Informal Learning Projects and World Wide Voluntary Co–Mentoring

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INTRODUCTION

This article seeks to explore the potential of online communities to support and develop new professional-development practices around collaborative mentoring and informal learning projects. This study seeks to address the following research hypotheses.

1. Informal learning can be utilised as a developmental approach in an online open environment.
2. Online communities can learn from involvement with informal learning projects and they can support the development of a community history and identity.
3. Online communities can be effective in supporting informal learning projects.
4. Informal learning can be a vehicle for crossing borders related to lifelong learning (namely those of time, culture, religion, geographical distance, different jobs, and careers).

Jobring (2002) describes online learning communities as context providers in a move away from being content providers. Jobring also notes three key areas of concern, which are community management, community measurement, and skills for working within communities. Community measurement particularly asks how we might come to know what is being learned within a community. This article offers a clear framework to facilitate a view of what is being learned through the collaborative support of informal learning projects in an online community. However, in providing the possibility of an audit, it argues that these are but traces of learning activity at several levels within the community. One outcome of this collaboration is the creation of archived case studies from within the community. This provides a method for knowledge management in a voluntary setting. The processes and

the experiences that have arisen from this pilot work have borne richer fruits in work that continues today.

The point raised about skills is also interesting as Jobring (2002) identifies seven skills marking an apprenticeship from initial joining to a position of greater autonomy. In the initiative described below, the author marks out a similar apprenticeship structure around involvement in co-mentoring of informal learning projects. His own experience of apprenticeship (described below) does, however, suggest that the idea of an apprenticeship as a linear hill climb may hide other issues to do with movements between different positions within the apprenticeship. As such, the apprenticeship may better be described as a development framework wherein the structure is an apparatus to be used differently according to needs and circumstances across time.

This article describes a pilot self-help initiative within an online community. This model is the author's own informal learning project (Tough, 1971) and forms part of the author's doctoral research at the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom. The model provides an open member-to-member service that is culturally sensitive and inclusive.

INFORMAL LEARNING

Tough (1971) and others have identified that many people have developed numerous ideas and interests outside formal educational settings. Although the potential of the Internet has been identified, there is little evidence of practice beyond casual use of the Internet for browsing and joining discussion lists or participating in occasional events. This paper will demonstrate how informal learning is being developed within a voluntary online community. Table 1 (derived from Long, 2001), gives an overview of relationships between formal and

Table 1. Overview of the relationship between formal and informal learning

	Formal	Informal
Percentage of all learning (Masie as cited in Managers Forum, 2004)	5	0%-70%
In an average week (Livingstone as cited in Long, 2001)		15 hrs per week
In first 3 months of starting employment in a company (Bishop as cited in Long, 2001)	8%	92%

informal learning. This is drawn from different studies in the literature.

Although formal learning may be very important in providing opportunities and space to develop learning, and to seek accreditation, for instance, it plays a comparatively small part in the totality of our learning. Whether we look at this based on an average week, the initial stages of new employment, or across a lifetime, the message is the same. Informal learning is the major part of our learning activities and yet receives much less recognition (Coffield, 2000) and much less support. Part of this lack of support has to do with the obvious difficulty in pinpointing how to offer support and what kinds of support might be most useful.

This paper responds to this difficulty by describing how an online community can and has provided support in concrete terms though collaboration and support of online learning projects as a learning activity for a community as a whole.

Informal Learning in Communities

Informal learning, like all learning, is understood as a social activity where meanings and practices are shared and situated. In non-networked environments, community centres have a long tradition of being supportive meeting places for learning to take place and often provide access to tutors, resources, and mental space. This article affirms the idea of learning within communities but repositions that view within a global online community context. The focus here is upon the idea of online communities as professional-development arenas for development (in this case, around

issues to do with learning and teaching involving technology).

The development of a learning-community model is presenting us with a new and increasingly popular vehicle for networked professional development. Examples include course and institutional communities, professional communities, and communities open to anyone interested in general education (see Schlager, Fusco, & Schank, 2002, for more details and examples). Within the literature, the learning-community concept relates to an apprenticeship of practice shared or developed by a given group (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the model described below, the aim is to show the enactment of a move away from being context providers toward the idea of communities as supporting the learning projects of individuals. In constructing such a view, the author will thereby demonstrate the emergence of shared practice within an online community.

ACTION RESEARCH

This chapter aims to explore online communities as a vehicle for professional development around topics to do with learning and teaching with technology. Action research was chosen because of the unique nature of the context (namely, one that is entirely voluntary, draws heavily upon informal learning projects and online mentoring, is cross-cultural, and open to private- and public-sector participants in a spirit of mutual collaboration and self-help). This combination of factors means that literature is scarce. The aim is to support the development of our online community and of our

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