Introduction

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THE CONTEXT

The e-facilitator's module, which gave rise to the papers in this issue, was an accredited module attached to the Advanced (now Graduate) Diploma in Professional Studies at the Institute of Education, University of London in 2003-2004. The module, developed in conjunction with MirandaNet[1], was initiated and part-funded by the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE) as well as the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). A course on e-facilitation for teachers seemed particularly apposite in the year when the DfES (2003) consulted with educators on a national UK e-learning strategy.

The brief was to achieve two separate, but related aims in the context of a credit-bearing module: one aim was to prepare participants to host forums amongst educators and learners, including the GTCE policy-based discussion forums; the second, overarching aim was to contribute to the support of teacher professionalism through bringing together university-based tutors and school-based teachers in work-based learning activities and projects, which were innovative within their context.

The module can be described as consisting of four primary components:
1. an eight-week online induction course designed to give participants experience, knowledge and skills in the area of e-facilitation;
2. an online writing workshop for self-access, designed to introduce participants to issues in internet-based research and academic literacy;
3. a practice-based inquiry project designed to introduce participants to the planning, implementation and evaluation of small studies; and
4. the co-construction of knowledge in the field of e-facilitation and the feedback of that knowledge to the political and academic spheres.

The module was taught in a variety of communication modes. The induction course and writing workshop were offered fully online, but supported by two meetings and two residential workshops that helped to consolidate this community of e-facilitation practitioners by face-to-face engagement.
The practice-based inquiry was developed and implemented within the teachers' own school or institution, in this way providing support and a feedback loop from the practical application of the work in the professional context.
Additionally, course participants reported on each of the stages of their project in a so-called MirandaNet e-journal, where they received feedback and critical review both from their peers and course tutors.

WHAT PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH DID WE USE?

The module was based on the MirandaNet model of an internet-based community of practice in education. MirandaNet itself is a community of practice which is aptly described using the following definition:

> a community of practice is not just a web site, a database, or a collection of best practices. It is a group of people who interact, learn together, build relationships, and in the process develop a sense of belonging and mutual commitment. Having others who share your overall view of the domain and yet bring their individual perspectives on any given problem creates a social learning system that goes beyond the sum of its parts. (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p. 34)

The development of the learning community was initiated in the induction phase through a mixture of course design features and process management.

The approach to teaching and learning on the module was based upon the principles developed by Laurillard (2002) in her conversational framework. The underlying design imperatives were:
- *learning is experiential*: one aspect of learning is the application and trial of new concepts, or new perspectives on previous ideas, in practice;
- *learning the skills of e-facilitation is reflexive:* learning how to manage an online group arises from active experience in online groups and reflection on the issues and processes involved;
- *learning is cyclical*: understandings develop over time. The development is at least partly a result of engagement in personal reflection and with the reflections of others; of engagement with the feedback loop afforded by mentor and peer critique; and of the application of ideas in practice;
- *theory and practice are mutually informing*: informed professional practice relies on the integration of theory and practice, and the ability to reflect critically on both; and
- *learning is mediated through dialogue*: deep-level learning is associated with an insight into the intentions of the speaker/writer and the ways in which language and ideas are structured and organised to convey meaning.

Further, Laurillard's framework models how the action of articulating a representation of a concept can lead to self-evaluation of one's own understanding, in addition to the opportunities afforded for feedback, questioning and evaluation from others. Laurillard's notion of cyclical learning was reinforced by the use of practice-based research principles which advocate the promotion of teachers as researchers. In this role teachers have a means of controlling the process of change and development in the classroom by fact-finding, planning, implementing a course of action, evaluating that action, reassessment and modification. Telling their own stories about how professionals think in action becomes a means of rethinking existing knowledge and revising professional identities. Encouraging teachers to publish their studies for the rest of their

learning community in the e-journal meant that the results of the module could be far-reaching.

However the VLE used for this purpose, called the 'e-journal', was not a static repository of knowledge. Through the mastery of e-facilitation skills on the course the teachers displayed the capacity to inhabit and customise the use of the e-journal so that resources could be shared, new pedagogical techniques could be tested, risks could be taken and failure could be a source of learning. Collaborative, constructive and co-constructive learning was explicitly at the core of the process which aimed at widening the participants' empirical understanding of the value of this kind of learning against the information transmission paradigms that still predominate in schools. Another means of intervening in the conventional learning process was the introduction of thinking skills and the scaffolding of creative dialogue.

HOW DID IT GO?

Although this was a pilot, the funding arrangements required an independent evaluation study to be conducted. The evaluation concluded that students experienced an in-depth induction to e-facilitation, and that the practice-based work involved the participants in innovative curriculum work, grounded in systemic theory.

The five authors featured in this volume were all participants in the module and their pieces are rooted in the coursework they submitted for assessment. Their work is testimony to the levels of creativity and scholarship displayed in the final submissions. In this context, research findings suggest that innovation and change come more from teachers' informed professional practice around teaching and learning than from target setting and 'performativity' (Saunders, 2002). Our contention is that fully supported, practice-based inquiry was one of the factors that contributed to the evidence of change in theoretical perspective and practice, which are illustrated in these papers.

The evaluation of the module also reported that students found the consistency between the virtual learning environment (VLE) design, the design of the induction course and the e-facilitation module itself to be an important scaffold in understanding the relationship between the different components and aims. They also valued the writing course online and the ensuing discussion between participants, which has continued.

Further, the iterative approach to our research, scholarship and writing, which characterised the module, has visibly continued for those who submitted papers to *Reflecting Education*. In yet another phase of the cyclical approach to learning, the case studies have now been revisited and, in many cases, substantially revised for publication within this journal.

THIS ISSUE

The papers in this issue have arisen from participants' practice-based inquiry project. The initial brief for the submission of the project proposals was intentionally open-ended to allow for diversity and individualisation in choice of topic and approach. But, as illustrated by the case studies reported in these papers, the experience of the interaction of the four components of the module programme brought about a shared focus on certain themes, all of which are directly associated with the aim of developing and maintaining an active, online learning community.

The first of these themes is a concern with the process management of an online discussion group. Questions arise as to what types of support structures and processes are required to set up and manage a successful online learning group, what types of functional roles need to be identified to meet the group's purposes and who should take on these roles at different stages in the life cycle of the discussion.

A second significant theme is consideration of the potential of online discussion groups to act as a catalyst for change in the relationship between the teacher and learner, and in the ways in which teachers and learners – specifically within the context of school-based education – approach the task of learning. Within this overarching theme the questions addressed by the papers are how participation in online learning can lead to greater learner autonomy, and how engagement through dialogue can be supported to aid the acquisition of new concepts and the development of new perspectives on previously known concepts. A further question, implicit in many of the papers but explicitly addressed by Bennison, is the issue of the skills children require to participate in and benefit from e-learning.

A third theme is the issue of motivation. How and why might membership of an online community impact on motivation and participation? A variety of views are considered in these papers, but in these small practice-based studies with novices the increased opportunity for reflective participation and self-direction in learning activities emerge as predominant factors.

Smith explores the processes of online group management (or e-facilitation), and the role of the tutor-moderator in particular. Initially working within the framework of Salmon's (2002) 5-stage model of e-moderation, which was developed within the context of adult distance education, Smith argues that within the context of school education, the three primary stages of Salmon's model, access, socialization and information exchange, require extension and modification.
He proposes a model for the management of online discussion groups within schools, which portrays the process as a non-linear passageway. Notably, the 'stages' of the life-cycle of the discussion group are overlapping and continuous. The management process is represented as an increase in complexity of roles and functions and rather than the loss of certain functions, the adoption of new ones.

Turvey looks at the perceived affordances of an online community in a primary school, from the viewpoint of three classes of Year 5 and 6 children (aged 9-11) and of their teachers. The study centres on the children's activities and interaction in an online forum, which was initially established as an after-school club. However, the online forum was also used for formal curriculum studies in Geography, PHSE and ICT, with a 50% split of the allocation of areas for the children's personal use and those used for formal curriculum studies.

Turvey reports on the enthusiastic response of a number of participants and to a marked increase in child-led learning and informal peer tutoring. On the other hand, the blurring of the purpose of the online forum led to pedagogical tensions for the teachers involved. This brings sharply into focus some of the issues surrounding the changes in teachers' and learners' roles and practices that are involved in a move towards greater learner autonomy and more flexible approaches to learning.

Hanrahan provides guidelines for setting up homework activities in Modern and Foreign Languages (MFL), using both Internet-based resource sites and an online discussion forum.

Since September 2004, learning of a foreign language at key stage 4 (age 14 +) in the United Kingdom is no longer a statutory requirement. However, it is an entitlement. One of the key factors in the development of this study was to explore the extent to which networked communications enhance opportunities for use, contact and engagement with foreign languages.

Hanrahan's study also establishes an effective link between home-based and school-based ICT activities, and in so doing challenges the artificial division between 'formal' school-based learning and the 'informal' learning acquired through games, online discussions and pursuit of hobbies. Her work also builds on the existing ICT skills and competences of her pupils, many of which are in advance of prescribed school tasks.

Bennison offers a view of the Chafford Hundred Campus, Thurrok (UK), which is an immersive e-learning environment, currently serving pupils aged 11-14 years. The pupils and teachers are provided with constant access to the Internet, software and their own files through a combination of wireless, networked and Internet-connected technologies. The school offers an integrated curriculum model, but emphasis is placed on independent learning methods for pupils, including individual self-study and collaborative group work.

While the school has received some external attention, Bennison, as Deputy Head Teacher of the school, surveys the perceptions of three of his Year 8 classes (95 respondents), who have been participant in this environment for a period of eighteen months. The survey, which was predominantly conducted in online discussion groups, examines the children's perceptions of the role of the teacher and the student experience of this mode of learning.

Worthington's study considers the extent to which continued and active engagement in an online discussion forum contributes to effectiveness on a continuing professional development programme (CPD) in teaching mathematics in the early years of schooling.

Effectiveness in this paper is determined by teachers' self –reports of satisfaction and increased understanding, the patterns of dissemination to a wider audience, and indicators within the discourses of the teachers in the programme of metacognitive and collaborative activity.

The study concludes with reflection on a positive link between levels of participation and reported levels of increased understanding and impact on practice. A further strand of the study considered the impact of participation as pairs in the online forum and concludes that collaboration enhances the leaning experience.

WHAT DID WE ACHIEVE?

Using a VLE to explore e-learning as a group was important in the effective assimilation of the technicalities of mastering e-facilitation principles. The VLE at the core of this module was designed to raise the students' explicit understanding of these issues through the critical use of multimodal tools. Critical engagement was encouraged by the tutors who taught in a variety of communication modes in order to extend participants' multimodal literacy. Comments from the participants and the case studies they produced indicate that this understanding has spread into the use of VLEs with young learners as well. Whereas most current papers on e-facilitation are based on the behaviour of university students, four of the five articles published here provide evidence of e-facilitation between school children. These pupils, like their teachers, appear to have gained from participation in an innovative curriculum addition which has enhanced their understanding of the learning process.

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NOTES

[1] See http://www.mirandanet.ac.uk