From eLearning Team to Community of Practice: Why, How and What’s the Benefits?

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Abstract: There is no shortage of innovation in eLearning. Committed educators globally are developing individual courses to meet the needs of students and particular subject matter. However, the more challenging task is to sustain, maintain and spread these innovative ways of teaching across whole programmes, entire schools, and the large institutions that characterise higher learning. This paper shares the strategies and experiences of an Australian multicampus School of Nursing and Midwifery that has implemented a blended learning approach across its entire undergraduate nursing programme. Bringing together an eLearning coordinator, academics, expert clinicians, an educational designer, AV specialists, programmers, and graphic and multimedia designers has enabled us to not only produce quality, integrated learning resources across the curriculum, but to sustain and enhance our eLearning initiatives by developing a community of practice (CoP).

Introduction

In health professionals’ education, the changing environment of clinical education has forced a rethink in the way curricula are delivered to both face-to-face and on-line students. Health professional education is located against a backdrop of rapid knowledge development, acute shortages of healthcare professionals in many disciplines and changing technology, creating clinical imperatives that drive the need for currency, relevance and continual innovation in learning. The age of life-long learning and a diverse student base also mandates that course development is based on sound and proven pedagogical design methodologies. As educators we are now dealing with irreversible technological changes (de Freitas & Jameson, 2006) that are impacting on learners’ lifestyles and learning behaviours, irrespective of the generation in which they were born and gained their early education. Flexible and on-line learning initiatives are now a prominent feature of strategies in higher education institutions in many places internationally and certainly in Australia, where students’ expectations for flexible access to learning (time, place), engaging activities (multimedia, communication) and, in the healthcare professions particularly, clinically (industry) relevant learning, are driving faculties to find educationally sound, innovative approaches to teaching and learning.

Since 2000 the Griffith University School of Nursing and Midwifery in Queensland, Australia has been committed to developing blended learning for its Bachelor of Nursing curriculum. The School itself is a multicampus school that provides a common curriculum across all sites. Blended learning dictates students have access to courseware 24/7. This requires development of resources that deliver meaningful opportunities for learning. We meet their needs with a systematic approach to the development of relevant, engaging eLearning material that is coherently integrated with other delivery modes. In this project, every course in the degree programme provides on-line resources and learning activities for students. Learners in the School of Nursing and Midwifery are a mixture of domestic and international students, with varying levels of skill and confidence with learning technologies, and differing experiences in health care: a combination that brings challenges for both the academics and the flexible learning
development team. This paper gives an overview of the pedagogy, processes, and infrastructure that support our eLearning development and demonstrates the ‘why, how and what are the benefits’ that we have learned as we have built and sustained eLearning across our multicampus school. It includes discussion of: leading with the pedagogy; creating the “future change-capable” (Kowch, 2005) culture; how we have grown our development team into a wider-reaching CoP; resource management and sustainable eLearning development; how to achieve relevance and currency, and how to manage continuing innovation in a practice discipline.

From Team to Community – What’s the Difference?

We started our project as more traditional teams of people who had specific purposes, specific roles, and a specific plan for the development of any given course. However, in this environment there was a degree of fragmentation that saw us losing opportunities for collaboration, and losing knowledge when team members changed. The team of flexible-learning developers was stable in part, but other members changed regularly, as their department serviced the entire organisation not just our school. The academics changed continually from course to course and each managed their campus’ instance of a course quite separately despite the common curriculum. The most stable team members were the eLearning coordinator (an academic position) and the educational designer (attached to the flexible learning services). There was also a sense early in the development of our project that the roles of the academics were quite separate from that of the flexible-learning developers: that the academics would determine their requirements, undertake their planning and writing course materials, and then pass this on to the developers who would fulfil and deliver. Whilst these teams worked cooperatively, there was room to work more collaboratively. What then was the difference?

Wenger’s (1998) work on communities of practice explains how a community ‘lives’ together: the members are part of an ongoing story, the community is always developing, members are interested in the needs of others and have a vested interest in each other – communities continue on after a specific project finishes or particular person’s part of a specific project ends. Communities have an entity that is more than the individuals involved. The following figure illustrates the dimensions of a CoP that bring the community together: joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire.

Collective learning results in practices that reflect both the social-relational aspects as well as the task aspects of the activity, and those practices belong to the community – thus a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). So, we became more than a team... across a whole curriculum, across a multicampus school, between our organisation and our clinical partners’ organisations... we became a community. It can fairly be said however, that we evolved into a community of practice rather than planning for this at the outset of the project. We would recommend that this aspect is considered at the commencement of any large-scale project that is expected to have a long lifecycle. There may well be an opportunity to develop a community of practice from the outset.

Who

Our community members came from the original teams and included academics, the elearning coordinator, expert clinicians from our clinical partner organisations, the educational designer, multimedia developers, graphic artists,
programmers, and AV specialists. In finding ways to develop blended learning and meet the challenges of teachers and technology working together, for an integrated approach and a coherent curriculum, we found new identities within our developing community of practice as we discovered collaborative rather than cooperative ways of working together. These new identities encompassed increased engagement with each other, and the boundaries of roles became gradually more porous.

Why

Wenger (1998, p.46) outlines how a community of practice is particularly helpful for learning in workplaces when he states that “a community of practice:
1) provides resolutions to institutionalised generated conflicts such as contradictions between measures and work
2) supports a communal memory that allows individuals to do their work without needing to know everything
3) helps newcomers join the community by participating in its practice
4) generates specific perspectives and terms to enable accomplishing what needs to be done
5) makes the job habitable by creating an atmosphere in which the monotonous and meaningless aspects of the job are woven into rituals, customs, stories, events, dramas, and rhythms of community life”.

This last is not really the issue for academics and flexible-learning development team members – the work of developing on-line learning materials was never meaningless or monotonous, but it is often unknown, not understood, a burden on top of all their other academic work, and in the scheme of institutional policies and procedures, is often unacknowledged. A lack of understanding applied equally to all team members in the beginning: while academics often had only a slim grasp of the applications of the technology and no grasp of its internal workings, the developers were similarly hazy about the demands of clinical practice and the intricacies of human beings and their wellness and illness that they were supposed to be bringing to life. We have to agree with Wenger’s basic premises (above) however, these challenging aspects have been woven by our CoP into customs, stories, and events, and through creating “rhythms of community life” (p.46), we have made this work habitable, for old and new members of the community alike.

Brown, White and Leibrandt (2006) discuss the importance to nursing education of collaboration between healthcare service providers and nursing faculties in decreasing the theory-practice gap, and enhancing the clinical readiness of students and new graduate nurses. Whilst not explicitly discussing elearning, their arguments for nursing education to develop more partnership models in an increasingly “globalized and networked world” (p.172) resonate with the development of an elearning CoP as we experienced it. Brown et al. (2006) note that “combining the perspectives, resources and skills of people and organisations ... has been shown to achieve outcomes more creative and far greater than could have been achieved by the partners working any way but collaboratively” (p.172). This certainly proved to be the case within our CoP. Developing on-line materials is a reciprocal activity; academics and expert clinicians perceived that changes to teaching and learning would be needed for on-line activities, what came as more of a surprise was the ways in which a move to blended learning changed their face-to-face teaching. At times like this, the CoP was an especially helpful source of support and enhanced creativity for teaching and learning.

How

Leading with the Pedagogy

It is well reported in the literature now that on-line learning activities require a constructivist underpinning to provide a sound pedagogical basis to the use of technology. We had a clear agenda from the start of this project that learning was driving the technology, rather than the reverse. We also kept clearly in our sights that we needed to address both metacognitive and cognitive skills in the learning activities. This kind of discussion in relation to what the students needed was a good catalyst to also discuss our own understandings of the on-line environment, which assisted the development of the staff. Furthermore in relation to the clinical relevance and clinical currency of our pedagogy we constantly kept in mind the need for our nursing students to capture not only content, but the culture of
nursing, key conceptual knowledge, the clinical context, and critical thinking (James & Seaton, 2003) and our need to manage the continuing innovation that occurs in a practice discipline. Using technology highlights in no uncertain terms that academics must change their role, and move their focus from teaching to learning. Both prior to commencing and during development cycles, academics themselves need opportunities for learning about on-line learning, and about appropriate pedagogies for this. They also need ongoing support; support that was found in our community of practice as we had informal discussions as well as planned meetings, and shared our growing knowledge, while the members gained greater confidence in talking to one another as they learned the language of each other’s disciplines.

**Processes for developing our Community of Practice**

**Communication and relationship building**

One of the most important steps we achieved as we developed our CoP was acknowledgement that elearning changes control of learning, and of the preparation for learning – this is not solely the province of the academics any more, and devising and developing learning activities no longer happens only according to an academic’s timeframes. Thus, much ongoing negotiation is required to develop successful working relationships. Continuing open communication is essential to this. Understanding each other’s roles and contribution to elearning development enhances and develops these relationships. Furthermore, understanding each other’s roles allows realistic and effective timelines to be developed, and more importantly, be adhered to. As our members were spread across three different, geographically separate campuses, and various clinical agencies, we also found that having a coordinator whom academics and clinicians knew was responsible for leading the project from their side, and a team leader and educational designer who led the developers’ team, allowed for improved communication, greater efficiency in communication (for example: developer’s information did not have to be repeated with up to 12 different academics in any one semester, but was disseminated by the coordinator) and assisted with negotiating and meeting timeframes. Members developing a specific course met regularly across a semester (our development timeframe) although not always face-to-face. Knowledge, however, tended to disseminate more widely. Staff working on one course would talk with those working on another, as did the elearning coordinator, educational designer and the developers, sharing ideas and generally increasing the cohesiveness and integration of the on-line learning activities through the curriculum. Mason & Lefrere (2003) have signalled the importance of trust, both in transforming an organisation and in developing effective e-learning. Our experience showed that this needs to be taken very seriously to develop an effective CoP that promotes best practice in elearning, particularly in a major undertaking like ours in which an entire curriculum delivered across a multi campus school had to be given an on-line presence.

Relationship building with clinicians, other key stakeholders, and industry partners is also vital in health professional education. As Jameson, Ferrell, Kelly, Walker and Ryan (2006) explain in relation to their multi-project community of elearning practice, there is potential for significant tensions between internal and external allegiances when the CoP has varied members covering a range of stakeholder groups. However, we found that with open and explicit goals and supportive processes that valued all the types of knowledge and the contributors of knowledge, it was a benefit rather than a challenge, with the clinical partners also embracing what was learned in the CoP. This collaborative interest in learning helped turn varying opinions into productive triggers that lead to developing better elearning rather than being points of discord. Perhaps this issue is less problematic in healthcare as there are very strong imperatives for elearning’s contribution to clinical education for students. It may be that the current crisis in health care systems globally provides a common meeting ground and places the education of future practitioners high on everyone’s agenda. Existing long term relationships with major clinical stakeholders underpinned most of our clinical relationships, however, some short term strategic relationships have been entered into with great success where additional expertise or resources are required (such as state government representatives and private health care organisations).

We undertook evaluation research during the latter parts of the initial development (we are now in our second cycle re-developing the sites to update them clinically, further improve and add to the activities based on what we have learned in our first cycle, and the evolving technologies that are now available). In keeping with our CoP, the research also included the perspectives of clinicians, the flexible learning development team and management as well as students and academics. This multiple-method research not only gave us a basis for evaluating the project that would lead to further learning for the school and organisation, it also afforded us the opportunity of widening
our network of relationships to include international experts through our participation in an international benchmarking study with the Teaching Learning and Technology group and other nursing schools in the United States. Planning evaluation to be concurrent with the development is beneficial; particularly in association with the important ongoing feedback that is obtained in the CoP.

**Supporting Succession**

Supporting succession has been important in our project as course coordinators changed from time to time across the three campuses, and several development team staff changed. Having a CoP structure allows for both the orientation and development of new staff, and staff new to elearning, as they become involved in the project. Additionally, increased effectiveness was gained through the two main coordinating roles of elearning coordinator and the educational designer. This allowed not only streamlined working practices with many different and changing members of the CoP, but there was always a first point of call, someone who could answer queries and give support.

**Infrastructure for sustainable elearning development**

Links to a CoP can also help people cope with the infrastructure as it develops in the current educational climate through supporting the importance of teaching and learning, and helping each other link teaching, learning and technological innovation to research quality assessment frameworks that now drive funding for many tertiary institutions in Australia and other commonwealth countries.

This project highlighted the institutional resources that are needed to support such development. Appropriate resourcing is essential. There is a need to develop clear policies, many of which did not exist previously or were appropriate only to the face-to-face environment. Having this project resourced through a Teaching and Learning grant, rather than operational budgets, afforded a number of benefits. It gave institutional support to the importance of the project and allowed the project an economic life of its own that was beneficial to developing the CoP. Besides funding for buying the development services, an allowance for academic time is necessary. One of the issues in the early stages of elearning development generally has been that the work of academics, and, to some extent, that of the elearning developers, has been that the work is invisible and not acknowledged within institutional workload planning (Seaton-Sykes, 2004), or recognition structures such as promotion. Early in our development specific time was not allotted to staff, however it is an essential component of sustainability in elearning developments, where the time demands of other teaching and learning activities may not decrease substantially with the introduction of elearning. With rapid increases in the uptake of new technology into universities and demands for multimedia environments for learning, attention also needs to be paid to work allocation in development teams, who are increasingly being called upon to provide flexible learning products and services to a greater range of schools. It is possible that in the future our community of practice may widen to directly include other health professional schools in a more structured arrangement.

A range of learning supports for academics were also put in place and supported participation in the CoP. Making technical information and targeted staff development available in both workshop and on-line format, in conjunction with individual guidance from the elearning coordinator and educational designer has proven to be useful. Technical support is crucial in promoting the confidence to develop and manage elearning. We instituted a delayed ‘sign off’ regime for each course until after live-deployment of the course websites. During this extended time academics were supported by the flexible learning team ensuring everything was functioning correctly.

Clear responsibility for quality processes and policies to support staff efforts, (while not detracting from their attempts at innovative teaching and learning strategies) are required. In our school the elearning coordinator had overall responsibility for this. The activities included copyright and intellectual property management, compliance with legislation, evaluation, and research into the elearning project. The research not only developed a clear evidence base to underpin what we were doing, but also mainstreamed the efforts of the academics and developers giving weight to the elearning development and supporting sustainability of the project. It also linked the culture of dissemination and sharing of knowledge, and collaboration in innovation that characterises a CoP to the broader higher education community.
Conclusions: What’s the Benefits?

The above discussion highlights a number of benefits of a CoP we found that may help other organisations build a supportive culture for elearning A CoP:

- Keeps the best of what is already known but adapts it to new ways of doing things (Hannan, 2005)
- Supports ongoing staff learning
- Supports creativity and innovation
- Keeps the focus on learning not just technology
- Supports institutional policy development (Tallent – Runnels et al, 2006)
- Provides feedback to members
- Offers a safe place to examine failures and learn from them as well as successes The CoP can absorb these because it is ongoing and integral, and thus offers transformative learning possibilities to members (McPherson, 2005)
- Spreads knowledge and practices
- Supports development of an integrated and cohesive curriculum
- Increases sustainability – In a COP with a focus on “building capacity of individuals and groups” as well as resource sharing (Mason & Lefrere, 2003, p. 262) sustainability is increased and succession supported.

As Bell and Bell (2005) note, a high number of educational innovations fail. An approach to innovation that encourages a CoP which crosses disciplinary and course-specific boundaries is one way of increasing the success of current projects, supporting their sustainability, and increasing future successes through the capacity building and knowledge growth that is derived from a CoP, and shared amongst the members.

References


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