REACT: AN EMERGENT ONLINE LIFELONG LEARNING MODEL FOR PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN HIGHER EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

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Keywords: Communities of practice, Online learning, Lifelong learning, Social learning.

Abstract: Online learning using communities of practice as a model for learning is fast becoming a new landscape for educational institutions. In constructing online communities of practice (CoP), the most obvious approach has been for academics to set up the CoP on a university system integrated with a formal teaching programme, located in the same place. We take the view that Place is a social construct, derived from the people that contribute to it and imbue it with meaning. Our position is that the places in which formal and informal learning occur need to be distinct and should have different feelings of ownership, governance, purpose and meaning. Providing for informal learning experiences in a place clearly owned and managed in an academic presence is counter-productive to learning that is intended to be owned by practitioners and located in their work space. We suggest that educators do not belong in communities of practice, do not belong in informal learning communities and that formal and informal learning communities need to be distinct in terms of place and membership. In this paper we present an alternative model for Lifelong Learning that we are developing through out Transfer of Innovation project, RE:ACT.

1   INTRODUCTION

We have recently been successful in gaining Lifelong Learning Programme, Leonardo da Vinci Transfer of Innovation funding to pilot this innovative approach to technology enhanced learning within the workplace. The project, involving five partners across three nations, is entitled RE:ACT – Relating Experience: Advancing Collaborative Tourism. We are now in the process of developing an online programme in social media for the European tourism industry.   The potential to effectively transfer to different contexts is based on the premise that as the combination of formal and informal collaborative online learning has, at its core, people, and the specific contexts offered by them, it is organically shaped by the context, rather than being imposed uncomfortably on it. The transfer implicit within the project operates at both geographical and sectoral levels and within the project we are working with partners from Wales, Sweden and Bulgaria to test and develop this approach.

Lifelong learning is now at the heart of the development of a knowledge economy. In adapting to the needs of the knowledge economy, higher education often responds by providing online learning courses for professional practitioners. Online learning technologies are claimed to augment learning by providing improved flexibility of access; greater opportunities for learner-to-learner and learner-to tutor communication and shared electronic resources. More recent research suggests that the

technology can not only create further opportunities for learning, but can also enhance learning, through the adoption of collaborative or cooperative methods (Hew and Cheung, 2007; McConnell, 2006; Jones et al., 2007; Booth and Hulten, 2003). We adopt a socio-cultural theory of learning (Vygotsky, 1978) that can be seen as a basis for cooperative and/or collaborative learning methods. Dyke at al., (2007) show how its characteristics can be coupled to online learning technology, describing the learning as primarily:

> "dialogic with emphasis on interpersonal relationships involving imitation and modelling; language as the primary tool for learning used for sharing and development of personal and shared understanding; making using multiple forms of asynchronous and synchronous technologies offering the potential for richer and more diverse forms of dialogue and interaction between learners and learners and tutors and learners and their resources for vicarious forms of learning." (Dyke et al., 2007 p.86).

We also benefit from the work of Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave on their development of learning seen through the lens of communities of practice. This paper focuses on the development of these informal learning communities in partnership with formal higher education courses. We concur with much reported activity (Fuller et al., 2005; Ponti & Hodgson, 2006) that learning needs to focus on placing the learner and their context at the centre of the learning activity and on work-place problem solving. We also agree that online communities need to be supported through a process of enculturation and community support.

In previous work, constructing professional online communities (Bell & Samuel, 2009), data taken from interviews in the field indicates that 'externally managing an online community, takes from that community its own sense of identity and self determination' (Bell et al., 2011). Evidence from this earlier work has now led us to take a new position in relation to community of practice formation and development in terms of membership and place in which formal and informal online learning occurs. Here we explore this model for online lifelong learning and report on our work in progress on learning activity design. Our position is that the places in which formal and informal learning occur need to be distinct and should have different feelings of ownership, governance, purpose and meaning. Providing for informal learning experiences in a place clearly owned and managed in an academic presence is counter-productive to learning that is intended to be owned by practitioners and located in their work space.

2 CONTEXT

The focus of the learning is the development of social media skills, for learners who are part of the European tourism industry in Bulgaria, Sweden and Wales. This focus evolved from our understanding that it has now become the ordinary, rather than extraordinary for tourists to participate in social media. Consequently, engagement with new information technologies has become increasingly important for competitiveness of the European tourism industry. The European Commission advocates that use of new technologies by tourism enterprises, particularly SMEs should be strengthened (EC, 2010). However, with 94% of the European tourism industry employing less than 10 employees, and many of our tourism businesses being small, family run enterprises, the way in which ICT is used within their businesses is unsurprisingly far from uniform, varying with basic skills, their size and their relative position in the tourist chain (EC, 2010).

The industry already has the disposition to collaborate, such collaboration generally taking the form of Tourism Associations, trade groups and informal networks and as such already participates in communities of practice, although very rarely is this within an online context. Although it may not be recognised as such, informal learning already exists within these groups but can be hampered by the challenges and barriers to effective networking activity, such as inadequate resources in terms of finance, time and manpower (UNWTO, 2003). Our learners in Bulgaria, Sweden and South West Wales are primarily small scale accommodation and attractions owner/ operators with little time to participate in learning which is not specific to their context, or which takes them outside their normal sphere of activity. The key to developing lifelong learners within the tourism industry is, we feel, to ensure that the learner is at the centre of activity, where academia and industry work in partnership.

3 DEVELOPING LIFELONG LEARNING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

3.1 The Changing Landscape of Formal Education and Lifelong Professional Learning

Communities of practice (CoP) are groups of people who have a shared purpose for a common activity (Wenger, 2000). In our context for our lifelong learning project, the tourism industry is seen as the community of practice. CoPs can be local or global, can be physical or exist in a digital environment, a 'digital habitat' or exist across both these boundaries (Wenger, 2009). Learning in a CoP involves sharing of knowledge and practice. Knowledge in this situation occurs unsytematically, as a response to the day to day goings on in the tourism industry context, through issues and problems that arise with customers, suppliers and other allied industries that interface with the tourism industry. Learning in a CoP involves engagement in solving real problems, to gain a 'working knowledge' of it. Wenger's (1999) community of practice view of learning is centred around the concept of apprenticeship where new members or in-service members improve their practice through a process of enculturation into the community. Membership of a community of practice is seen in terms of 'belonging' to the community. To belong requires members to have or to be working towards a level of 'competence'. It is this competence that gives meaning to the community and helps it construct its purpose.

Lifelong learning is now seen as a core goal of any knowledge economy. Higher Education (HE), who traditionally serves more abstract theoretical learning, has been turning its attention to professional learning, learning that occurs within the workplace for the workplace. This change in the landscape of educational institutions from formal to more informal learning is registered by the increase in interest for designing learning for professional practitioners amongst both teachers and researchers. The increase in online learning aligns very well to lifelong learning, as it provides the access and flexibility that technology can offer in terms of time and place independence. This, coupled with a rise in popular use of social media technologies, has drawn attention to a more learner centred approach to learning online. Groups of practitioners can now be offered formal learning courses 'any place and any time' and professional learners can come together to fill gaps or advance their knowledge. In this context learning design is centred more on social learning approaches using collaboration through dialogue as the basis for learning. Learning is less focused on theoretical concepts, acquired through a teacher and more on practical knowledge or workplace knowledge that is relevant to practitioners' work (Goodyear, 2002). The implication of this is that universities who now wish to engage with professional learners need to consider a new approach to learning that focuses on an apprenticeship in knowledge work.

Evidence (McConnell, 1994, 2006; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2003; Farmer, 2008; Ponti & Hodgson, 2006) from research into online learning of this form suggests that much of the attention in this area has been in relation to the central aspect of community formation, maintenance and development. Many of the ideas generated focus on how to facilitate learning, on the instruction, support, mentoring and fostering of the online learning community. The focus has been on instructors acting as a guide, facilitator or a partner in the learning community. The intention is to reduce the power differences between the learners and teacher, to reduce the focus on the authoritarian figure of the 'academic expert', so that a more authentic practice learning model ensues. Farmer (2008) describes a model in which learning involves gaining competence in the language, rules, customs and culture of that community. He describes how in an online environment "supportive, mentoring relationships can happen in discussion boards and chats, and through individual reflection and encouragement" p.230. Ponti and Hodgson (2006) have also developed an online learning model which "seeks to foster dialogue and collaboration between managers [practitioners] and educators to leverage work and life experience" p.3.

In these and other examples there are two areas that we often find ourselves taking issue with. First, is that in most examples of higher education, learning design using online CoPs place the learning community only in a university environment. Secondly, membership of the CoP is not just practitioners but also academics. Our experience tells us that too often educators using the CoP model alongside more formal approaches make use of a university learning environment only, a formal place, to conduct informal learning which belongs with practitioners. From our work in developing practice based learning communities (Bell & Samuel, 2009) we posit the idea that academic educators do not belong in communities of practice,

do not belong in informal learning communities and that formal and informal communities need to be distinct in terms of place and membership. This raises issues about how the community of practice would be initiated and supported.

3.2 The Riddle of the Liberating Structure

These issues centre around the question of what makes someone eligible to be a member of a community of practice and draws on Pedler's (1981) work on learning design models for use in community based learning. He identifies "the riddle of the liberating structure" p.77 in which learning is almost always organised and staffed by an outside agent, the educator, who clearly is not a peer, identifying the irony in the problem of "guiding people towards self-direction". He suggests that power should be altered to ensure a more equal footing.

Descriptions of communities always describe membership of communities as groups of people who share a place to undertake a common purpose. The 'place', of learning is, however, itself a social construct, derived from the characteristics, attitudes and feelings of those people that contribute to it and imbue it with meaning; place is 'a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world' (Creswell, 2008, p11; McConnell, 1994, p116). This understanding within the context of a learning community, and subsequently the 'place' of the learner derives its meaning from the people that comprise that community. The membership of the community is therefore an essential consideration in ensuring truly practitioner centred learning, where seeing, knowing and understanding are focused on practice and are not transformed by external academic influences. Our position is that the places in which formal and informal learning occur need to be distinct and should have different feelings of ownership, governance, purpose and meaning. Providing for informal learning experiences in a place clearly owned and managed in an academic presence is counter-productive to learning that is intended to be owned by practitioners and located in their work space.

The socially constructed spaces in virtual learning environments are places where learners can meet to develop their sense of identity a place to carry out common 'tasks', a place to exist. (McConnell, 1994). Interference from people outside, changes the community's identity and its natural emergent leaders. Learning communities need to attend to their own issues of climate, needs, resources, planning, action and evaluation. This requires personal investment, commitment, trust and a sense of belonging. It is these characteristics of participation and the know-how to achieve these that HE needs to also attend to during their engagement with lifelong learners. This underpins the focus of our activity in designing learning for our European course. In doing this we also draw on Pedler's (1981) notions of helping self, helping others towards the greater goal of 'social development'. In this situation development demands a social contribution, a 'giving back' as well as a personal qualitative leap. Lifelong learning should not only be seen as an individual goal, it has a social context, a community context and a community of practice context.

3.3 Designing Learning Activities that Underpin Lifelong Learning Development: A Work in Progress

We recognise that a position of self determination and self governance is not an easy position to achieve, especially in an unfamiliar online learning environment. It requires staged development, through staged activity and progressive enculturation into the practices of the community. For many, who may or may not already be participants in a CoP, the transition to an online CoP may not be something that can be easily transversed. For these new or mature tourism practitioners, development of competencies for belonging to a CoP can be transversed through engagement with formal learning. We argue that the development of a professional course that reflects lifelong learning needs to integrate activity that supports belonging to an online CoP. In essence, we see this as not the work of a facilitator managing power imbalances present within the CoP but the work of the learning designer in activity design. The task of the learning designer is thus to work in partnership with industry practitioners to design learning activity that works at two levels - subject of interest and community development.

The first at the subject interest level engages learners in identifying tasks that could be of use to the learning community. In our context these could be product reviews, critical summaries of impending legislation, membership list and activity, training events, resources. The second level of learning design should focus on underpinning this with an individual's personal development as a member of the community. This will involve asking the learners

to identify tasks that would involve them in offering themselves up as a resource for community; leading projects; supporting members and engaging in governance of the CoP. This may involve creating special interest groups, evaluating participation, awarding accolades or prizes or noting the contribution of other participants for recognition. These two levels of activity together provide both knowledge work and community building activity that benefits the community. For us, lifelong learning is not just about individual development for now but also about community development into the future.

Our work in progress is now at a stage where we are designing learning activities integrating both levels of participation. In our project we have a team comprising of both academic and tourism industry practitioners working on this and hope to provide greater detail on the learning activity design that underpins community development at the next opportunity. Our planned pilot in Autumn 2011 of the learning design will be followed by data collection within the three European countries. Interviews with a small group of participants will seek to illuminate the learning experiences encountered through the adoption of a phenomenological approach.

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