

Why Did It Work For Us? Reflections on a successful networked learning community

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The Networked Community in Module CPD461 ()*

Abstract

Eleven participants of one module of the MA in Clinical Education at Edge Hill University, analysed the reasons for the 'success' of their specific networked learning community whilst studying 'Designing and Tutoring E-learning Opportunities' 2007. This paper, written by participants, is centred on their experiences, giving a different research perspective on networked learning communities.

Some participants undertook a quantitative and qualitative analysis of archived interactions on the WebCT discussion board whilst another compared data available from the previous course two years earlier. Participants shared and analysed qualitatively, reflective statements upon their own discussion board contributions and a thematic analysis of a post course meeting was undertaken.

The module enjoyed humour, mutual respect, democracy, good listening and discourse, and a non-directive tutor role. Peer facilitators emerged, enthusiasm was maintained by peer support in a circular process, with technology as both the medium and the end. Participants became more conscious of the impact of their contributions, making more effort to have predictable effects with them, attempting to limit damaging behaviours, and were prompted to be more rounded contributors, responding to others and encouraging participation from the less vocal. For some it was only by doing it themselves within the module that the understanding of the module, and the added value of e-learning, could be realised.

Keywords

Analysis of interaction; facilitation; active learning; learning community; value added.

Introduction

Arguably the most important perspective in any learning experience is that of the learners themselves. In this paper, we intend to capture and describe the collective experiences of a highly successful online learning group. This study seeks to explain, from the learners' perspective, how and why eleven participants on the e-learning module of the MA in Clinical Education at Edge Hill University found this experience to be such a success. Our group studied the WebCT based; 15 week; blended learning module entitled "Designing and Tutoring E-learning Opportunities" which concluded in June 2007.

Research based on the learners' perspective is scarce. Coates has argued that most research into student engagement has been utilitarian and has not explored the characteristics which underpin the concept of engagement - "few research studies into online learning have focussed explicitly on students or student engagement"(Coates 2006). Others have relied on the methodology of using "before and after" questionnaires to try to tease out student expectations and experiences. (Goodyear, et al. 2005). The interview material in the studies by De Latt and Lally of Networked Learning among M.Ed students at Sheffield has been influential in exposing the processes and influences perceived by students as they moved through different phases of their

interactivity. Their growing awareness and sensing are part of the skills that developed alongside other typical skills, such as regulation and communication. Critical Event Recall is an example of an aid to identifying significant participant observations and their team roles such as completer-finisher, group focussed facilitator, or task focussed contributor (De Laat & Lally 2003; 2004). In contrast to previous research, this paper is centred on participants' experiences, indeed it is written by participants, thus giving a different research perspective on networked learning communities.

At the conclusion of the module group members expressed the opinion that this was a very successful, active, supportive and enjoyable learning experience and community. This prompted us to try to identify the characteristics of this experience which marked it out from other online learning experiences. Our aim is to articulate how and why these positive experiences arose.

Methods

The participants met with the module tutors to discuss the course two months after the end of the module and agreed to share the work of analysis. Three principal data sources were used to explore the participants experiences.

1. The Post Course Meeting

An informal meeting held approximately one month after the module ended attended by learners and tutors was recorded using a digital microphone and recorder. The recording of the post course meeting ran for 2 hours and 24 minutes. The quality was poor at times making some voices indistinct. The structure of the session was very open but essentially running through three stages: recognition of aims; feedback and discussion of learning experience; and planning future development. The initial analytic method used was to identify the key topic areas and key commentary and issues. The recording was transcribed and analysed using a thematic analysis by one participant (Pix). (Quotations from this meeting are identified by (Pg) in later text.)

2. The Reflective Statements

The module required all learners to submit an 800-1000 word reflective statement on their contributions and experiences of the discussion boards. With the consent of all the course participants, we shared these amongst the group. Two participants (Pv & Pviii) then analysed ten of these reflective statements using a thematic analysis.

3. The Discussion Board

Eleven participants (Pi-Pxi) and two tutor facilitators on the module used an asynchronous discussion board throughout. All postings on the board were archived and two participants (Pvii & Px) undertook a quantitative and qualitative analysis of the postings. Another participant (Pviii) compared the quantitative data with data available from a 2003/4 iteration of the module. This methodology was similar, but not identical to that undertaken by Sherratt and Sackville in their studies of online discussion in the postgraduate certificate programme which precedes the Master's course (Sherratt & Sackville 2006)

Analysis

With the permission of all participants, we performed a retrospective analysis of the discussion postings, using two classification frameworks; - Johnson and Bishops' (2001), and Garrison's (2001). These were slightly modified and combined with Meyer's concepts of the personal nature of postings to create the following classification list:

1. Trigger
2. Exploration
3. Integration +/- Reference
4. Resolution
5. Social

6. Peer Support
7. Academic Interaction
8. Academic Monologue
9. Reflection
10. Administration
11. Use of Names
12. Tutor Facilitation

Each activity was coded by two investigators and allocated a primary and secondary theme (if appropriate).

A descriptive quantitative analysis compared the 2007 course against data from a similar iteration of the course in 2003/4. The 2003/4 course contained an additional two activities, but was otherwise very similar in content and pedagogical style.

Results

Quantitative analysis

Table one shows the comparative frequency of submissions between the courses

TABLE ONE: Frequency of Postings

	2003/4 course	2007 course
Overall number of postings	443	711
Number of tutor postings	77	82
Postings in General area	93 (21% of total)	244 (34% of total)
Range of number of individual postings	9-86	8-116
Range of postings for an individual activity	7-50	26-53

Figure One shows the frequency of postings by activity and in the main area. There is a clear increase in the number of postings in the general ('Main') area. However, there were more postings for every activity in 2007 as compared to 2003/04 indicating an increased level of engagement throughout the course.

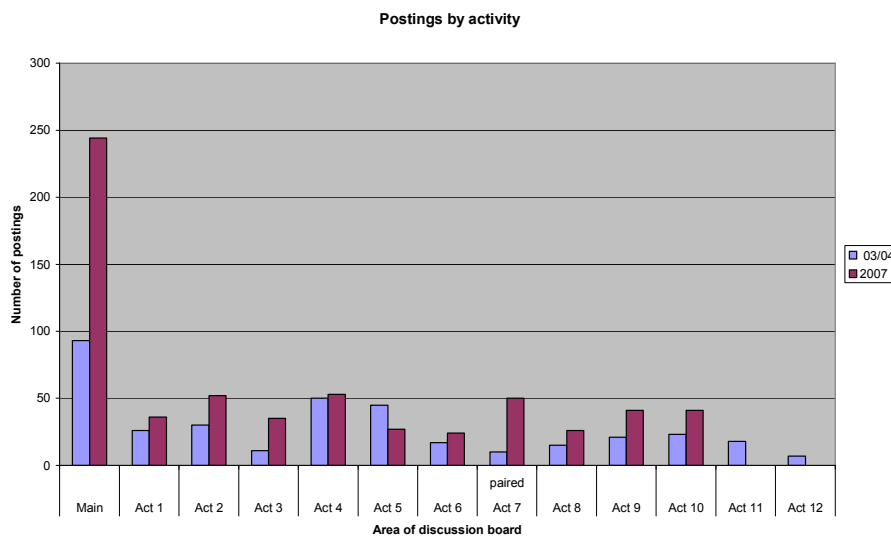


Figure 1: Comparison of Postings, 2003/4 & 2007

Qualitative analysis

Qualitative analysis revealed several areas of influential experience amongst participants.

1. Conduct and progression of the group

Surprise and delight were expressed at the prolific posting of the group resulting in the volume and *'the sheer quantity of material posted'* (Pii). This suited both the reflectors who preferred to post completed works and the more reactive who would post initial thoughts as *'work in progress'*. (Pii)

'a large number of posts, the majority of which were short, responsive and pithy' (Pii)

'Should I have known we would have been so active, I would have made contemporaneous notes of key passages!' (Pii)

Some participants recognised their fewer than average contributions and tried to make up for this lack of activity, recognising how greater involvement might work for them in the future.

'I did make a conscious effort ... to summarise the postings so far' and *'acknowledge the work already done by the group'* (Pviii)

There was evidence of both 'early bird', 'tortoise' and 'steam trains' posters. All were able to safely contribute though concerns were expressed.

'I actively moved on two activities in this module to become part of the conversation' (Px)

'lonely if timed incorrectly; the tortoises have not joined in and the early birds moved on.' (Px)

'Lurking (Weller 2002) helped me get my thoughts together' (Pv)

Participants recognised that the *'wide ranging contributions ranging from chit chat to a detailed report'* (Pxi) were both *'interesting and dynamic'* (Pii) and were of many types; social comment, questioning, bridge building, summarising, leading, motivating, encouraging, supporting etc. Those who had previously only made academic contributions both recognised the value of, and began to contribute to, the social chat.

Participants commented that the discussion had realised a social constructivist philosophy in that they found co-operative learning new and unusual.

2. Content of postings

The vast majority of the responses to the activities were of exploration, which were important in encouraging shared learning. There was a sense of duty to the group to contribute and huge numbers of references were shared within the group initiated by Pi. The discussions led to surprisingly little disagreement which has been recognised as a feature of e-discussion before and may be influenced by warning e-etiquette at the beginning of the course. (Jeong 2003) It may reflect that our community is not quite as strong as we would like to think, or that there are no personalities willing to challenge. The one true area of contention regarding scoring of postings was resolved without harm to the group.

It was surprising that there was significantly less resolution than other studies at only 3% (Meyer 2004) (Garrison et al. 2001) Only once was a summary of the discussion undertaken and only one participant came close to resolution but then steered clear. This lack of resolution could be for a number of reasons; Garrison suggests lack of time to reflect and hesitation to share inadequate solutions in public. (Garrison et al. 2001) We would add fear of closing the discussion and fear of misconstruing others' thoughts.

3. Trigger postings

Triggers were relatively infrequent but important (18%) and were of two distinct types. The first was the obvious opening statement or question and the second we describe as the latent trigger. This often came as a statement, could be social and was often a little off track; the poster was possibly unaware that it would be a trigger to further discussion. However it was taken up by a number of participants who could relate to it. e.g.

“there are only three inanimate things in my life that are irreplaceable; my 21st watch, my wedding ring and my data” (Pii.) Triggers were important in starting and maintaining discussion. In this group Pi was particularly good at this. However when this person went quiet there were at least four who took on this role (Pii ,Piv ,Pv, Px). Sherratt and Sackville refer to this as a peer facilitator and allude to the importance of having more than one in the group. (Sherratt & Sackville 2006) Not only were triggers offered but they were generally taken up (86%).

Trigger postings in the main area tended to be limited in response and primarily concerned with peer support, administration and socialising. This area was important for community building. (Brown 2001) The group were adept at segregating the use of the discussion board and consistent with the use of threads. Pix was particularly good at pulling us back on track on the few occasions discussions veered too far away. Social postings contributed to 25% of the total, previous discussion boards report social postings at only 5% (Curtis & Lawson 1999)

4. Patterns of communication

The group used names and referred to others' statements either directly or indirectly. This reduced the amount of monologue that occurred and is consistent with other studies of active groups. (Sackville & Sherratt 2006) Dialogue felt like a face to face conversation, interacting and not posting serial responses (Holmes 2005) Participants were good communicators, used few attachments and individual postings were diverse in nature. This may reflect luck in the forming of this group; however all had completed previous modules and may have developed experientially.

Piv and Pvii used a style of discussion that serially referred to others' postings and this was adopted by many other participants in later activities. The use of names is known to be very powerful in teaching face to face and was found to be powerful in this e-discussion as not only did it reflect that one's posting was being read and appreciated, it generated discussion and was a foundation to peer support. It was interesting that this was used less in the main area which was already a 'cosy' area.

5. Relationships/Group characteristics

Our group of 11 people added to the opportunity for interaction as we are from quite different backgrounds. There was evidence that pre-existing relationships, common ground of previous modules or similar specialities was relevant, but also that one is more likely to read the postings of others who are perceived to be like minded, by one's *'online self'*. (Pii)

Face to face sessions were felt to cement relationships, and posted profiles were felt by some to be useful but by others to be of no consequence. A *'sense of duty of care'* (Pg) and commitment was expressed to the group and social and mutual support acknowledged along with respect for those travelling from further afield to face to face sessions

6. Tutor activity

The tutor facilitators were infrequent posters in the activities; however the comments made suggested they were following discussion with a light touch. The facilitators being "ghosts in the wings" may have allowed discussion to become more informal but productive. (Mazzolini & Maddison 2003)

Tutors were felt to be invisible designers who became visible if there were problems and behaved as a supporting tool. There was felt to be a;

'paucity of active input from tutor' (Pv)

but that from a 'behind the scenes' position they had been providing

'encouraging discussion, co-operation and giving prompt feedback' (Pvii) (Pg)

7. Peer Support and Facilitation

Some individuals were felt to be *'drivers in the group'* (Pg). Missing out periods and catching up or *'getting back in'* (Pg) were also possible. Peer support was evident in many postings particularly in the main area with Pvi leading the way. Interestingly much of the peer support came as statements or limited response items which previously we had held in poor regard. (Sherratt & Sackville 2007) Curtis suggests that it is not only those who trigger that are leaders but also those who provide significant feedback. In fact all members of this particular group fulfilled both of these roles. (Curtis & Lawson 1999) at some point. More than two peer facilitators helps keep groups active and can allow more chance of sustaining if relief or rest needed. (Sackville & Sherratt 2006)

In the reflective statements participants commented on the tremendous sense of support and community which developed online.

'What strikes me overall is the degree of social interaction that has occurred on this module'
(Pvi)

'fascinating, rewarding and engaging' (Pii) group and summed up as a
'special,...supportive group of individuals (who) achieved an enormous amount of work' (Pii)

'I have taken encouragement and motivation from seeing the progress made by others' (Pi)

8. Design

The design of the activities was important with activities designed to help in the assignment preparation. The importance of design for interaction and response has been advocated by amongst others. (Salmon 2000). Less worked up input was required than experienced in other modules with which this was contrasted. *'So much easier to write'* (Pg), *'Open season'* (Pg) and *'I was OK shoving something up'* (Pg) less *'precious'* (Pg) (than in other modules) and seeing what happens and getting quick feedback *'using the group'* (Pg), *'Sense of immediacy'* (Pg). The group together acted as platform for developing material though individual *interactions* were also valuable.

9. Emotional impact

There was excitement at the openness of activities and opportunity to *'chit-chat'*, there was so much to talk about whilst feeling *'safe'* (Pg) and comfortable with others. The social aspect was more valued at its conclusion than at its commencement - *'never thought I would join in with that'* (Pg). Useful and supportive interchanges helped *'cement the functionality'* (Pg) of the group.

There was personal emotional investment and humour was important. This sense of fun has been found in other successful groups and lends to the community bonding. (Sackville and Sherratt 2006) Many individual comments were about the emotional impact of online discussion, some of which used powerful descriptors.

'posting a discussion point and feeling it would not be read is frustrating, lonely and demotivating' (Px)

'I feel bereft at the end of the module' (Px)

'The discussion board has been an invaluable supporting tool in facilitating that journey of change' (Pi)

Several of the group underwent significant life events during the module,

'Life got in the way of my learning' (Pvi)

For some these were exposed in their reflective pieces but, interestingly, not all expressed during their time online. The combination of group support (despite lack of awareness of the situations) and asynchronicity of the discussion board were sufficient to enable them to keep going,

'I felt the group's energy and mutual support balanced my inclination to withdraw' (Pix)

'I would have found it impossible to collaborate in a synchronous chat room' (Pviii)

10. Issues related to the technology and learning environment

Technical issues, personal and external, made keeping in touch difficult at times,

'struggled with the technology helped greatly by the other members of the group' (Pv)

'Nervous that my technical knowledge was not up to the level required' (Piv)

There was an awareness of the opportunities for misunderstanding electronic communication without the congruity of face to face communication.

'I do try not to make short, snappy replies that can be misinterpreted' (Pxi)

'I tried to say something I thought was humorous which was misconstrued; adding to a feeling of distance' (Pv)

Discussion

It is clear that this module succeeded for design, personal and interpersonal reasons. All participants were highly motivated and appeared to have a reasonable amount of regular time to devote. The level of discussion was high; promoting a real sense of camaraderie, bonding and shared learning in a relaxed atmosphere. The participants brought with them a degree of sophistication of e-discussion from previous modules/courses and naturally fell into various roles in the group but were flexible and able to take on other roles when needed. There were many peer facilitators. This module provided a circular process, with technology as both the medium and the end. The resulting was a demystifying of e-learning through which immersion and transformation resulted in achievement of deep learning.

It was a superb demonstration of Wenger's 'communities of practice: groups of people who share a concern or passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly' (Wenger 2001)

'I also learned what it feels like and recognised a genuine online socialisation experience' (Pix)

Many participants described that they had gained more through participating on the discussion board than by learning alone, from how to facilitate discussion themselves, to interpretation of module content.

'I think I learned more from the group discussions than the reading' (Pv)

'The discussion forum is the online equivalent of having the verbiage translated by several people before being able to grasp the whole as a concept' (Pviii)

Over time the activities felt less task orientated: They became more conscious of the impact of their contributions, making more effort to have predictable effects with them; attempting to limit their own damaging behaviours; and were prompted to be more rounded contributors in discussions, responding specifically to the contributions of others and trying to encourage participation from the less vocal.

The recording of the post module meeting strikingly summarised the tone of the module with a sense of group enjoyment and humour, lots of fun and laughter, a sense of mutual respect and democracy, good listening and consequent relatedness of discourse.

We recognise that learner led evaluation is an emerging model and that successful groups may present a partial view of group processes and contributory factors. Nevertheless our deep reflections among a group of committed clinical educators and use of several evidence sources have reinforced and developed our thinking. We concur with De Laat and Lally in seeking to develop praxis from participant experiences through educational research. (De Laat & Lally 2004) We also believe learner led studies may be possible, with elements comparable to Critical Event Recall, through the shared analysis of hitherto confidential reflective statements and group debriefing sessions. However, in order to achieve this, high levels of maturity, team trust and psychological safety are needed.

For some it was only by doing it themselves within the module that the understanding of the module, and the added value of e-learning, could be realised.

'I feel I've had some sort of 'Eureka' moment, and I'm not sure whether to be delighted with the result or partly ashamed that it has taken me so long!' (Pvii)

Summary

We consider the success of the group to be linked to membership from a variety of backgrounds, with differing learning styles, given well-designed activities in which to participate. The enthusiasm for the subject and course was high and maintained by great peer support.

(* Members of the Networked Learning Community

Simon Carley, Consultant in Emergency Medicine; Jill Cochrane, Clinical Educator, Paediatric Intensive Care; Mike Cranney, General Practitioner; Clare Etherington, General Practitioner; Karen Groves, Consultant in Palliative Medicine; Bridget Moss, Director of Education (Palliative Care); Carmel Noonan, Consultant in Ophthalmology; John Reid, Consultant in Health Protection; Julie Richardson, Specialist Registrar in Paediatric Intensive Care; David Roe, Consultant in Emergency Medicine; Rebecca Sinfield, Clinical Lecturer In International Child Health.

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