

Elearning, efacilitation, ecommunities, epedagogies: a professional standpoint based on evidence

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ABSTRACT

It could be argued that despite the growth of the Internet in schools and the recent addition of fast broadband connections to the repertoire of many primary schools' resources, the majority of schools are merely exploiting the pedagogical potential of the Internet at a relatively superficial level. It was against this background, and feeling the need to incorporate the Internet into my own teaching in a more meaningful way that I used Think.com to develop an online community within my own school.

This paper reports on the process and findings from a teacher research project focusing on the use of an online community with three classes of thirty Year 5/6 children. In the paper I share and explore some of my findings and observations regarding the development of the online community. The paper considers some of the affordances of such an approach as evident from the project. For example, how does the concept of anytime-anywhere learning affect the teacher – child relationship? Also, could online learning facilitate learning that is more suitable for children who find face-to-face environments intimidating? And, what are the pedagogical tensions at the centre of such an approach?

In its final conclusions the paper offers a glimpse of what new interactive communication technologies might yield within the primary education context, and leads to the conclusion that there remains a need for further research if the potential for new pedagogical approaches are to be realised.

INTRODUCTION: THE EFACILITATION CONTEXT

This research project evolved out of work on a taught module in e-facilitation and professional practice involving Mirandanet at the Institute of Education, University of London and was funded by the General Teaching Council for England (GTCE). The aims of the module were complex and ambitious. On one level participants were encouraged to develop their skills as e-facilitators in order to manage discussions on a range of policy issues within the GTCE forums. On another level the aim was to investigate how the skills and capabilities being developed and practised within a professional online community might also be applied to our own professional contexts in school. This paper relates to the latter level, reporting on my own investigations into the use of an online community within a primary school context. However, it should also be noted that much of my own research within the school context was informed by the experiences I gained whilst participating within the professional online community, enabling me to reflect much more critically upon the research being carried out in school.

For example, as a participant within the GTCE forums I came to see the importance of online socialisation realising that if discussion was to be constructive, participants needed to feel secure enough to express their views openly. Sharing a joke online or reassuring a

fellow participant who had had a bad day were important socialising factors that helped to build trust between discussants. Having experienced this myself enabled me to recognise the importance of online socialisation for the children using the online community I established in school. Similarly, participating myself in discussion forums as part of the module also helped me to reflect upon other features of learning online in that it became evident that the role of the facilitator could be key to constructive discussion. Certain techniques such as summarising the threads in the discussion in order to move the debate forward seemed vital to a constructive discussion forum. This then had implications for my role within the online community I established in school in that I needed to play an active role in order to facilitate learning.

Thus, the strength of the module in efacilitation and professional practice combined with the participation within the GTCE forums was that it allowed for practice to inform theory and vice versa. As I embarked upon my own research project to establish an online community in my own primary school I had already developed a sound understanding of some of the issues through participating in an online community myself. However, I had also begun to generate my own questions that related much more to the use of such techniques with primary school children such as: could this way of learning genuinely motivate younger learners? And: what impact, if any, would this way of learning have upon those children who are often alienated by more traditional approaches to the curriculum?

CRITIQUE: SHOULD WE TAKE THE TUBE?

At the beginning of this project my own feelings towards ICT and e-learning were mixed: excited by the creative potential that seemed to be offered by ICT but also sometimes sceptical as to the benefits. The following analogy illustrates my scepticism: as a supply teacher in London at the beginning of my career, I regularly used the Underground to get around. However, it was not until I spent a day exploring central London by bus and foot that I began to gain a real understanding of the geography of central London and how different places were connected. So, could it be argued that ICT enables children to reach places faster but without necessarily gaining a depth of understanding? How do we as teachers ensure that the way we use new technologies in school has real educational benefits for our pupils? In this critique, I will engage in a brief review of some of the key texts that portray a social constructivist approach to the integration of ICT and offer, I believe, the potential to secure lasting educational benefits.

In describing the transformation that takes place at the core of the educational process, Wenger identifies several key themes of a social constructivist approach to education thus:

What makes information knowledge – what makes it empowering – is the way in which it can be integrated within an identity of participation. When information does not build up to an identity of participation, it remains alien, literal, fragmented, unnegotiable. It is not just that it is disconnected from other pieces of relevant information, but that it fails to translate into a way of being in the world coherent enough to be enacted in practice. (Wenger, 1998, p.220)

For Wenger, learning takes place in 'communities of practice' via a complex interaction between participants as they negotiate meanings and create identities in relation to the learning resources available to them. Similarly, this 'situated' approach to teaching and

learning with computers is cited by Wegerif and Scrimshaw (1997, p. 4), who emphasise the importance of context when considering the impact of ICT:

it is these conversations and the communicative climate of the classroom that shape children's expectations as they approach the twin challenge of both working at the computer and together with others. It is also this larger discursive context, particularly the way activities are integrated into the curriculum that will determine whether or not experiences at the computer contribute to any continuing development of understanding or competence.

This might lead one to ask what a situated learning approach to ICT can actually look like. Indeed, one could argue that we only need to look at the use of computers at home and for leisure to see a situated learning approach in action. The home use of computers to perform any number of activities from buying and selling online to chatting with friends and strangers in different forums is thriving among certain groups of society. There is a plethora of online communities of practice already in existence. The issue is this: can this model be successfully emulated within the context of formal education and what might be the affordances of such an approach be in a formal educational context?

Salmon cites the lack of face-to-face interaction online as a potential benefit in online collaboration (Salmon, 2002). Moreover, online collaboration enables participants to reach beyond cultural and geographical boundaries, as Sproull and Kiesler (1993) note “electronic messages lack information regarding job titles, social importance, hierarchical position, race, age and appearance”.

This raises interesting questions for the development of online communities in education in that it could be argued that they herald the introduction of a new pedagogy; a pedagogy based more on equity and democracy. Although Salmon's work like Sproull and Kiesler's does not specifically relate to the use of online communities with primary-aged children, perceived hierarchies within the classroom amongst peers can have a significant impact upon children's ability to learn. Thus any technology that potentially mitigates the impact of social status might be seen to afford a more equitable learning environment. Salmon offers a hierarchical five-stage model of collaboration and learning through online communities beginning with access and socialisation with participants eventually reaching a level where participants co-construct knowledge. However this is, it could be argued, at odds with the current predominant pedagogy with its preoccupation with tightly focused learning intentions, content, pace and instructional pedagogies. This pedagogical tension is evident in the importance Salmon assigns to the role of socialisation in her five stage model. Furthermore Salmon refers to research carried out by Oxford Brookes University whose findings claim that "it is important that 'leisure use' of Information and Communication Technology does not become seen as something to be eliminated in the interests of efficiency" (Breen et al, 2001).

Indeed, from the perspective of my own project involving online communities within the primary school context, this blend of academic and social, could be seen as problematic in that such online socialisation might be regarded as ‘off task’ rather than as integral to the whole process as Breen et al (2001) suggest. Furthermore, this complex relationship between the leisure use of technology and more formal use within the school context is highlighted as being significant by Sangar et. al. (2001) who argue that children's use of computers in the home is largely unmediated by home or school. This can also lead to a lack of critical awareness about technology or their own role as consumers of technology (Sanger et. al., 1997; Livingstone and Bober, 2005). From this point of view it could be

argued that schools need to engage with popular media more in order to facilitate a critical awareness amongst children.

To return to the question of the educational affordances of online communities, I would like to draw attention to the work of Livingstone (2002) who states that many people “express disappointment that the kinds of contents currently available fall far short of the ambitions conceived for the internet”. Livingstone claims that there is a general misconception surrounding the notion of 'interactivity' when online in that often, people's perception is that there is someone 'listening' whilst this is not the case. In other words, much internet content, is just 'out there' and there is little real sense of community. However, whilst this may be the case, it could be argued that virtual online communities such as Think.com could go some way to facilitating “the shift from just receiving to also creating content” (Livingstone and Bober, 2005) as children begin to take advantage of increased interconnectivity on the internet. Online communities could be seen as a logical progression as users of the internet attempt to make sense of and assimilate the plethora of information available online as they communicate and 'negotiate identities' (Wenger, 1998) in relation to the information. In other words, online communities, it could be argued, afford genuine 'interactivity' in that there usually is someone online available to respond.

However, another important affordance that Scardemalia and Bereiter (1996) accredit to online communities is the potential not just for the co-construction of knowledge but also for the collectivisation of knowledge. They argue that although teaching strategies based on collaboration may be adopted within the traditional classroom, many of the routines and practices isolate the children as learners and approach knowledge as an essentially individual entity that is not socially constructed:

conventional schooling places undue emphasis on individual initiative and time- and space limited discourses. Individual students all work on the same task, with no distribution of responsibilities or building on each others' inputs. (Scardemalia and Bereiter, 1996, p. 155)

Consequently, the implication here is that not only do online communities and network technologies enable the extension of collaborative boundaries beyond the walls of the school and the arbitrary timings of the school day, but they can also facilitate the disintegration of traditional boundaries and relationships within school settings themselves, which would normally negate against the notion of the shared construction and collectivisation of knowledge. In an online community children can easily share and access each other's work, without having to have it recognised and then displayed in a public place or presented to the class by the teacher. The teacher remains a significant influence upon the learning community but their role is not as central when compared to more traditional pedagogies. This is an important shift for, according to Scardemalia and Bereiter, pupils can engage more with the processes of understanding issues, problems and arguments. Whereas in traditional teacher-pupil exchanges the teacher's own knowledge may 'curtail what is to be learned', in an online community:

the teacher can contribute to the discourse but there are other sources of information as well. The teacher remains the leader but his or her role shifts from standing outside the learning process and guiding it to participating actively in the learning process and leading by virtue of being a more expert learner. (Scardemalia and Bereiter, 1996, p. 155)

To summarise from the perspective of the literature reviewed, it seems there are a number of potential affordances that might emerge from the establishment of online communities as a new modality for learning within primary schools. These could be summarised as:

- a more equitable arena for learning when compared to traditional face-to-face classroom settings;
- opportunities for child-led learning;
- the integration of socialisation and learning; and
- the potential for knowledge construction as a collaborative enterprise as opposed to a purely individual pursuit.

THE CASE STUDY: WHAT AFFORDANCES EMERGE FROM THE USE OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES WITHIN THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CONTEXT?

Aims

The broad aim of this project was to investigate the perceived affordances, positive and negative of an online community within the primary school setting. As highlighted within the literature review, much has been written regarding the use of discussion forums to facilitate the construction of knowledge within Further and Higher Education contexts, bringing together individuals with common ground to share and exchange information (Preece, 2000). Similarly, much has been established regarding the stages of progression within online collaborations through socialisation to knowledge construction and development in Higher Education (Salmon, 2002). However, can these models of e-learning be successfully emulated within the context of the primary school? And, do they herald the introduction of a potentially new pedagogy? Whilst the overall aim was to investigate the affordances of online communities when used within a primary school setting there was also the need for some more focused questions relating specifically to how some of these theories might manifest themselves within the primary school context thus:

- to what extent might child-led learning emerge through engagement within the online community?
- how far could socialisation, and learning online be successfully integrated?
- could the online community provide a new arena for learning, which motivated those often alienated within the face-to-face environment of the classroom?
- to what extent would the children engage in shared knowledge construction through engagement and communication within the online community?

These questions, informed by the review of the literature became the key themes when coding and analysing the raw data as I will demonstrate later.

The community – real and virtual

This project was based in a one and a half form entry primary school with Year 5/6 children. Denton Community Primary School is based in the port town of Newhaven with approximately 270 children on roll. The school is situated on the outskirts of Newhaven. The majority of the children come from the local housing estate whilst some travel from the centre of town or nearby towns such as Seaford.

The online community was established using free web-based software provided by Oracle Corporation more commonly referred to as Think.com¹. Access to the software and community is only available to schools and as such provides – in theory – a secure online environment within which children and teachers can communicate and develop their own web space, using the software tools provided (See Figure 1). Participants are able to upload documents, images and multimedia onto their pages, as well as create their own discussion forums and message boards. Moreover, these tools emphasise the active participation of the user in that they are open ended and require the user to consider the purpose to which they could be used on their own website. As well as providing a variety of tools for the development of participants' personal websites, there are several facilities within the online community for making contact with, and visiting other users' areas of the online community. Children from different countries can visit each other's websites and communicate, navigating the online community by seeing who is online or searching for a specific school's area of the community.

Such open-ended online tools combined with the facility to communicate with peers and other teachers, appeared to yield the opportunity to explore the affordances of using an online community within a primary school setting.

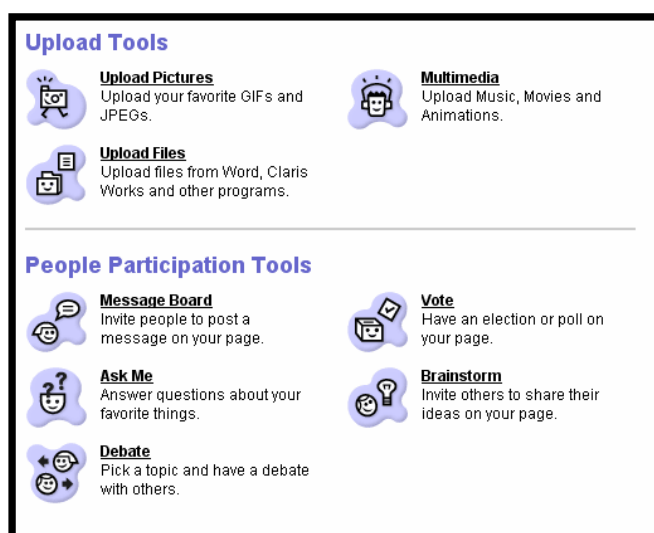


Figure 1: User Interface – some of the tools available

Methods

The main body of the research focused on three Year 5/6 classes using Think.com to develop and participate in an online community and took place over the course of the summer term 2003. An after school club was established to enable children without access to computers at home to use the community out of school hours. Within the school curriculum the online community was utilised by a team of Year 5/6 teachers to address aspects of the curriculum in Geography, PHSE and ICT (see Table 1). The limitations of the software meant that children were only able to create ten of their own web pages so from the beginning of the project it was established with the children that five pages would be kept for school based activities, whereas children were free to choose the content of the five webpages they created in their own time.

Week	School-based activities
1	Online community established and introduced to the children. Code of online conduct agreed with children and after-school club established
2	ICT lesson in suite to introduce the online tools available to the children; how to upload documents and images; how to change the appearance of their pages. Also discussion about the need to keep five pages for activities in school
3	First online task given to the children. "About Newhaven" – children asked to create a page using text and images to introduce where they lived as part of a Geography topic on contrasting localities
4	Continued as above
5	As part of PSHE and Citizenship an online discussion was held to consider how the school playground could be developed to improve the quality of play times
6	"Showcase" – children were asked to use the remainder of their webpages to show case the work they had done in ICT across the curriculum over the past three years. This consisted of multimedia presentations in Science and History, stories and poems, maths games they had created in Excel, work created in ICT and Art, images of their work in Design and Technology.
7	
8	

Table 1: Project outline

RESEARCH PARADIGMS

In attempting to come to terms with the philosophical basis underlying the research, a considered view of contrasting paradigms within social research was undertaken. Initially, a determinist approach (Burrell and Morgan, 1979; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2003) appeared to be an attractive option with its mechanistic view of cause and effect.

However, to what extent would it be appropriate to apply such scientific tools to social reality? The main disadvantage of this stance is that it is based upon a view of the subjects as passive participants responding to a set of environmental conditions, whereas my own philosophical bias was towards a view that recognised the role of 'free will' (Kant, 1781/1934) within peoples' actions and reactions to various environmental stimuli. That is, it is my own belief that virtual communities, like 'real' communities, are created by the individuals who participate within them, taking decisions about how to respond to others within the community both shaping and being shaped by the environment according to their own beliefs and needs. An approach that did not attempt to engage with the subjects and probe the motivation behind their actions would not have been apt. In other words, 'the principal concern is with an understanding of the way in which the individual creates, modifies and interprets the world in which he or she finds himself or herself' (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2003, p.7).

This research was firmly based within an interpretive paradigm in that it was based upon a philosophy of social reality as socially constructed as opposed to being determined by some underlying oblique laws of social science. From this perspective, it becomes impossible to separate social reality from people, and although one may observe similarities in different social contexts they may still remain unique to that context (Bassegy, 1999). Gilbert describes the interpretive paradigm as one in which "the social world consists of multiple, subjective realities" (2001, p.33). Within this tradition of social research, close engagement with the rich diversity that constitutes the social context becomes imperative for as Strauss and Corbin (1994, p. 279) point out:

all interpretations, whether or not they have the features or status of theory, are temporally limited – in a dual sense. First, they are always provisional, they are never established forever; their very nature allows for endless elaboration and partial negation (qualification).

That is, meaning is grounded in the particular social context out of which it emerges and as such is susceptible to change for social reality is a dynamic entity which itself changes in time. For me this necessitated a close engagement in the field in order to paint as accurate a picture as possible of the particular social context surrounding the online community that I was researching.

A range of data collection methods were used to enable a degree of triangulation. These were: observations of the children working together in the form of two short video extracts; field notes of any telling incidents; three informal interviews with three pairs of children; two semi-structured interviews with colleagues from parallel Year 5/6 classes and; various telling extracts from children's webpages downloaded for analysis. I regularly archived and analysed a sample of the children's online exchanges by downloading and saving some of the material they developed on their websites.

It was also necessary to consider a variety of ethical issues in relation to this project and I considered a range of ethical standpoints in relation to the research. Ultimately, however, as opposed to taking a particular ethical standpoint, due to the complex nature of ethical issues when researching children's online activities I endeavoured to be 'constantly ethically aware' throughout the project (Bulmer, 2001). Initially in providing children with access to an online community that only some would be able to access out of school I decided to establish an after school club providing access to the community in order to mitigate some of the impact of the digital divide. Similarly, before downloading and archiving children's web pages I sought their permission for this explaining why I was interested. Perhaps one of the more difficult ethical areas I had to deal with was regarding the boundaries between home and school. For example, how far could my own responsibilities for the safe and appropriate use of the online tools reach? What was my role if children used the online tools inappropriately whilst engaging in the community from home? This did indeed occur on a few occasions with children sending inappropriate and sometimes offensive messages to each other. Faced with such a situation it seemed clear that as initiator and administrator of the project I had a duty to intervene and address these issues with the individuals concerned.

Within the three data sets (archived material from children's webpages, colleague interviews and video excerpts/observations of children working) I analysed the data for common themes in order to bring validity to my findings and ensure some level of triangulation within the research data. Key phrases in the interviews with colleagues were coded and categorised as were extracts of archived material from the children's sites. Video data was also treated in the same way with – as far as possible – critical unspoken incidents described and embedded in the transcripts.

As there is relatively little research into primary children's use of online environments, the approach I adopted drew significantly on the philosophy underpinning grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). That is, for myself as well as the children and colleagues involved this project was 'a voyage of discovery' and as such, I wanted to be able to respond to themes as they emerged from the project rather than restrict the project from the beginning by imposing a rigid methodological framework.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The initial question I posed at the beginning of this project was: what affordances emerge from the use of online communities within the primary school setting? This broad question was then subdivided into various categories informed by the review of literature. The following discussion and analysis will be based around the following themes:

- child-led independent learning;
- integration of socialisation and learning;
- new arena for learning: face-to-face versus traditional classroom environment; and
- socially constructed knowledge.

An additional theme that seemed to emerge out of the data was that of pedagogical tensions in that, whilst a significant number of children engaged with the online community during out of school hours, there did seem to be a blurring of the boundaries between formal and informal education. In other words, child-led learning often emerged during the formally timetabled ICT lessons with children often pursuing tasks they had determined or begun outside of the formal curriculum, which caused tension for the teachers. This additional theme will also be discussed.

It should be noted that this was a small scale case study and whilst I sought to triangulate my findings through adopting a range of approaches (colleague interviews, student interviews, student observations, analysis of web pages), levels of reliability regarding the conclusions I draw are limited by the scale of the project, and as such are not intended for wider generalisation without further research.

CHILD-LED INDEPENDENT LEARNING AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

I found evidence of this in all data sets. Whilst children used the online community for socialisation within school and out some children also significantly took responsibility for their own skills development as these extracts downloaded from different children's webpages demonstrate (see Figure 2).

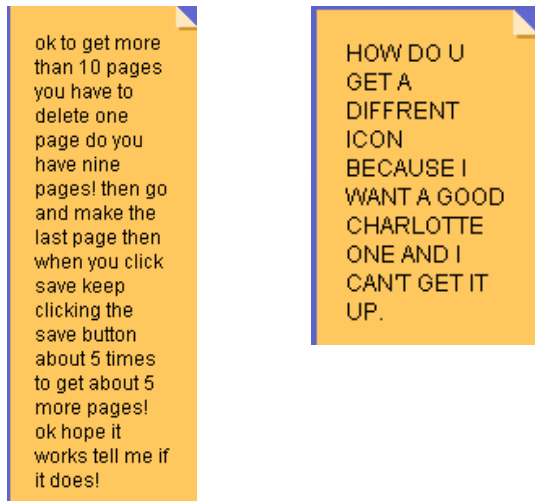


Figure 2: Virtual ‘sticky notes’

These messages left on pupils’ websites demonstrate the degree to which some children participating within the online community took responsibility for the development of their skills, finding out from each other often through online socialisation about techniques, such as cheating the system into allowing users more than ten pages or how to change icons (see Figure 2). Similarly, some children also discovered how to use HTML tags to change the colour of their fonts or create backgrounds to their pages by visiting older children’s websites within the online community (see Figure 3).

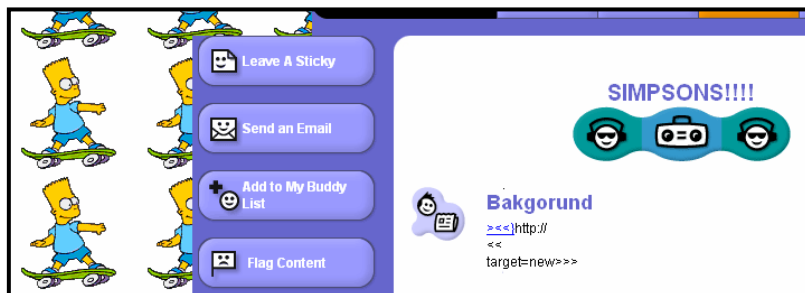


Figure 3: Extract from a pupil’s webpage

In this extract it is possible to see that the child has used HTML to create a themed ‘Simpsons’ background to one of their pages reserved for out-of-school work. The use of HTML was not taught within the school-based sessions but this child learnt how to do this through viewing such techniques on other children’s websites and enquiring how to do it. Much of the archived material is rich in such examples of information about various techniques exchanged between the children. Similarly, in both of the interviews with colleagues, teachers made reference to the relative ease with which children shared information and learnt from each other within the online environment, as this extract indicates:

Interviewer.. Yes!.... What do you think are the pros and cons of using Think.com and I'm thinking in terms of em pupil's reactions and the way they respond to publishing their material on the web?

Teacher.. Well.. They all just seem to take to it they they.. there's no hesitation... that's what you could do... they just did it

Interviewer: Right

Teacher: Em.. so if it was a package that was designed to get children publishing on a website... then they just do... so it's successful

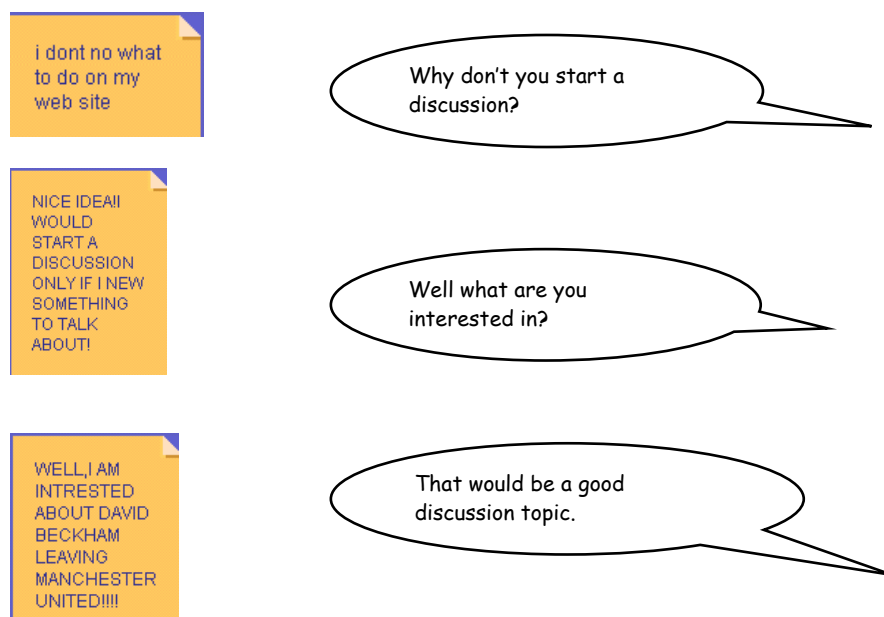
Interviewer: Right

Teacher.. Really... and em it seems a very user-friendly way of going about it, I mean they don't really need much instruction once they've logged in with a password and they chat to each other from one computer to another you know

In other words, the teacher interviewed here is reporting the ease with which children seemed to pick up the skills needed to use the software and create their webpages through chatting online and exchanging information with each other.

NEW ARENAS FOR LEARNING

Another significant theme which did seem to be evident in the data was the way in which pupil to teacher relationships and dynamics seemed to shift in some cases. I was particularly interested in how those children who were normally quite reticent or even alienated in the face-to-face context of the classroom would respond to an online environment. I monitored this by identifying specific children in the class and archiving what I believed to be telling exchanges that they had initiated within the online environment. There appears to be evidence that within the context of the online environment children who would not normally initiate conversation with the teacher found it easier to approach the teacher. This manifested itself in several requests for help relating to the development of their ICT capabilities and also reassurance about current issues such as worries about SATS. Figure 4 is typical of some of the discussions initiated by some of the children who tended to be more reticent in the face-to-face context.



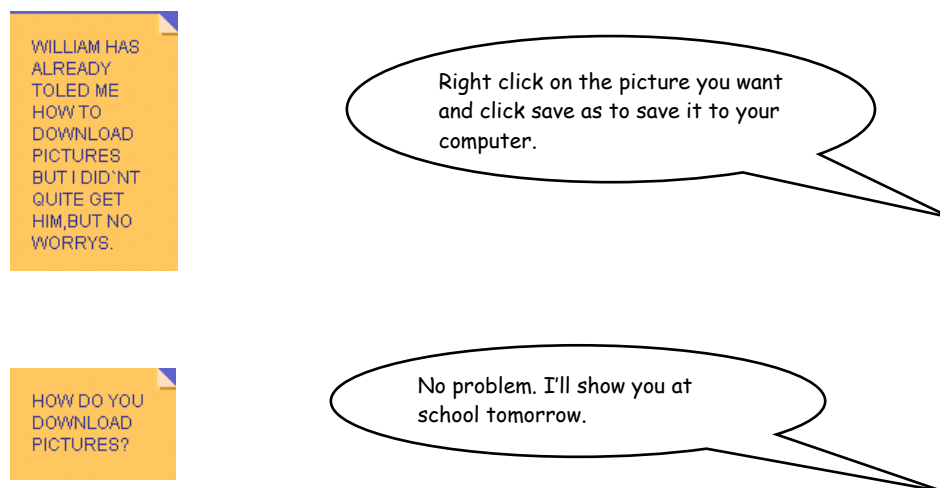


Figure 4: Virtual Pupil / Teacher Exchange²

This exchange took place out of school hours as the pupil initiated an online discussion with myself to try out ideas he had for developing his personal webpages within the online community. As previously mentioned other students whose level of engagement and willingness to initiate discussion with the teacher in the traditional face-to-face setting appeared to demonstrate higher levels of engagement within the online community including during out of school hours.

PEDAGOGICAL TENSIONS

There were several aspects to consider when analysing the formal school-based activities within the online community. Firstly, within the data there are strong signs that the children perceived the use of the online environment as something other than school and work. The way in which they took responsibility for the development of their sites meant that they were sometimes resentful of using their webspace for school-based, teacher-initiated projects. Pupils remained motivated when using Think.com in school but some made a clear distinction between the different uses of the online environment. Due to the fact that children were able to work on their sites at home there was a strong sense of ownership over their material.

This tension operated on another level too in that in the same way that children sometimes felt school was encroaching on their own web space, teachers also indicated that it was often difficult to keep children 'on task' when using the online community to carry out school-based tasks. One of the drawbacks for one colleague was that they try to find out how much they can 'use it for their own ends'. Ultimately it seems there was a tension here between teacher-led activity and a more child-centred approach which the online community lends itself to. This tension was also apparent in the other colleague interview as this short extract shows:

Interviewer: OK, are there any negative outcomes apart from what you've already mentioned about inappropriate messages?

Intemiewee: *Bad (pausing for thought). I think it's monitoring children doing their*

work er... but I always remember from ICT (possibly refering back to experience at University) you know, I'm not necessarily the person in control with all the answers.

The children that are using it (ICT) day in and day out at home probably know how to do things better than I do. So they help each other there's a lot of dialogue going on between computers.

The issue of control and the teacher monitoring the learning was significant in both interviews. As the extract above shows, there was a recognition amongst colleagues that using the online community required a different approach to pedagogy, one that recognised the child's ability to take responsibility for their own learning. As a participant researcher, I too felt this tension between the predominantly instructional mode of teaching adopted within more formal lessons and the situated approach adopted when using the online community as the medium.

However, in my analysis of the work done by the children within the curriculum there also appeared to be an issue concerning the design and functionality of the community. Whilst children clearly enjoyed using the online community as the forum for presenting their school-based work in Geography it could also be argued that they were limited by the constraints of the software. Figure 5 below is an extract from a child's webpage about their hometown, developed in school as part of their Geography topic on contrasting localities. Although the child has made good use of the online tools available, inviting any visitors to his site to vote on which of the town's attractions is most appealing, the information is set out sequentially with little integration between the text and images.

Pictures - May 12, 2003
My town

our beach our ferry our fort

Vote - May 8, 2003
want do you think sound's the best?

Voting Options:
downs
ferry
paradise park
swimming pool
beach

Total Votes: 9
0
1
1
2
5

[See Who's Voted](#)

Remember: Only you and the people who have voted can see the results.

Article - May 7, 2003
NEWHAVEN

DOWNS
At the back of newhaven and south heigton are the Downs. It is great if you want a long or short enjoyable walk or bike or horse.

FERRY
we have a boat and it takes you to france in less than three hours.

PARADISE PARK
paradise park has a meuseum, game zone, plants section, pet shop, crazy golf and park.

SWIMMING POOL
at our local swimming pool their is a float in the shape of a island much difficult fun plus there is a gym, sun bed, you can have parties if you wish so and a baby pool.

BEACH
we have a stoney and sandy beach it's great fun in the summer wether you want to relax or be amused.

Figure 5: My town

Similarly, other curriculum-based activities were also limited by the constraints of the software. The online discussion forum set up to debate how the school playground might be improved to improve the quality of school playtimes was also an activity that the children enjoyed contributing to. However, the discussion tool did not allow the discussion to be threaded or for participants to respond to individual postings. This limited the potential for real debate between participants.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Much of the data and evidence I have cited does seem to suggest that the educational use of online communities in the primary school could indeed afford new opportunities in teaching and learning. A significant number of the children involved in this project responded positively to the opportunities they were given through the online community, taking responsibility for their learning and using it to share their discoveries about the medium and also extend and develop their own capabilities in the use of the community as illustrated above. However, it should also be noted that this was not the case for all children. A significant number of children used only a limited number of the online tools available and did not particularly show any inclination towards developing their capabilities. Some of the children seemed to become fixated on a very narrow selection of tools available to them often filling their own personal webspace with very similar stylised cartoon images they had found on the Internet. Moreover, the fact that the other teachers reported difficulty sometimes in keeping the children 'on task' during the formal ICT lessons based on the use of the online community in school was also significant. These anomalies in the data I feel point to a significant issue in the educational use of online communities within a primary context in that the relative autonomy and opportunities for child-led learning that do seem to be afforded by online communities, are only a part of the issue. In order to take full advantage of these affordances, there is an assumption that children understand the art of learning or know how to learn. Consequently one of my recommendations from this project would be that more research needs to be focused upon what it is that enables some children to exploit the opportunities for child-led learning in online environments.

Another conclusion that seems to emerge from my work on this project is that the blurring of the boundaries between formal and informal education that seems to occur when utilising an online community within the curriculum can be problematic. Whilst utilising the online community to support the children's work in Geography did seem appropriate and motivating for many of the children – some of the children actually brought in their own digital photographs they had taken at the weekend of their home town for their webpages – much of the independent learning about how to use the online tools appeared to occur out of school as children exchanged information and ideas. This begs the question of whether indeed the most appropriate use of online communities is not outside of the formal curriculum. Similarly, the tensions that colleagues clearly identified between the plans that they had for the use of the online community during dedicated sessions in the ICT suite and the agenda that the children wanted to follow also seems to indicate this problematic relation between the formal and informal use of the online community. Related to this issue between formal and informal use of online communities in a primary school setting are questions of design. Much of the independent, child-led learning that seemed to occur throughout the duration of this project appeared to take place outside of the formal school-based activities planned by the teachers. This begs the question of whether the design of this particular online community and its tools (Think.com) is more suited to informal out-of-school use. A further recommendation is that there needs to be

further research into the design of such online communities and how they might be designed more specifically for use in more formal contexts.

Ultimately, whilst it is clear that a great deal of further research into new communication technologies and their affordances needs to be done if we are to harness their educational potential, I feel there is some urgency in this. Firstly, early on in my own project I had to deal with a particularly difficult incident in which a small group of children had targeted abuse at another child through the online community despite having discussed and agreed upon a code of conduct for the use of the forum. This took up a great deal of my time and was particularly stressful, dealing with parents and children; it tested my own commitment to this approach to learning. However, whilst this was occurring, my research into children's use of online communities outside of the school environment led me to the work of O'Connell at the Cyberspace Research Unit who argues for the need to empower children in the appropriate use of new communication technologies such as chat rooms, mobile phones and instant messaging. From O'Connell's (2003) point of view

communication technologies are becoming integral parts of childrens lives and arguably this needs to be reflected in programmes of education that teach children how to recognise, establish and maintain the kinds of boundaries they ought to have.

I would argue that the more schools fall behind on the use of new means of communication the more vulnerable and exposed children and teenagers will be to the inappropriate use of new communications technologies. This project and the ease with which some children involved took to communicating online and sharing information, has given me a much greater awareness of how far communications technologies are becoming integrated into young peoples' lives. It has also emphasised for me the importance of embracing new modes of communication such as online communities if the education we offer is to remain relevant and exciting to young people.

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NOTES

¹ Further information is available at: http://www.think.com/en_gb/

² Teacher's responses reconstructed as the child removed the teacher's 'stickies' from his site after a while.