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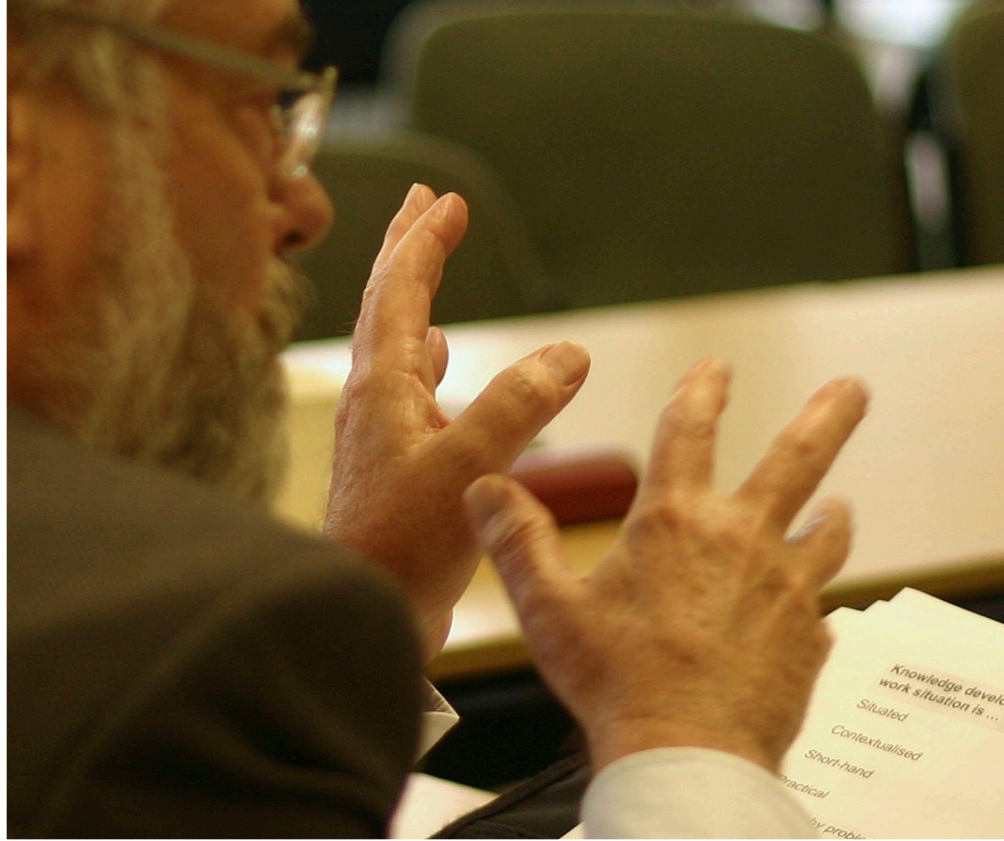**Leading education and social research**
Institute of Education
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From practice to praxis – through work based teaching and learning

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From practice to praxis - through work-based teaching and learning

Summary

This developmental project focuses on the 'unconference', a generic term for informal virtual meetings used in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) events. In an 'unconference' the learning agenda is decided at the grassroots of the education profession: the power relationships in traditional conferences between expert speakers and learners are destabilised. Teachers in England have led the development of two kinds of 'unconference': the TeachMeet that concentrates on the craft of the practitioner and the international MirandaMod, a themed unconference that encourages a focus on 'praxis' – the melding of learning theory, pedagogy and practice. This paper investigates the MirandaMod model that reflects the complex, social, intellectual and practical process of professional learning and facilitates this under three headings: the opportunities for teachers to record changes in their beliefs and understandings in relation to changing practice and developing skills; the variety of locations and modes that reflect different cultural contexts for learning; and, the potential for professionals to re-evaluate their identity in relationship to their role and their pedagogical observations. MirandaMods also enrich social learning over time when face-to-face meetings are limited because of economic restraints.

Introduction

This paper describes a developmental project that concentrates on observing an informal mode of professional learning called the 'unconference'. The term 'unconference or igathering, the subject of this development project, is a generic term for virtual meetings between professionals: in this case educators. The term refers to the design of an online forum that challenges the power relationships in a conventional conference. These unconferences often take place simultaneously face-to-face and online. This approach has recently been adopted by professional educators in TeacherMeet (wiki.scotedublogs.org.uk) form designed in order to promote a focus on the teachers' knowledge and craft rather than on theory and abstraction. MirandaMods (www.mirandanet.ac.uk/mirandamods) are a complementary form of themed unconference that creates the conditions for new thinking to take place. Freire (1968) described this change as 'praxis': the moment when the professional sees the relationship between theory and practice for themselves. Praxis, is a high-level mode of professional operation where the practitioner does not only possess skills but a deep knowledge and understanding of the theories that underpin practice. This can lead to a profound change in the professional's sense of identity that is the aim of the best professional development.

Pedagogical models underpinning CPD

The underlying pedagogical mode of the traditional professional conference is 'information transmission'. This popular phrase is used to denote the

communication of expert knowledge that is one way only. Chandler (1994) complains that the information transmission model assumes communicators are isolated individuals. No allowance is made for differing purposes, differing interpretations, unequal power relations and situational contexts. The traditional role of expert educators around the world is to pass on their expertise to students who learn this information and reproduce it for examinations and tests without necessarily processing it to change their practice.

The 'unconference' model eschews this approach to learning through demanding that all the participants are actively engaged in generating knowledge and knowledge exchange. In this innovative mode of professional learning the traditional power relationships between the expert and the learner are unbalanced. The underlying pedagogical approaches 'social interaction' promoted by Lave and Wenger (2004) in the development of the 'community of practice (CoP)' concept over nearly two decades; these are groups of professionals who chose to learn together informally. Two related theories expand Wenger's vision about CoP practices: Communal Constructivism and Braided Learning. Communal Constructivism emphasises teachers' knowledge building role as they work together often across national boundaries (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger, McDermott et al. 2002). This 'social interaction' approach to learning picks up on Freire's notion of the wider value of collaborative learning in social and cultural contexts for professionals who want to take charge of their own agenda. One of the approaches to ICT CPD recommended by the Betca-funded Landscape Review is a greater concentration on the role of groups of professionals who meet informally to exchange the theories and practices (Daly, Pachler and Pelletier 2009a, b).

As CoPs become e-mature an interesting form of social learning is emerging that is underpinned by the use of technologies. Salmon has analysed the five steps of learning that take place when a course is run online: access and motivation; online socialisation; information exchange; knowledge construction; and development. Salmon complains that knowledge construction tends to happen when students are writing their essays on their own. It would be fruitful in the development stage, the fifth step, if they came back to the classroom and shared collaboratively what has been learnt in their individual studies in order to gain new insights into learning together. But this rarely happens because students begin new modules at this stage in new groupings.

Braided Learning theory (Haythornthwaite et al. 2007; Preston 2008) picks up on the individual learning in Salmon's step four (http://www.atimod.com/e-moderating/5stage.shtml) and then considers how the development step, five, might be an activity like an unconference that is collaborative, community-focused and voluntary. This contrasts with the activity of a group of individual learners moving towards accreditation on a formal course. Braided Learning is an emergent theory that is tracing how this kind of informal dynamic knowledge creation works in a collaborative online context. Braided learning refers to a meaning-making process that is emerging from the observation of online communication. Cuthell (2005) has traced the development of students' collaborative knowledge sharing in detail in a MirandaNet online course on e-facilitation in a virtual learning environment. The second braided learning study looked at the productive use of

email texts and e-facilitation processes (Preston 2007). In this third study, undertaken as communities of professionals mature in digital competence, the 'unconference' has become a crucible where social learning can find expression using virtual meeting software transcripts, ichat, remote multi-authored digital concept mapping, microblogging and video streaming. The resources can be found here www.mirandanet.ac.uk/mirandamod .

Originally MirandaNet members have been engaged in observing the email discussions taking place in professional CoPs, ITTE (www.itte.org.uk), MirandaNet (www.mirandanet.ac.uk), Naace (www.naace.org.uk). Members' uses of email have indicated how online professional learning is orchestrated by the members of the CoP in accordance with their own agenda (Preston and Cuthell 2007, in press). In this paper, the second in the series, the MirandaMod is the focus. The MirandaMod, extends the opportunities for collaborative learning practiced in a 'community of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991). Cuthell and Preston, in their unpublished evaluation of the iGathering pilot, investigate the value of multi-authored concept maps as a knowledge building tool and found that traditional scoring of the maps did not yield as much information as studying the collaborative process of knowledge building as it took place in real time.

MirandaMod format

In brief, a themed MirandaMod is an occasion when like-minded educators aim to explore an emerging professional issue and create new knowledge collaboratively. This knowledge is then disseminated through the website in order to inspire new grassroots practice.

MirandaNet members define the MirandaMod on their website as an informal, loosely structured unconference of like-minded educators sharing ideas about the use of technology to inspire others. Historically the word Mod, that was offered by a Scottish member, comes from the Gaelic word for a gathering, assembly or parliament. MirandMod is usually (but not always) a fringe event following or attached to a formal MirandaNet seminar/workshop or meeting. The wiki-based format, with streamed webcasts, chat facilities and linked Twitter streams, mean that there is an international dimension to these events. Like wikis, blogs, chat and email, this online multimodal communication is unlike previous modes of knowledge construction because remote participation reduces time and cost commitments. In these unstructured activities software such as Flash Meeting linked to microblogging and instant communication streams empowers digital visitors to engage remotely with those at the terrestrial meetings, even to the point of placing a convivial beer next to their terminal. The virtual world, Second Life, is also being considered as a welcoming MirandaMod location.

These creators of the MirandaMod programme as well as the participants value the mix of perspectives at the meetings. Some of them are also members of Naace, or ITTE, or TeachMeet, or all three, and many are enthusiastic Twitterers. They have engaged in a variety of experiments with 'unconference' models in relationship to the topic, the location and the technology available. The MirandaMod format is

constantly being adjusted according to the topic.

Typically a conventional seminar lasts for 3 hours, normally from 1400 - 1700 hours. Some well-known experts are given thirty minutes to talk about their subject at length followed by questions. In the MirandaMod about educational games, for example, this session covered different perspectives on games in education by researchers, teachers, teacher educators and games developers.

The room is organised without a speakers' platform in a Miranda seminar. Speakers and participants sit round a table facing each other so that the barriers between speakers and their listeners are broken down and the participants can look each other in the eye and see reactions. All participants are also invited to introduce themselves, whereas speakers in conferences often do not ask their audience who they are: sometimes because the audience is too big, sometimes because they are keener talk than learn. The MirandaNet seminar will be filmed and hosted on the MirandaNet website if there are funds to do this. In this way international and national members who could not be present in person can still learn from the topics. In planning the programme complex decisions by the team have to be made that take account of what is topical, who is available to lead the sessions and what technology is appropriate. 'Low cost and no frills' is the norm and speakers are asked to give their time free and so this early seminar and the MirandaMod are free to anyone who has an interest. Supper followed paid for by sponsors during which some of the audience leave and some stay and more participants appear for the MirandaMod who could not attend the afternoon session; these are members of MirandaNet as well as staff and students at the host university, members of ITTE, Nacce and attendees at TeachMeet. Where possible MirandaMods are held in school holidays or on a Friday evening so practising teachers have a chance of attending. Obtaining support cover for teachers in classrooms is increasingly difficult. The 'expert' seminar speakers are expected to stay as well to contribute to the more relaxed MirandaMod. Speakers are invited to see this as an opportunity to learn from the participants as well as contribute.

MirandaMods, lasting from about 1830 – 2100 hours, are open to students and teachers, MirandaNet members and other appropriate professional groups.

The programme for 2009/2010, funded by the WLE Centre, included
- computer games, learning and the curriculum;
- mobile learning, handheld learning;
- balancing digital literacy with digital safety;
- the role of communities of practice in teaching and learning;
- teachers as bloggers;
- ICT CPD;
- CPD - critical incidents;
- visual learning, multimodal learning.

The full resources can be accessed on www.mirandanet.ac.uk/mirandamods.

Speakers and participants are asked to make their materials freely available and the collaborative maps prove to be a good place for useful but less obvious resources to be posted.

All the iChat text, video stream and Twitter feeds are then posted in the MirandaNet Third Space so that those who could not participate have a record of proceedings.

Currently this material is also being used for research in order to develop the Braided Learning framework more comprehensively.

In specific terms, participants elect to present for 2 minutes or 7 minutes on the theme of the session. The use of standard presentation software like Powerpoint is discouraged in order to minimise the possibility of didactic presentations, and to empower engagement with colleagues. On the evening the order of speakers is random. Time factors may prevent some from speaking depending on the incidental discussions that evolve about the presentations. The international dimension is made possible by the use of wikis, FlashMeeting, real time video streams, iChat and a Twitter stream (Preston and Cuthell in press) – all of which are embedded in a Second Life seminar space. The last half hour of the MirandaMod and time afterwards will be taken up by the collaborative creation of an online multi-authored concept map that will outline the group judgments that have been made on the topic under debate. These maps will form the basis of the professional distribution of knowledge and the reports.

Methods

In summary questions that was identified to frame the study was:

How does the MirandaMos enrich praxis in work-based learning?

A case study approach was used in this research (Cohen, Manion et al. 2000). The two researchers worked from the perspective of Complete Member Researchers as defined by Adler and Adler (1987). In this ethnographical stance the research is conducted by members of the MirandaNet CoP who also act as co-researchers.

The findings: achieving praxis

The evidence for changes in praxis was divided under the key characteristics of an effective ICT CPD programme design described in the Landscape review (Daly, Pachler, Pelletier 2009) that reflects the complex, social, intellectual and practical process of professional learning. The conclusions have been grouped under three headings:

Under the first heading, 'the opportunities for teachers to record changes in their beliefs and understandings in relation to changing practice and developing skills,' are several observations:

The MirandaMod is proving valuable in the creation of professional knowledge as opposed to socialising online. This instant communication between work-based experts is a valuable mode for professional learning, where all the participants define the agenda before and during the event.

In particular, a MirandaMod programme addresses some of the issues raised in the Becta reports on the UK ICT landscape. Firstly the emphasis on intellectual debate about digital technologies emphasises a deep understanding and application of skills to developing learning and teaching rather than just a discussion of skills.

Additionally teachers' knowledge and craft is recognised instead of relying on a crude estimate of their skills.

Teachers at any level are sharing in a MirandaMod in the development of an appropriate 'vision' focused on pedagogy. Even if their own focus is skills other participants can open minds to other perspectives. The teacher development aspect is a given in the information experience that they have.

Under the second heading 'a variety of locations and modes that reflect different cultural contexts for learning' are these observations:

o Because PowerPoint is discouraged each participant has to think hard about less linear ways if presenting information and greater use of multimodal forms of presentation. Persuasion simply through eye contact with the audience is also seen to be powerful in terms of performance.

o The way in which a MirandaMod can be set up means that the costs and time required for conventional CPD do not apply. The teachers are, in effect, teaching themselves. They do not need to meet face-to-face in order to keep up their knowledge. This means that the 'policy tensions' which deflect from coherent and consistent development of pedagogy using technologies, and that create conflicts over how time and resources are used to embed technologies within schools are largely dissipated.

o This knowledge creation activity is important because the technology is sufficiently transparent to empower all members to set agenda at the grassroots. This mirrors young peoples' mobile learning activity outside school in easy to use virtual environments like ThinkQuest, Beebo and Facebook that allow them to follow their interests and exploits their existing talents.

o Teachers can utilise the attendant resources in any way they wish and at any time. They can use them for self-study or to share with peers and pupils. They can also author resources for others which change their perception of their role.

Under the third heading 'potential for professionals to re-evaluate their identity in relationship to their role and their pedagogical observations' are:

o Significantly MirandaMods encourages democratic debate rather than just promoting socialisation.

o These MirandaMods challenge the usual model of conferences for teachers where there is limited interaction, if any, between 'experts' on stage and the expert audience. This mix helps teachers to see themselves in the wider profession and, perhaps, open up interests that they were not aware that they had.

o These MirandaMods challenge the usual model of conferences for teachers where there is limited interaction, if any, between 'experts' on stage and the expert audience. In the MirandaMod professionals have equal input regardless of their differing status in the world of education which challenges their understanding of their identity.

o In questions about revaluating their identity the practitioner participants particularly valued the research input which is not normally available to

teachers in classrooms. They also found contact with researchers and the chance to question them particularly revealing and mind changing.

Conclusions

The MirandaMod is a new mode of professional learning that employs digital technologies in innovative ways to enrich collaborative knowledge creation processes. The main message is that it is the knowledge gathering agenda that should take precedence over the demands of digital technologies.

Five ways have been identified overall that show how MirandaMods have the potential to promote changes in professional praxis:

through reflection;
through collaboration;
through access to collaborative resources;
through publishing new professional knowledge based on collaboration;
by changing existing frames of thought and patterns of behaviour.

What is probably most important for the future is the extra dimension MirandaMods add to learning by social interaction, especially when the opportunities for professionals to meet face-to-face meetings are reduced because of economic restraints. Costs are not high and investment in this form of ICT CPD may be the only way that many educators have access to professional learning in the years to come.

Impact indicators

Quantiative analysis of impact

The fact that fourteen MirandaMods that were supported by a modest level of annual funding suggests that much can be achieved in this information mode of CPD for a limited outlay as a result of the voluntary nature of much of this information exchange.

The range and spread of subjects

The reach and range of the MirandaMod programme can be seen on www.mirandanet.ac.uk/mirandamods including the breadth and depth of resources that are now available to teachers. Several subjects were returned to more that once from different perspectives. Under each title there are summaries, videos and collaborative maps with resources attached that provide the professional learners with a full range of current information and opinion provided by practitioners.

The number of participants

Each MirandaMod in the series of fourteen attracted an average of twenty-five participants in the face-to-face meeting and an average of fifteen virtual participants, which suggests that the core community of practice is over five hundred professionals who have tried out this mode of knowledge creation. Some meetings were attended by more than fifty participants. Sometimes up to twenty countries were represented virtually and the estimate is that overall, colleagues from over thirty nations were involved.

Creating a global community of practice

The greatest success of this project is the involvement of over 500 educators in the last year from all over the world as well as from the UK. Although each MirandaMod subject has attracted a different cohort of participants there has been a core group of educators who have participated throughout. It seems that an informal community of practice has been created that will be adversely affected by the lack of funds in the next year.

The dissemination programme

This programme of professional learning events can be characterized as an ongoing action research project in which the primary researchers have been John Cuthell and Christina Preston. But as facilitators and as project leaders they have also been involving about 250 plus members of MirandaNet , about 130 members of the Institute of Education and about 120 other educators in the UK who have been drawn to this activity through Twitter feeds, TeachMeets and other informal communities of practice. At some points colleagues from over twenty countries have been engaged in the debates and overall colleagues from 35 countries have participated. These educators have also been actively involved in contributing to the knowledge creation through their talks, their questions, the development of the collaborative digital maps and the trail of evidence in other more ephemeral learning technologies like Twitter and Flash meeting.

The WLE Centre dissemination grant was used to subsidise a lecture tour focusing on iGatherings as a means of professional knowledge creation underpinned by Braided Learning principles (Haythornthwaite et al. 2007). This programme also included some presentations on Visual Learning based on another related WLE Centre project led by John Cuthell and Christina Preston.

The methods, results and outcome from the MirandaMod programme and the use of collaborative digital maps were a key element in all the talks that were given in conference and the meetings that were held in universities, with government staff

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and with educators face to face and online. About 40 new members have been generated for MirandaNet from the dissemination programme that took place in 2010 in America, Australia, New Zealand and Japan. Self-funded talks have also been given in India and Portugal and are now planned for Greece.

Overall the presentations have included keynotes, conference papers, workshops and online discussions at fourteen events to more than one thousand educators in seven countries. The response of the audiences indicated that there is a global recognition that informal ways of learning will soon become mainstream. Other government agency research indicates that this observation has some foundation in discussion with teachers in England (Pachler, Preston, Cuthell and Allen 2010 in press)

Potential for further development

As the HEFCE and Becta funding have now finished sponsorship for these activities will be saught to continue the virtual meetings software. What this community has to research is the wealth of professional knowledge that has been stored on the MirandaNet website and linked to the WLE Centre website.

Some key interests emerged from the pilot study that relate to the development of methodologies for building and assessing knowledge which could be a very fruitful area for further work (Cuthell and Preston 2010). The participatory methodologies that are emerging could be used to identify the professional voice in the classroom and include dialogues on the future of learning – where consultation with teachers is currently limited.

The pilot that concentrated on concept mapping methodologies (Cuthell and Preston 2010) presented a number of further research directions:
- developing of an index of interactivity, based on actions observed during the mapping process;
- concentrating on enriching research methods for identifying, formatively assessing and encouraging multimodal and multi-literacy skills in communities of practice;
- developing ways of completing, storing and tagging articles about a knowledge creation event written by a group from the map;
- comparing collaborative mapping strategies for knowledge creation and storage with wikis;
- investigating how collaborative mapping might be combined with other technologies to enrich the knowledge creation capacity of a professional work-based CoP over time;
- looking at use of collaborative mapping as a platform for professional development, as well as for systemic change;
- exploring collaborative international cooperation between practitioners on the ways in which education policy should reflect and enrich local practice.

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Using these methodologies the teachers, as co-researchers, will gain agency in influencing local and national policy in developing regions where learning new practices can be a matter of life and death. Some experiments have already take place in this area (Leask and Preston 2010 in press).

Other areas where research was recommended was into
- the value of MirandaMods for professionals in CPD;
- the process of exploring professional knowledge-building processes including into the methodologies with the potential to support CoPs who want to develop strategies of the collaborative analysis of professional information;
- the testing and evaluating of new combinations of technologies for professional learning

Recommendations

The recommendations that the team suggested are put forward in a climate of economic restraint when it is likely that MirandaMods will have to be run virtually. The recommendations are:
- The development of dissemination routes for CPD programme designers
- Increasing the involvement of the associated CoPs
- Development of a funding stream for MirandaNet to support small
- groups who want to set similar knowledge building resources

Potential for further development

- More research into the value of MirandaMods for professionals
- More research into the process of exploring professional knowledge building processes including into the methodologies with the potential to support CoPs who want to develop strategies of the collaborative analysis of professional information.
- The testing and evaluating of new combinations of technologies for professional learning.

Partners involved

WLE Centre, Institute of Education, University of London (www.wlecentre.ac.uk)
MirandaNet Fellowship (www.mirandanet.ac.uk)
Becta (www.becta.org.uk)
Oracle (www.thinkquest.org/en)
Inspiration (www.inspiration.com)

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