at the very same point of development. Consequently, there has been considerable effort to endure that Facilitators representing the host organisations are able to have their 'voice' heard whilst taking part in a choir of shared Network activity.

iv) To become skilled in the art of double-loop learning

This requires self-reflective action to underpin intelligent action. To do this is to examine the status quo, to consider alternative or new modes of operation and to understand from a new perspective.

The Facilitators have been completing and maintaining personal diaries about their involvement and the activities of the BHLN. By reviewing Facilitators' selected thoughts and reactions of key events and episodes in the early life of the Network, it will be possible to enable reflective evaluation at several levels. Clearly individuals are the first level, but there is also opportunity to enable reflection across the Network. By using action research in such a way, the Network is not consigned to repeat; rather, it is able to learn from previous experiences, and to see them differently.

The ability of the BHLN to demonstrate these four competencies relies on several underpinning platforms. The BHLN is not a totally separate entity from the Host organisations, and as such there is considerable need for a close relationship and organisational support to enable the Network to function firstly, and secondly, to achieve its aims.

### **Ongoing challenges**

At present the BHLN is identifying the units/modules that can actually be delivered online. This is problematic in that our initial focus has been to deliver Community Services (Aged Care), and at present there are insufficient options for online delivery. This leaves the Network with two options – to customise current offerings to make them more relevant to aged care workers or to actually produce the materials in html format - an option that the Network has not (yet) been funded for.

Having created online learning options, the importance of establishing a user friendly gateway to the BHLN for our staff and students is becoming primary. Some of the potential students have little or no experience with computers and use of the web. Others have languages other than English as their first language. The Network is determined that getting online and access to the BHLN be as simple as possible. The creation of a virtual campus is still at a relatively early stage of development. The current facilitators in the BHLN have skills in the use of computers - eg word processing and communication - but their experience with online learning is relatively 'new'. Additionally, most have no formal training as teachers. To address both of these issues, the BHLN is supporting and upskilling the facilitators to be able to 'deliver online', through their completion of Certificate IV Workplace Assessor and Training online.

Establishing BHLN as a source of workplace training, especially with the host organisations, is an interesting challenge. Some of the host organisations are large and can employ over 200 people across a diverse range of work. The need to market and promote the activities of the BHLN to its host organisations, particularly as a preferred option for 'in house' training, will be a large task. However, the very viability and sustainability of the Network is largely predicated upon the achievement of this feat.

## Conclusion

The BHLN is still in the very early stages of its development. There are a number of challenges it faces in becoming a Community of Practice and supporting the development of the host organisations to become learning organisations. To achieve this it will be necessary for the Network to becoming a recognised provider of training within its host organisations, creating a viable online presence and enabling professional relationships within a nurturing environment.

To date, the establishment of the BHLN has been one of the positive experiences for the facilitators involved. There has been an imperative to create a Community of Practice before the Network could begin to promote itself in other arenas. The attainment of this goal at such an early stage is significant. The Network is only just beginning to consider ways in which it can demonstrate to the philosophy and practice of the host organisation's learning organisation. The ability of the Facilitators to meet and surpass this and other inevitable challenges, is an aspect that is emerging for our Community of Practice as a significant priority. To be willing to rise to such challenges allows the Network to ponder its potential to become a viable and sustainable entity.

## References

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