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Online communities

Pete Bradshaw [1]

“Our online community provides a dynamic forum for you to discuss current topics and concerns with the wider education community.”

This quote is taken from the Teachernet website [2], but could be claimed to apply to any number of education sites. Increasingly, online content is being complemented by with opportunities for readers to interact with each other or participate in debate. This article will look at the proliferation of such ‘online communities’. It will consider how they might be used to support teachers and school managers, how they might be most effectively used and how ‘virtual’ communication complements and overlaps with the ‘real world’. Finally it challenges the very notion of this dichotomy.

What then is an online community? Simply it is community, a collection of people, who are communicating or working together online. Often the term is used to describe the software or online space – “Click here to enter our community” – but if it is a true “community” then it must involve a defined membership, however loose that definition.

In 2000 the DfEE [3], as it then was, established an online space for newly-appointed headteachers to share issues and concerns arising from their practice. This website, *Talking Heads*, initially had 1200 members – representing the cohort of new appointments in the previous year. Designed and run by a team of full time facilitators at Ultralab [4], it became part of the services provided newly-formed NCSL [5]. The prime motivation for its development was to tackle the isolation felt by those leading schools for the first time. Quickly it established communication networks for headteachers, offering peer-support and sharing of challenges and solutions with others. Evaluations showed that one of the key success factors was the ability to share with those who were ‘at a distance’ and who were able to offer a more objective view than maybe a colleague in a close geographic proximity.

At the time of the launch of *Talking Heads*, the concept of online communities was still in its infancy. Several companies had begun to establish a forum for customer feedback. Often these developed into vital channels for feedback for the company. Gradually these spaces spawned independent communities where customers can discuss issues relating to particular products. Although usually unattached, the businesses can still garner much feedback about their products. Running parallel to this was the development of forums on sites such as the BBC ranging from discussions about programmes to educational support to collaborative projects such as H2G2 [6]. In the school context online communities for learning developed such as Channel 4’s *Homework High* [7], which allows students to contact online teachers and experts for support with homework, revision etc. in a safe environment.

In the education world, NCSL saw the value of putting an communication channel into the headteacher's office. The newly rebranded DfES [8] also saw similar opportunities. From the start *Talking Heads* had provided opportunities for policy makers and civil servants to engage in discussion with school leaders. The immediacy and vibrancy of this benefited both sides. Headteachers were able to talk directly to those 'in power' and DfES staff and experts were able to consult widely and quickly with those who would be affected by their decisions.

These developments led the DfES to instigate online discussions with ministers and others to accompany more traditional consultation conferences and roadshows. At the same time NCSL broadened the use of their online communities to provide an e-learning dimension to their programmes for leadership.

Developments over the last five years have seen online communities established in most areas of education. The DfES-sponsored Teachernet covers all educational topics [2], Becta have a range of forums including supporting those new to computers [9] and there are discussion groups associated with most subject associations, professional associations/unions, awarding bodies, companies providing management information systems or virtual learning environments (VLEs) and publications such as the TES.

Similarly for students and learners, online communities are established at national and local level. Nationally there are sites such as Gridclub [10], which offers online learning and activities to pupils aged 7 to 12 bridging between home and school. Locally individual schools have communities based in their VLE either for a single or a family of schools. This helps with peer support, assessment for learning (through dialogue and feedback) and, where used across schools, with transition.

All of these communities have the same basic aim – to bring together professionals who may not otherwise meet to share practice and develop common understanding and solution of problems. Whereas previously a teacher or other member of staff in school would have access to a fairly limited network, it is now possible to engage with colleagues at a distance. A subsidiary aim, and one which often cements the community, is the facility to share resources and content. Sites such as the Teacher Training Resource Bank [11] provide content for its target community – those involved initial and induction teacher education – but also provide opportunity for contributions. School VLEs are another obvious example of this, with content and discussion. At a technical level, most forum software will allow uploading of attached content similar to e-mails.

Communities may also spring up around individual or organization weblogs or blogs. Initially conceived of as online diaries, their structure of content followed by comment allows for groups of people to come together in ways similar to

communities described above. For example, Ewan McIntosh [12] has a blog showing how the tool can be used in schools with most posts attracting some comments from his 'community'.

There is also the development of education wikis, mirroring the H2G2 site of the BBC. An example of this collaborative technology can be seen at Astrogrid's Schoolgrid [13]. On this website all members of the community can edit the content as well as discuss it. A more well-known example is Wikipedia [14], although the community there is less well defined, perhaps. This lack of definition results in a breakdown in clarity of purpose for the contributions and also, perhaps, a lack of trust between 'members'. To belong to a community we need to know who the others are and why we are communicating with them. In Wikipedia's case the result is uncertainty as the veracity of the content [15]. In other cases it may simply result in lack of contributions, dominance by one or two individuals or spurious postings. In the case of the NCSL communities, this is mitigated by the presence of professional facilitators. In others, there may be clear understanding of who the membership is, or enforced codes of conduct.

How does the community manifest itself online? It may be a website with an associated forum, as in Teachernet, or as an e-mail list. In some cases there may be provision for receiving e-mails carrying the messages posted in an online forum. In others the e-mails may be archived in a website. To an extent the design of provision depends on the available technology. It is somewhat simpler to set up an e-mail list than host a forum. Providers, or communities themselves, need to consider the preference of users, however. The community will only be sustained on a website forum if there is sufficient *pull* to draw people in. This might be because of the vibrancy of the discussion or the perceived authority of the provider. Other communities may have to rely on e-mail to *push* the messages to its members through e-mail, digests or alerts to maintain their interest. There is a choice then between 'push' and 'pull' methods of communication.

Recent developments in Internet browsers and e-mail clients have provided for the integration of dynamic alerting through RSS [16] or similar systems that feed updates to individual's desktops. Users can choose to subscribe to these updates, which may refer to changes in web content, news or new messages and topics in discussions.

Online communities may be considered to support dialogue between various groups.

- Teacher to teacher (as in subject associations)
- Expert to teacher (as in NCSL programmes or DfES roadshows)
- Teacher to learner or Learner to learner (as in VLEs)

The last of these channels, learner to learner, is perhaps the most developed in its online presence. Pupils and students will be members of the formal learning communities established by schools or local authorities and they may choose to be part of the communities associated with such as Homework High or BBC's Onion Street [17]. Whether they do this or not, however, they are almost certain to use online technology to interact with their community of friends. This may include mobile phone text chats, e-mail, instant messenger sessions, weblogs, voice over IP telephony such as Skype [18], photo sharing and discussion on sites such as Flickr [19], music sharing and discussion and, bringing all these tools together, personal web spaces such as My Space [20].

Does this give us an indicator of the future of so-called 'online community'? Our school students have blurred the boundary between their community of friends and acquaintances in real life and contact with them online. The online community may be an extended one – contact at a distance – but essentially it is the same community. They meet face to face and the meet online. Is the same happening with some online communities? Do people who meet online then arrange to meet face to face? There is some evidence of this, for example Moodle [21] moots, but maybe it is more a case of the two complementing each other. Essentially the online community is just that - a community that interacts, at least part of the time, online. Fundamentally it is a group of people who have come together to help and support each other and to share ideas. Something that has been going on in staffrooms for many years.

¹ Pete Bradshaw works as a secondary PGCE Applied ICT strand leader at Nottingham Trent University, but writes here in a personal capacity

² <http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/community>

³ Department of Education and Employment

⁴ Ultralab is a research centre of Anglia Ruskin University <http://www.ultralab.net>

⁵ National College for School Leadership <http://www.ncsl.org.uk>

⁶ H2G2 – collaborative encyclopedia named after *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/h2g2>

⁷ <http://www.channel4.com/homeworkhigh>

⁸ Department for Education and Skills <http://www.dfes.gov.uk>

⁹ <http://schools.becta.org.uk/new2computers/page/talk>

¹⁰ <http://www.gridclub.com/>

¹¹ <http://www.ttrb.ac.uk>

¹² http://edu.blogs.com/edublogs/2006/08/does_blogging_a.html

¹³ <http://wiki.astrogrid.org/bin/view/Schoolgrid/WebHome>

¹⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/>

¹⁵ http://www.theregister.co.uk/2005/10/18/wikipedia_quality_problem/

¹⁶ Guide to RSS (really simple syndication) from the DfES <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/feeds/>

¹⁷ http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/communities/onionstreet/dna_messageboard/

¹⁸ <http://www.skype.com>

¹⁹ <http://www.flickr.com>

²⁰ <http://www.myspace.com>

²¹ <http://www.moodle.org>