Online Communities of Practice - Burden or Boon to VET Practitioners.

Priscilla Shorne
West Coast Institute Of Training, WA

Introduction

In the second semester of 2008, I attended a course over a series of thirteen Fridays in Instructional Intelligence. Instructional Intelligence[1] is a method of teaching which involves collaborative learning and it has been highly promoted in Western Australia in a partnership involving the Department of Education and Training as it was then, the State School Teachers Union of WA and Barrie Bennet himself who came [i]to Perth to conduct training. The course was mainly for TAFE lecturers at one particular TAFE College which was promoting the use of II as a teaching method though another person from elsewhere and I attended.

It was a particularly inspiring and engaging course and of course the twenty or so participants who had grown close because of the time they had spent together and the collaborative and engaging teaching style they had experienced, wanted to remain in touch. One way of doing this was through an online community of practice which had been set up through EDNA, a free online network for people working in education and training from early childhood education to higher education.[2] Participants were given details of the site and encouraged to join EDNA if they were not already members. Over the following year, there were some attempts to keep a dialogue going particularly by two of the participants but by 2010 their efforts had largely lapsed. Other people had also completed the course by then but there had been no sign of them participating in this online CoP (community of practice.) It must be pointed out that it was not necessary to log onto the site to see if there had been any new contributions as notifications came directly to my usual email address though if I wanted to reply I had, of course, to log on to EDNA.

There was also a face to face or physical CoP which met once a term to net work, discuss issues and try new practices. This had far more success and generally attracted at least 20 lecturers.

This paper aims to look at some of the reasons that this online CoP has not worked and why this group of TAFE lecturers did not choose to engage with this technology. As part of this project, I also looked briefly at a highly successful CoP in which I also participate to see what

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[1] Instructional intelligence aims to develop student learning through a mixture of curriculum content, structuring effective group work, teaching tactics and strategies, knowledge of how students learn and information about personal a systemic change. (Bennett, B., Rolheiser, C. 2001)

[2] http://www.edna.edu.au/edna/go

lessons can be learned. The participants in this CoP, The Beading Forum,[3] are a diverse group of beaders, largely based in Australia, mainly female, multi-aged with a passionate interest in beading and jewellery making of all sorts. One discussion strand asking what people's occupations were revealed that members ranged from mothers at home to retail assistants, clerical staff, managers, it specialists, massage therapists, teachers, geologists, medical specialists and lots more. This group responded readily to my query on why this CoP worked and so it makes a useful comparison with my key CoP.

Methodology

I made a conscious decision that I would do as much of the research as possible online since my interest was in online practice. This largely worked; I was able to find relevant literature and articles about online CoPs and my interaction with the Beading Forum was all online. When it came to the target group though, it was more difficult. I did place a request for assistance on the EDNA site which meant that people who were still subscribed would receive it in their emails without having to log on to EDNA. I received one response only and that was from one of the two people who had really tried to make it work. I also asked the Instructional Intelligence coordinator to send out an email to her mailing list of those who had undertaken the II course and received one response only. Finally I attended a physical community of practice session and undertook some research on the project there. Then I obtained results. That I needed to use face to face methods was indicative of the problematic nature of this particular online CoP.

Online Communities of Practice

So what is a community of practice? Etienne Wenger, who has worked extensively on CoPs says that CoPs are every where and that they develop around things that matter to people. He writes:

> *Members of a community are informally bound by what they do together – from engaging in lunchtime discussions to solving difficult problems- and by what they have learned through their mutual engagement in these activities. A community of practice is thus different from a community of interest or a geographical community, neither of which implies a shared practice. (Wenger 1998)*

He says that a community of practice is defined along three dimensions, joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire of communal resources. He also has seven steps towards establishing a community of practice.

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[3] www.beadingforum.com.au

Now an online CoP is all of this but done online. It is a centralised online location where participants can access resources, respond to various discussion topics, read announcements and even chat in real time. Think of a Face book that is limited to people of similar interests as your own but far more useful than Face book.

> The bottom line is that online community or online interaction is not the goal. It is one **means** for helping groups achieve their goals. It is not necessarily about "online community" but what conditions and processes are needed to enable communities to use the online environment. (White 2002)

Now all online CoPs have active members and they have lurkers. A lurker is a member who may read what is going on, on a regular basis but rarely if ever participates on line. A lurker may feel that they do not have enough expertise to contribute or participation may not be a priority though they want to know what is happening. (MacDonald et al 2003). A lurker may participate at times and then retreat to a lurking status. If you read some of the online commentary blogs like Online Opinion, you will notice that there are some people who are involved constantly but the bulk of readers are probably lurkers who may never contribute or who may contribute on rare occasions. Someone may be a lurker on one site but not on another. It is sometimes very hard to know if they are there.

The Beading CoP

This CoP is a social forum, a virtual meeting place, a provider of advice, a soft shoulder for troubles, an advertiser of products, a place to display work, a provider of tutorials, and above all a community. While the bulk of interaction is online, members do sometimes meet up for a meal or coffee and to display their work. It is a very positive forum and one respondent to my enquiries abut why it worked commented:

> It's the sharing of information, without the I'm not telling anyone element. Each and everyone here is willing to share thoughts, ideas, help, tips etc, not to mention the most basic of all, the Aussie mateship, which we extend to our o/s mates as well. It works because we're all ready to step up and have a say, share and spare a kind word for a buddy in need. Many of us have made good friendships because of the forum too. Regular meet ups, drop ins etc are now the norm.

The administrator of this CoP was also the originator. She had had experience of another online forum which had a commercial basis and found the behaviour of some participants abhorrent. Her CoP was started primarily as a social forum. She lived in regional Western Australia and began her forum as a way of both promoting beads and her online bead shop and connecting with other people who were interested in beading. She does not charge for

membership or even I believe make any profit from it but her expenses are defrayed by paid advertising from beading businesses.

She used her experience of the other forum to set up guidelines for this one and says:

> *I do believe in the beginning a forum reflects the attitude of the person setting it up, the way they set out rule(s) and regulations the tone used etc.*

She and her two moderators were online everyday, starting threads, keeping them going encouraging new members and generally trying to create the sort of site that people would like to visit regularly. It started in 2004 with several current members including myself, dating from that year and shows no sign of slowing down. The administrator's thoughts on why it keeps going are:

> *Today I think the members' feeling of ownership of the forum is what keeps it going strong and they have that because of the hard draft (graft?) maintaining the rules. It isn't evident by just visiting a forum the amount of work involved.*

Good moderation and a friendly community seemed to be recurring themes within the responses.

One particularly relevant response came from an IT specialist who was involved in attempting to set up a social networking site in the water management area. She has also worked in a university and saw unwillingness to participate in online activities as a generational thing. She said that:

> *Older folk do not see the online possibilities as serious. Universities are struggling getting older academics to even use email as a valid submission medium for papers. Students are forced to communicate in hard copy with these recalcitrant academics.*

She goes on to support what others have had to say about having policies about behaviour and attitudes but also comments that strong objectives are needed and those objectives need to be clearly communicated and held commonly:

> *Without leadership and mods, this forum would have petered out within a year. Mini projects to build cohesion, shared skill building, opening up research channels all these are services the forum offers, so you need to be able to define, implement and support these services. With sponsors, with competitions, with people saying hey lets go this way, come on guys, x promotion with the magazines. This forum is a business guys, it has a plan, a vision, and was executed to plan. Sometimes the plan was changed, or guidelines changed, but the vision was always clear.*

This unfortunately did not happen with the Instructional Intelligence Community of Practice.

The Instructional Intelligence Online Community of Practice

Responses to my discussions with came up with certain key points about why this site had not worked and they are listed as follows and none of them are good news for the survival of this CoP.

	Barriers for lecturers
1	Edna is clunky (2)
2	When I send an email, I get lots of replies but when I use Edna there is no response (1) (see above)
3	No one is promoting it(2)
4	What is in it for me (4)
5	II is already working – why do I need this? (see above) (1)
6	Other things to do in my ARD time (1)
7	Lecturers are split in too many directions already/ too many changes for TAFE lecturers already (3)
8	No time (7)
9	Don't have time to type stuff (1)
10	Prefer face to face contact/prefer to talk to people / Unsatisfactory way of communicating (7)
11	Do not like online environments/ Do not like to learn online (6)
12	Fear of open forum (1)
13	Have other networks for support (1)
14	I forget about it (2)
15	Not much activity (1)
16	Did not know about it (4)
17	Pedestrian (1)
18	Inertia (1)

I have tried to group the responses roughly via theme. First the criticisms of Edna (1 and 2): is it really any more "clunky" than any other log on? I am not sure that it is but the problem is that if you are not logging on every day, then it is possible to forget how to and to forget your user name and/or password. TAFE lecturers in Western Australia may have four logons at work for the computer system depending on where they are logging on and for which programme. It is not possible to have the same user name and password for each one. Then there are the plethora of other user names and logins required for banking, bill paying and the like. I suspect that many people are feeling logged out. In any case, if a particular log on is not being used

regularly, it is not likely to be remembered and security experts recommend not writing down pins and passwords. Thus the perceived "clunkiness" of Edna may well be related to the fact that people forget how to log on if they are not using it frequently.

The next large group of responses (3 – 9) relate to a general feeling of being overworked which is affecting TAFE lecturers. The introduction of more online services has increased lecturers' work since more of the administrative work has been computerised and passed on to lecturing staff. These tasks include resulting, general typing and correspondence and online rolls. Kronemann (2001) in a previous AVETRA presentation pointed out:

> *The changes that teachers have experienced have had a significant impact on how they see their work and their professional interactions. In total, 86% say the r workload has increased or significantly increased, and about the same number state that stress at work has increased or significantly increased. More than two thirds (68%) say their ability to maintain professional standards/provide quality education has been eroded. While nearly 44% say that their ability to maintain and update their technical skills has increased, about 30% say it has decreased.*

These changes have continued and will continue to continue and as three of the responses pointed out lectures are split in too many directions already and there was a strong feeling that there just was not time to take on an online CoP. It seems that every time a new task is added, it rarely replaces but rather adds to the number of tasks required.

An interesting suggestion was made about whether lecturers really regarded participating in an online CoP as work? If they were seen on a networking site at work, was this perceived as legitimate? These same people might spend time on face book or other social networking sites in their own time though. At the same time is it really ARD? (activities related to delivery)[4] I would contend that any participation in this CoP is quite legitimate work but when participants are time poor and stretched in too many directions, this site must take a lesser precedence to marking and preparing lessons and courses. The over worked feeling might then rebound on accessing the CoP in their own time as this might be seen as an infringement into their personal space.

The next of the significant groups is the responses 10 – 12; these are the people who have not adopted online technology and do not wish to play with it. AS most of the participants were at the same college though not on the same campus, they thought that they could have corridor

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[4] In WA lecturers' working hours are divided into delivery, activities related to delivery such as planning, preparing and marking and professional activities. Those who have opted for the new Flexible Hours Agreement receive less ARD and must do more professional activities. Professional activities include everything from administration to implementation of new technologies, to answering emails and attending staff meetings that management might require. For standard lecturers 4 ½ hours professional activities are allowed per week.

conversations without having to resort to online ones. This would of course limit the number of people they would come across since participants were divided between four campuses. There are no ages recorded for participants in this survey but the Twomey Report (2007) claimed that if part time lecturers were taken into account, the average age of TAFE lecturers in 2007 was 55. These would be people who have grown up in the pre computer days and are not ready adopters. They are possibly the people who prefer to write long hand and then transcribe onto computer and they do not regard computers as one of their primary communication channels. Note that one of the beading respondents referred to recalcitrant older academics who would not use online communication – perhaps this is the same situation. They may also be the same people who complain about having to read emails.

Were there lurkers? I cannot tell. I do know that every response was sent to me at my email address so I knew when something had happened. Functionally there must have been lurkers at the very least but who knows if they even read these emails?

Comparison of successful and unsuccessful CoPs

If the two examples are compared, it is possible to see that the bead CoP operates in a very different way to the II CoP. One basic difference is that the Bead CoP is for pleasure and not for work though some of the participants make their living from their work. People log on because they enjoy the site and find it an important part of their lives. The II CoP is work but it does not seem important enough to fit into a busy work life.

Another important point is that the Bead CoP had an administrator and moderators from the beginning who spent time online every day promoting and fostering the site. They launched threads, made comments, advertised in beading magazines, sought sponsorship and generally encouraged membership and participation. With the II CoP, there were no moderators and the person who established it, did not have a time allowance to enable her to manage it in fact it is unclear if management were even aware of it or thought that it should be part of her official duties. Without anyone to push the forum, it was unlikely to succeed. As for having to have strict guidelines for behaviour, in this situation, the forum did not even get to that stage; it was dead before many even realised that it had been born

There is a problem with online activity at TAFEs in WA where management who may be older and not always technologically agile themselves promote online learning, teaching and other activities without necessarily being aware of its demands. This is of course a generalisation but in order to have effective online interaction, a great deal of planning and time is necessary.

What Can Be Learned From This?

Any VET institution which thinks that *if you build it, they will come*[5] is very wrong when it comes to online involvement. If an online CoP is to work it must first have an administrator and moderators who have the time and energy to devote to it. It also needs someone to champion it who understands just how it works.

Lecturers are not necessarily convinced that online CoPs have much to offer and they may see it as one extra burden on their already busy lives. This may be because of their age or their lack of familiarity of what online CoPs can achieve. If they are to be convinced then they have to be shown what is in it for them. If they cannot be convinced that what it offers is better or at least adds value to what they already have, then it will not be used. This is not resistance to change; it is common sense and the best use of their limited resources and time.

There are people who thrive on online CoPs and find them a source of help, friendship, advice, technical knowledge and communication. Anyone who is setting up an online CoP should study success

Personally I am a great fan of the potential of online CoPs but even I used the II one rarely much as I would have like to see it succeed, but I do know that when these activities become the primary focus of teachers' activities, when no resources are provided for these activities, when no additional time or training is provided, then teachers will resist the activity.   And in the long run, does it matter?

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[5] From Field of Dreams 1989 directed by Phil Alden Robinson

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