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How to cite:

Curran, Sheila and Golding, Tyrrell (2012). Moving from the periphery to the centre: promoting conversation and developing communities of practice in online environments'. In: Renewing the tradition: sustaining and sustainable communities through informal education, 9-11 Jul 2012, Brathay Hall, Cumbria.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://training-agencies-group.wikispaces.com/file/view/Curran+%26+Golding+TAG+2012.doc/352814668/Curran%20%26%20Golding+TAG+2012.doc>

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## **Moving from the periphery to the centre: Promoting conversation and developing communities of practice in online environments'**

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### **Abstract**

The last decade has witnessed significant growth in the use of digital technologies. These changes have impacted on learning and teaching in Higher Education and also impacted on youth workers' professional practice and the lives of the young people they are working with.

What are the implications of this growth in digital technologies, which includes the development of virtual learning environments, for the professional education of youth workers studying in Higher Education? To what extent do digital technologies present new opportunities for pedagogical innovation and provide opportunities for students to become part of a wider, networked community of peers? How can the potential benefits of online learning environments be harnessed to promote conversation, develop professional communities of practice and support students' in developing their professional identities as youth workers? And what are the implications of the growing use of learning technologies for the practices of academics teaching on youth and community courses? How can they enhance their skills in teaching and providing support for students in online environments, building on their skills and experience in promoting conversation in their face-to-face engagement with students?

In this paper the authors will draw on a range of research on students' engagement with technologies and on the way they make use of it to support their learning, as well as their experiences of teaching on the Open University's BA (Hons) in Youth Work. Issues to be explored will include what 'participation' might mean and look like in an online learning environment; the extent to which digital literacy might be a widening participation issue; and the development of online identities.

### **Introduction: the context in which we teach**

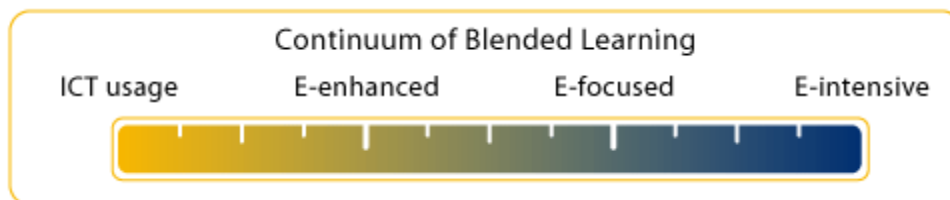
The last decade has witnessed significant growth in the use of digital technologies in both people's everyday life and in education. These changes have impacted on learning and teaching in Higher Education, youth and community workers' professional practice and the lives of the young people they are working with.

There are nuances within the terms digital technology, mobile learning and distance learning which we will not explore further in this paper. However, we must state that from our perspective as Lecturers at a Distance Learning institution, we identify a difference between 'traditional' distance learning, which was paper based and 'online' distance learning whereby students access their learning materials and activities online i.e. via the internet. Throughout this paper we will be adopting the JISC definition of e-learning to encompass the breadth of online and mobile learning:

'Learning facilitated and supported through the use of Information and Communications Technologies (ICT). Typically used to describe media such as CD-ROM, Internet, Intranet, wireless and mobile learning, audio- and videotape, satellite broadcast, interactive TV. Some include Knowledge Management as a form of e-learning.' (Fowler, n.d., p.3)

Within this paper we are drawing upon our current experiences of teaching at a distance learning institution which has been a leader in online learning and online communication for many years. Across our BA (Hons) Youth Work qualification there has been a development in the adoption and use of e-learning tools, via Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) hosting forums, wikis and blogs, and social networking sites such as twitter and Facebook. This has seen a move away from sending materials to students towards learners accessing all materials online. In our Work Based Learning modules students' skills and usage of e-learning are developed gradually over the three levels (Bruner, 1966). Students receive most materials through the post in the first module, being encouraged to access tutor forums, links to external websites and complimentary course materials online. As such, it is technology enhanced learning rather than being dependent upon it. Learning is progressively moved 'online' over time with the second Work Based Learning module being taught in a blended style and the third and final module totally 'online'.

We are aware that colleagues beyond our institution are using e-learning in their teaching practice (Crichton, Pegler, & White, 2012; Kassens-Noor, 2012) in a range of ways. It is with this in mind that this paper aims to develop and define the 'domain' (Wenger, 2006) of a developing Community of Practice for educators interested in e-learning on Youth and Community Work qualifications.



**Figure 1:** Continuum of Blended Learning

Whilst we appreciate that colleagues are situated at different points to us on the Continuum of Blended Learning (Jones, N., 2006), this paper does not take a stance on the 'correct' place to be on this continuum. Rather we aim to consider how e-learning can enhance our teaching of Youth Work students and support the development of a 'Community of Practice' (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Within our own qualification we also hope to support students to develop their own communities of practice. This will support them to foster an environment which maintains the tension between experience and congruence, the situation identified by Wenger as being vital to maintain a learning community, throughout their professional practice.

**What are we trying to achieve as educators of youth and community workers?**

The 'learning technologies' literature emphasises the importance of pedagogy driving the choices that we make as teachers, rather than our practice being driven by tools (Beetham and Sharpe, 2007). As educators of youth and community workers we take the view that our use of digital technologies and tools in our teaching should be shaped by what we are aiming to achieve in relation to our students' learning, and reflect the theories of learning and the values that inform our practice as educators.

Youth and community work is an applied academic subject. As educators in this discipline, we are preparing students to practice as informal educators who are skilled in developing learning through processes of conversation, dialogue and association (QAA, 2009). Our programmes aim to develop students' ability work as critical, reflective and reflexive practitioners who have an understanding of ethics, who are able to deal with complex situations and who can practice in different contexts and policy environments. Teaching in our area involves engaging students in critical discussion and debate. Students are encouraged to learn from each other and from their engagement with and reflection on practice with young people and communities. Assessment includes making judgements about students' abilities as practitioners and their fitness for professional practice.

We also acknowledge that as teachers and academics working in Higher Education institutions, our practice will also be influenced by the contexts in which we are working, including institutional pressures to recruit and retain students and to support their completion and achievement of qualifications.

### **Theories of learning that inform our practice as educators**

Our practice as teachers on youth and community work programmes in Higher Education is also shaped by our understandings of what learning means and how people learn. These will be informed by our experiences of practice and our values as youth and community workers.

Ideas and understandings of learning that have had the most influence in shaping approaches to youth work professional education, we would suggest, largely reflect socio-cultural perspectives and theories of learning. Learning is viewed as a collaborative process, not something that is just done by individuals working in isolation from each other, or just something in the mind of an individual, a process of individual cognition. Learning is not simply a process of 'knowledge transfer', where teachers, who know things, transmit information to students, who know nothing (Brown et al, 1989). Learning is as an active process; we learn by engaging in activity and from reflecting on this process (Kolb, 1984). Learning is situated; it is a social process shaped by the context and the culture in which it takes place (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Education is a process of critical dialogue, not one in which educators 'bank' or deposit knowledge in empty minds (Freire, 1972). Learning is not just something that takes place in formal educational settings and institutions; it comes from our engagement with the world around us. And what we are learning is not stable and fixed; outcomes are difficult to predict and what has been learnt may be difficult to define and to understand (Engestrom, 2001).

### **Learning as developing 'communities of practice'**

One way in which learning has been conceptualised has been as a process of community building, where people come together and learn through developing 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice are 'groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an on-going basis' (Wenger et al, 2002, p.4). Through joint engagement in activity, a group of people develops and shares their practice.

Based on their studies of practice-based communities, Lave and Wenger (1991) observed how novices in the community may start at the periphery of a community, by watching and observing others, a process they term 'legitimate peripheral participation'. Over time, they learn and develop expertise and become more central to the community and its activities. For Wenger (1998) being a member of a community of practice not only develops a participant's expertise in the practice on which the community is focused; learners' identities are also shaped by their engagement and relationship with the community.

If we are to promote learning, it is argued, then as educators we need to enable our students to engage in activities and practices which provide opportunities for communal learning. Practices where they can be actively engaged and have opportunities to discuss and reflect on what has been happening.

### **Promoting conversation and developing communities of practice online**

Over the last few years e-learning has begun to place more and more emphasis on pedagogy based on learning relationships (Mayes and de Freitas, 2007). Is it possible to replicate communities of practice, and to create and sustain learning relationships more generally, online? And if it is, what can teachers and educators do to support these processes?

Given our aims as youth work educators and our commitment to learning as a social process, these are questions which we are particularly interested in exploring. To what extent is it possible to make use of digital technologies to support communication, dialogue and collaboration, and to provide peer support for students as learners? We know that for many students a sense of belonging to a learning community is a key factor in promoting motivation, confidence and enjoyment in their learning (Kear, 2011). Can we make use of these tools so that students and teachers can remain in touch even if they are unable to meet up regularly on a face-to-face basis, for example, when students are on placement, or if they are studying at a distance, supporting their retention and achievement? Can we create online environments where students can develop their 'communities of practice' and professional identities as youth and community workers, including with practitioners who they might not have access to face-to-face? And can we use technology to support the development of our own communities of practice?

We believe that more recent developments in technologies have the potential to support us in creating these spaces and environments. While early use of the internet for educational purposes focused on use of the web to deliver course content to students who passively received it, the development of Web 2.0 or 'social software tools', including online forums and discussion boards, instant messaging, wikis, blogs and social networking tools, have created new opportunities for

students to communicate with each other, to share information and ideas, and to collaborate (Kear, 2011). Tools, including social networking, ‘allow the rapid identification of like-minded others, and allow learning relationships to drive both direct communication and the sharing of relevant information’ (Mayes and de Freitas, 2007, p.21). Technology now has the potential to create flexible learning settings, bringing people together who are in different spaces in terms of time and geography. Mirroring processes of peripheral participation, these tools also have the potential to support engagement at different levels, providing spaces for ‘lurkers’ who can begin to learn from observing the practices of others (Salmon, 2002).

### **The opportunities and implications of online environments for teaching and learning**

At a very simplistic and anecdotal level teachers and educators views on ‘e-learning’ tend to be distilled in to two distinct camps: for and against. This may be due to a lack of appropriate training and development for staff (Haynes et al, 2004), a lack of institutional commitment to the process of ‘adoption’ of new technologies (JISC, 2009) or a belief that e-learning is a substitute for ‘genuine’ or ‘quality’ face to face teaching (Haythornthwaite, C. and Andrews, R., 2011).

Our position is to explore the extent to which digital technologies present new opportunities for pedagogical innovation, particularly how they might provide opportunities for students to become part of a wider, networked community of peers (JISC, 2005). However, we do not wish to fall in to the ‘pro’ camp uncritically and adopt ‘hyped technology’ (Crichton et al., 2012) without considering the processes and implications as well as the opportunities. Through our own experiences as teachers in a distance learning environment and students at the same institution, we are developing a practical as well as theoretical awareness of the implications of e-learning. Therefore throughout this section of our paper we will be identifying some of the implications of the fast-moving growth in digital technologies for the professional education of youth and community workers.

### **Opportunities of online environments**

With any new development there is always deemed to be an ‘opportunity’ to be found (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008). In the following table JISC (2005) have identified those associated with e-learning technologies within four pedagogical perspectives.

<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Assumptions</b>	<b>Associated opportunities from mobile and wireless technologies</b>
<b>The associative perspective</b>	<p><b>Learning as acquiring competence</b></p> <p>Learners acquire knowledge by building associations between different concepts</p> <p>Learners gain skills by building progressively complex actions</p>	<p><b>Mobile phone/PDA:</b> Bite-sized elements of learning develop individuals’ competences</p> <p><b>Mobile phone:</b> m-Mentoring through SMS messaging reinforces behaviours and provides feedback</p>

	from component skills	
<b>The constructive approach (individual focus)</b>	<p><b>Learning as achieving understanding</b></p> <p>Learners actively construct new ideas by building and testing hypotheses</p>	<p><b>Wireless networked campus:</b> 'Just-in-time' mobile access to learning resources on a VLE or portal facilitates discovery of underlying principles</p> <p><b>Mobile devices:</b> Reflective and evaluative skills are developed through mobile access to e-portfolios</p>
<b>The constructive approach (social focus)</b>	<p><b>Learning as achieving understanding</b></p> <p>Learners actively construct new ideas through collaborative activities and/or through dialogue</p>	<p><b>Electronic voting systems:</b> Active learning is made possible in large group contexts by discussion and voting</p> <p><b>Mobile devices:</b> Can support collaborative learning and construction of meaning through information sharing and discussion</p> <p><b>Mobile devices combined with wireless networks:</b> Opportunities are available for rich learning experiences in the in-situ use or capture of data, sound and images</p>
<b>The situative perspective Learning as social practice</b>	<p><b>Learners develop their identity through participation in specific communities and practices</b></p>	<p><b>Laptops and PDAs:</b> Mobile laptop/PDA schemes support learning in dispersed communities</p> <p><b>Mobile phones:</b> Ownership of a mobile device enables disaffected learners to become part of a learning community</p> <p><b>Mobile devices:</b> Use of laptops, PDAs or tablet PCs enables learning in authentic contexts e.g. in laboratories, in the workplace or on field trips</p>

**Figure 2** Exploring approaches to learning with mobile and wireless technologies (JISC, 2005)

One of the main 'attractions' of e-learning to us as educators and youth workers is its similarities to youth work. The first of these is the cultivation of flexible learning opportunities. Using of mobile technologies there is the potential to capture 'real time' work based learning and 'serendipitous' or informal learning in its varied of forms.

One of the arguments against the wholesale conversion to e-learning is that students have a varied range of skills, equipment and experience (Bennett et al., 2008). However, we would argue that e-learning provides positive opportunities to plan for and accommodate the 'differentiation' across students on a number of different fronts, not just online skills and abilities (JISC, 2005). Whilst this may not accommodate students who currently do not have computers or internet access at home it does enable those who are more 'e-dependent' to use technologies.

The convenience and flexibility of e-learning should not be underestimated. This particularly resonates with us, working in a distance learning institution where students are geographically dispersed, but is equally valid for face to face learners. Students want to access the library, prepare assignments or post comments on the forums at a time and in a place which suits them. For youth work students this may well be late in the evening after a youth club session. The flexibility of e-learning enables students to write their reflective journal on their mobile on the bus ride home. Alternatively, they can post a comment about their session of their forum. The asynchronous nature of forum discussions provides time and space for reflection, trying ideas out before writing them up for assessment, opportunities to begin to articulate and 'name' practice, and learning from other peoples' ideas and contributions. As stated previously, different learners use these spaces in different ways but the asynchronous nature also means that they can also use it at different times. In our experience, students on the periphery (Wenger, 1988) engage with the forums by reading other people's contributions, often gradually becoming more engaged as they begin to feel more comfortable in the online environment and more confident that they have something to say. All of which is captured 'online' and can be used by students in their assessments or to illustrate how their skills or understanding has developed over a period of time.

### **Implications of online environments**

Of course we do recognise, as with any pedagogical decisions that we make as educators, there are implications which we need to consider. When thinking about using online environments and digital technology in our teaching strategy one of the main implications we have identified is the fast-moving growth in digital technologies. This is because our modules are written over an up to two year period and delivered for up to eight years. Whilst our resources are regularly updated our learning and teaching strategy, including activities, is firmly established at the outset. Therefore, it is important that we 'future proof' our modules. We also need to ensure that any resources used, such as tools like wikis or apps, are fit for purpose and will be useable throughout the life of the module.

One implication which is often identified by educators is the perceived impact of the cost of new technologies to students. However, in our experience in terms of the student experience, savings in time and transport to their university would contribute to the 'cost' of buying equipment for the few students in this position. The more technologically cognisant students benefit from learning which can be accessed in their daily lives and in ways they have come to expect i.e. through their smart phones. For all students an increase in ICT skills will be an important outcome and specifically for Youth Work students this is another area in which they can develop skills on par with other similar professions (Hill & Shaw, 2011).



Whilst we have identified a counter argument to the 'cost' question we would not wish to dismiss it out of hand, particularly with reference to cohorts such as ours. In fact, for two key reasons we identify e-learning and student's digital literacy as a widening participation issue, which we feel helps us to address these issues in a constructive way. Firstly, the financial implications of e-learning are not just limited to the cost of hardware and software. The quality of student's internet access, for example the speed of download, may impact upon student's ability and willingness to engage in their learning. Students download limit is also an issue, if students are being asked to download all their study materials and watch hours of video this will add to the on-costs for students, many of whom come from low income households. Whilst it is not an issue that we can address here the impacts of the 'digital divide' (Loader & Keeble, 2004) on our students is clearly an area for further research.

The second factor which we believe identifies online learning as a widening participation factor is student's digital literacy. With such a broad spectrum of skills within youth and community work cohorts lecturers need to be aware of and plan for 'differentiation' across students with different, skills, equipment and experience (Bennett et al., 2008; JISC, 2005). This is either a problem or opportunity depending upon the perspective of the educator and the institution.

The final implication is explicitly for us as educators. We need to equip ourselves to use these tools and to understand how to make best use of them, whilst limiting potential negative implications. To do this we must draw upon the building body of research as well as undertaking our own. As stated earlier, rather than adopt new 'shiny' technologies unthinkingly we need to take an informed and critical approach. We should focus on student and pedagogical needs, and how these tools support learning and teaching, rather than use technology for the sake of it.

### **Specifics for Youth and Community Work educators**

With this in mind, we have been exploring the extent to which digital technologies present new opportunities for students to become part of a wider, networked community of peers. Whilst the authors work in a distance learning institution, e-learning is used in a spectrum moving from students learning being supported online in level 1 to the whole module being delivered online at level 3. Obviously, this model would not suit every qualification or every student. However, there are opportunities for Youth Work educators to consider how they use learning technologies to enhance student learning and educational attainment.

The growing use of learning technologies within academia and teaching at all levels has started to create a bank of knowledge and resources which we draw upon in our teaching design. As we have already stated the planned learning activity should inform the technology used rather than the other way round. For example, for some group work activities the most appropriate 'technology' would still be a flip chart sheet and pens, for other activities a group designed wiki page may be appropriate (Crichton et al., 2012).

Our own approach to e-learning has been to explore how online environments and tools can enhance our skills in teaching, rather than identifying online learning as being something which is

imposed upon us. With this in mind the following table is a short summary of some of the tools we use within our qualification and their potential uses.

	<b>Potential use for teaching and Learning</b>	<b>Potential use for fostering CoP</b>	<b>Applications in youth work practice</b>
<p><b>Blogs</b></p> <p>Asynchronous</p> <p>Individual and group</p> <p>If on VLE, HEI has control over access and responsibility for content</p>	<p>Developing reflective practice</p> <p>Ways for educators to share informal, serendipitous learning from own practice or draw important news items to students attention</p>	<p>Students following one another's blogs can provide support, challenge and debate.</p> <p>Developing networks between students in geographically diverse places.</p>	<p>Maintaining reflective practice and recording qualitative aspects of practice</p> <p>Support young people to maintain blogs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To develop reflective skills</li> <li>- To record engagement with services</li> <li>- To use as evidence for accreditation</li> </ul>
<p><b>Facebook</b></p> <p>Asynchronous</p> <p>Individual and group</p> <p>HEI has control over access and responsibility for content</p>	<p>Provide a social space for students to engage with one another outside 'formal' teaching spaces</p> <p>Not necessarily moderated by tutors</p>	<p>Bringing together all students on a qualification</p> <p>Create a 'group', enabling future students and alumni to be part of a wider qualification community</p>	<p>Maintaining relationships with friends and contacts made whilst studying.</p> <p>Develop understanding of social media for use and application with young people.</p>
<p><b>Forums</b></p> <p>Asynchronous</p> <p>Individual and group</p> <p>HEI has control over access and responsibility for content</p>	<p>Moderated by tutors</p> <p>Space to discuss topics, themes or activities within the teaching materials (tutor forums)</p>	<p>Space to discuss practice issues 'outside' those directly relevant to the current study themes (professional issues forum)</p>	<p>Develop / access professional forums for continuing CPD and co-support</p> <p>Develop understanding of forums for use and discussion with young people</p>
<p><b>Twitter</b></p> <p>Asynchronous</p> <p>Individual and group</p> <p>HEI has no control over access and responsibility for</p>	<p>To inform followers of qualification related news</p> <p>Sign post followers to news stories of interest to them</p> <p>To follow relevant individuals and organisations to keep up to</p>	<p>To inform followers of news</p> <p>To follow relevant individuals and organisations to keep up to date</p> <p>To share things of interest</p>	<p>Informing young people about sessions or where detached / mobile work is happening</p> <p>Tell young people about stories of relevance to them (#ReverseRiots)</p>

content	date	(retweet) To start a debate (#discuss)	
<b>VLEs</b>  Synchronous & Asynchronous  Individual and group  HEI has control over access and responsibility for content	Repository for lecture notes, module guides and recordings of online lectures.  Signpost online resources such as journal, policy and practice related websites  Access to university library	Opportunities for students to develop own learning groups outside 'formal' study  Participate in online conferencing tools (Elluminate)  Share resources	VLEs do not tend to be available for students post-graduation. Therefore students should be informed so that they can save links and resources they have shared or found useful.
<b>Wikis</b>  Asynchronous  Individual and group  If on VLE, HEI has control over access and responsibility for content	Developing resources and artefacts via group work  Use outside classroom time fosters other forms of active learning and encourages students to participate and complete tasks given	Supports group work and sharing of knowledge, experience and resources  Can embed links to external resources creating a topic 'database'	Staff teams could develop resource pages  Young people could develop community profiles or databases and reviews of local services

**Figure 3:** Uses of e-learning tools

Within our own teaching we recognise that e-learning identifies specific opportunities and challenges with regard to the 'professional' nature of our courses. The first of these is the awareness that young people use many of the tools in the table above (Davies et al., 2008). This, together with the development of online recording and evaluation processes (Hill & Shaw, 2011) illustrates the importance of our students developing their ICT skills alongside their group work ones (QAA, 2009; National Youth Agency, 2007).

E-learning also provides us as educators another opportunity to explore personal, professional and academic boundaries with students. Professional reputations, and more besides, can be lost by an ill-conceived tweet, something which may prompt some to disengage completely. However, we would argue that if online is 'where young people are at' that is where we should be engaging with them. Our role as youth work educators is to support our students to understand how to do this appropriately and safely.

### **Key conclusions/ further questions**

Whilst we have explored some of the key considerations and implications of e-learning in youth work courses more generally and in fostering a community of practice specifically, we have identified three key conclusions.

Firstly, we recognise the importance of retaining a critical perspective. We both, personally and professionally, enjoy engaging with new technologies and recognise the potential for them to support pedagogical innovation and the development of creative ways of engaging in learning and teaching. However, we also recognise that the technological tools that we use should be informed by the pedagogical 'problem' or dilemma we are facing and not the other way round.

Secondly we recognise the importance of evidence based and empirically informed understanding (Kennedy et al, 2008). Therefore further research is needed to inform our pedagogic decision-making. This is particularly necessary in relation to the use of e-learning and ICT in youth work programmes in particular as well as practice based professional learning more broadly. Furthermore, how are we as academics using these tools and how is this impacting on our practice (teaching, research, administration) and on our lives? We also recognise the need to develop a better understanding of our students' online habits and behaviours: what tools are they using, what technology do they have access to and what are they using them for i.e. social and personal use or to support their learning in HE?

Thirdly, we recognise the need to debate and discuss our practice and, for those of us with an interest in this domain, develop our own community of practice. With this in mind we would like to invite you to come and join us in discussing and debating this further on Twitter #YWCOP:

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