Chapter 4.4
E–Research Collaboration, Conflict and Compromise

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, we consider two multi-institution, multinational education research projects in Europe that used a variety of technology to facilitate online collaboration as virtual communities of practice. While judged as successes by their funding bodies, the projects both exhibited symptoms of conflict that were subsequently resolved. We apply a personal inquiry technique and draw on situational analysis to identify and explore the conflict resolution processes associated with issues of leadership, organization, and technology in e-research. We contend that the communication technologies themselves must support the development of a collaborative community; and that the social, technical, and cultural facets of electronic collaboration evolve integrally over time. We conclude by proposing strategies that may assist colleagues in setting up a successful e-research project.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws its empirical base from experiences on two multi-institution, multinational education research projects in Europe: DELFEE and EQUEL. These were undertaken largely online using a range of software. The projects achieved their overall objectives and were innovative in their respective approaches to electronic collaboration, but each took time to establish ways and means of working amongst team members. Areas of conflict included the choice of software platform, the language in which the teams communicated and the mechanisms for intersite communication. Interventions were necessary to resolve these areas of conflict.

Individually, project members were highly literate in electronic communication and had experience of successful collaborations in the past. In these new e-research groupings, however, there were unanticipated barriers to realizing

the organizational synergy offered by electronic collaboration across educational institutions. A previous examination of the features of these projects explored the extent to which they mirror global and national initiatives to introduce virtual research environments (King & Deepwell, 2006). Here we review and extend our thinking using personal inquiry and drawing on situational analysis to analyze the development of organizational synergies in both projects in terms of Leadership, Organization, and Technology.

We contend that the development of a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) has, in each case, enabled operational, procedural, and cultural norms to be established, and the consequential innovative, cross-border outcomes achieved. Furthermore, we believe that the communication technologies themselves must support the development of this collaborative community; and that the social, technical, and cultural facets of electronic collaboration evolve integrally over time.

Against the background of relevant literature, and the general context of the two projects, this chapter will:

1. Examine how the classic features of a community of practice translate to an e-research environment;
2. Explore the barriers to successful electronic collaboration and its development as a functional community of practice that may be pertinent to other e-research projects;
3. Discuss approaches to resolving the conflicting expectations, skills, and cultural norms of electronic collaboration team members, and thereby achieving synergies through technology;
4. Propose strategies that may assist colleagues in setting up successful e-research projects.

BACKGROUND

We first examine the term e-research, then the application of the concept of virtual communities of practice and, finally, the synergies that technology may offer.

Defining E-Research

When we set out to understand the difficulties we had encountered as researchers on the collaborative projects described in this chapter, we found a vast raft of literature concerning computer supported cooperative working, e-research and virtual research environments (King & Deepwell, 2006). We saw the term "e-research" used to define the information and communications technology infrastructure and processes developed to support collaborative virtual research, as well as the research itself. The UK's Joint Information Systems Committee asserts that e-research extends the term "e-science" to encompass other nonscientific disciplines and smaller scales of collaboration (Joint Information Systems Committee [JISC], 2007a), even including researchers "wishing to collaborate more effectively with a handful of colleagues world-wide in the same field of interest" (JISC Support of Research Committee, Virtual Research Environments Working Group [JCSR VRE], 2004, pp. 2). In addition to data manipulation and analysis which are essential to e-science, research activities which information and communications technology might integrate include "marshalling of resources, scholarly discourse and publication, and the creation and maintenance of collaborations, across disciplines, institutions and countries, including support for meetings and organizational processes" (JCSR VRE, 2004, p. 3).

Paradoxically, there is a competitive drive between nation-states to develop information and communications technology infrastructure to support their own e-research and e-science. JISC's activities are part of a well-developed UK

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