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WED: The Fiction of Open Online Collaboration; they want to share, don't they? (Jim Fanning)

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The conference paper presents a critical discussion of the issues surrounding implementation and development of a voluntary online professional learning community that is set within the context of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (Education Scotland, 2016). It involves teachers who are working on initiatives that have received central government funding to improve attainment. The educators in the community include civil servants, local authority education officers, senior teachers and teachers who were working directly with learners.

The conference paper will make use of a range of project materials and information. This will include government publications that illustrate how online collaboration is supported at a policy level in Scottish education. Yammer is the application in which the community has been built and it is hosted on Glow, the Scottish national intranet for education (Scottish Government, 2016). How the functions of a Yammer group support collaboration will be described, along with the ways in which Gilly Salmon's 5-Step model of e-learning was adapted to promote educator engagement in it (Salmon, 2011).

Influenced by Wenger's work on communities of practice (Wenger, 2007), a framework was developed that defined collaboration as being 'surface' or 'deep' and what each of those elements looked like. That framework has been used to map teacher input in the online community and evaluate the nature and openness of collaboration and how the implementation process, based on Salmon's adapted model, influences this.

In 2015 the Scottish government facilitated a range of stakeholder consultation events for the design of a national digital learning and teaching strategy (Scottish Government, 2015). The consultation provided a range of evidence around teacher cultures and the barriers and enablers to change in the system. That evidence, along with an online poll designed for the purposes of the project, and conversations with a range of educators, has been used to describe the cultural context in which the online community operates.

Whilst each of the educators involved in this project brought with them a range of experiences, knowledge, and expectations of collaboration in an online community, a marked feature of the project has been the reluctance of school based staff to be the 'first' to contribute in comparison to local authority and central government colleagues. A philosophical belief in collaboration and openness has not been matched by practice within the community. There was much evidence of co-operation rather than collaboration and where collaboration took

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place, it tended to be in a face to face setting built on contacts that had been made through the community.

Understanding the synthesis between implementation strategies and teacher cultures in these online communities is important in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of the Glow based communities. More widely, the development of Web 2.0 has been built around collaboration tools and services that promote sharing and openness. There are numerous examples of these being harnessed for social, political and economic purposes. The reasons why they have yet to become widely embedded in mainstream education may be better understood through this project.

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[Jude Toasland](#)

12:23pm 28 January 2017 [Permalink](#)

I'm hoping to catch your presentation as this is a topic that resonates with my experiences. I am particularly interested in your application of Salmon's model to support

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and encourage more sharing across the community. My experience has been that some participants require additional nurturing through this, both from moderators/leaders and from within the community. I would also be interested to explore other learning options for those participants for whom this model does not fit.



[James Fanning](#)

1:58pm 28 January 2017 [Permalink](#)

Jude, it is a really useful model. One of the debates I have been having with colleagues is to what extent do you expose users or contributors to your online groups to the framework - so that they understand how to frame learning conversations within the group.



[Mary Howell](#)

9:06pm 28 January 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Jim, Just to say thank you for sharing Salmon's model, which I in turn have shared with two different teams at work - the MOOC mentors and the team who deliver teacher CPD who are trying to increase the use of online fora with course participants.

I will be interested to hear what your project says about these issues.



[James Fanning](#)

9:16pm 28 January 2017 (Edited 9:17pm 28 January 2017) [Permalink](#)

Thanks Mary. I also have a model or framework for evaluating collaboration in an online community that was developed as part of this work and that I will share. Jim

PS you can view the model at <http://digitaltogether.blogspot.co.uk/>



[Dr Susan Morris](#)

12:07pm 2 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hello James,

Thank you for a clear abstract and call to come to your presentation. I am familiar with GLOW from the pernicious promotion of Falkirk Schools activities by Malcolm Wilson ICT Falkirk Council on Twitter. My question relates to Yammer and how the novelty/mimicry/privacy fits into the collaborative working online model.

Your thoughts are welcome, Susan



[James Fanning](#)

2:29pm 2 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hello Susan, I know Malcolm Wilson well.

In the community that I have been exploring, the welcoming message that each new

member is provided with has a line that says, 'Many colleagues have asked for a more private, online place to talk and share', hence the Yammer group - so there's an assumption built in from the start that there may be some anxiety over openly sharing information and collaborating - and that does not fit well with the philosophy of open online collaboration.

At the start of 2016 I was involved in a number of stakeholder consultation events around the construction of a digital learning teaching strategy - and there was some feedback from folks involved in those that closed groups, such as the Yammer one, were very much against the spirit of open online collaboration. Having said that, some of the teachers I interviewed for this paper stated that whilst they were 'wary' of contributing to a Yammer group where 'advisers were watching over their shoulders', they were part of Facebook groups of subject teachers - but these are closed as well.

So - whatever the application used - there seems to be something of a 'cultural' barrier to open collaboration that needs resolved.

Do you want to expand on what you mean by novelty/mimicry? Novelty - flavour of the month, temporary, it will go? Mimicry - way in which Yammer is compared to social media applications such as Facebook and the consequences this might have for an approach to collaboration?

Thanks

Jim



[Sarah Adrienne Hughes](#)

6:38pm 2 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Dear Jim,

I too thank you for sharing Salmon's model, I will also be exploring Yammer! My experience has also included the need to nurture the 'moderators'. Any thought on that?

Regards,

Sarah



[Allison Bell](#)

9:25pm 2 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Jim,

Looks to be an interesting presentation, I have looked at teaching cultures from your blog post and although, as you acknowledge, some of this is contestable, I think it does a good job of capturing some of the key tensions at play - something I have some experience of when trying to 'recruit' / persuade educators who teach on-campus with trying to work online. I would suggest that online forums (within the VLE as opposed to student-initiated communication networks) are more hierarchical in that there is usually an educator that facilitates (at least where I work!).

Allison



[Mary Howell](#)

1:04pm 4 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Sarah - interested in your comment about nurturing the moderators - in our team we have been very conscious that we are learning to learn online ourselves, whilst supporting our learners.



[Mary Howell](#)

1:09pm 4 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Jim I think your comment about advisors looking over shoulders may be pertinent and may explain the apparent contradiction between what I see in the MOOCs and what you say about teachers, some teachers reluctance to share - perhaps it's more to do with perception of who is looking, rather than actual degree of openness? Perhaps it's also safety in numbers perhaps it feels safer in a world wide MOOC than in a relatively local national system?



[Jan Turner](#)

7:02pm 5 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Reading your abstract again Jim, there is a flavour of those who are engaged in framing the policy are particularly amenable to the idea of engagement. If that evidence isn't so strong in respect of the teaching community, what is the process of consultation with them at the time a policy is constructed? Not so easy perhaps to build links later where this may seem a little too much like the 'cold call'.



[James Fanning](#)

8:03am 6 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hello Jan. I led on the consultation around a Digital Learning and Teaching Strategy for Scotland in 2015/2016.

There was a clear process in place in terms of stakeholder consultation as the strategy was formulated - face to face events across Scotland, online feedback, meetings with key organisations - before a draft and then a final strategy was published.

<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2015/09/3281>

I will be engaged in a consultation piece with stakeholders in 2017, following on from my work in this conference, around collaboration.

But you are totally correct in terms of 'cold calling' - Glow was launched around 2006 and updated in 2013 - there has been consultation through local authorities but nothing on the scale of the strategy piece.



[James Fanning](#)

8:12am 6 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Sarah, RE nurturing 'moderators'.

A few years ago I ran an online, 6 week, PSHE Year 10 collaboration piece on our school learning platform. The focus for the discussions, tying in with classroom teaching, was 'sexuality' - so you can imagine some of the issues around such an online discussion!

Ex-students were recruited as moderators and they undertook a 4 week e-moderating course run by Gilly Salmon. This was absolutely key to the success of the 6 week project and especially their understanding of supporting (not dominating) threaded discussions etc.

I did a similar piece of work with two teachers who were delivering a Year 7 topic in history and embedding online discussions in this. One member of staff did the e-moderator training and one agreed to manage his forum discussions without the training. It was interesting to compare the results, in that (fairly obviously maybe) learning in the e-moderator trained sessions was evaluated as 'deeper' than the surface social comments that were prevalent in the 'teacher' led forum. Hope that makes sense! Jim



[Jude Toasland](#)

9:33am 6 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

The whole nurturing the moderators topic resonates strongly for me. I'm inspired by the model you describe above Jim. I'm particularly interested in the parallel processes of supporting participants and supporting moderators, particularly when the two groups overlap. I'm envisioning a structure where there are participants, moderators and coordinators where all three roles overlap. Would that fit with some of your experience?



[James Fanning](#)

3:28pm 7 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hello Jude - absolutely - I think we focus on moderator skills and need to appreciate that for many learners it's a different way of learning - skills honed on Facebook are not enough.



[Matt Endean](#)

4:28pm 7 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Having worked with teachers for the last 10-15 years and trying to get them to share resources, this is a topic close to my heart. Online learning should be a great way to increase sharing, but does it really happen? I am interested to hear your findings.



[Louise Worsley](#)

10:43am 8 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

This looks so interesting. I did this module 2 years ago and looked at LinkedIn communities in project management. I was also interested in whether self-led communities could be generated - or whether that was an oxymoron. There was evidence 'good' moderating led to more collaborative communities. Good luck with your presentation - I will look out for it! Regards Louise



[Paul Curran](#)

1:06pm 8 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

This reminds me of an experience I had trying to set up a private network for youth work professionals in an immediate area. At the face to face meetings everybody was happy to contribute to discussions, they all knew each other and they were receptive to the idea of an online equivalent to their face-to-face meetings but nobody used it once it was built. I think perhaps online silence is experienced differently to face-to-face silence. Interested to learn more from this. Good luck!



[James Fanning](#)

3:31pm 11 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Thanks Louise and Paul. The examples I have looked at seem to suggest that where you have an effective moderator, an effective learning community emerges. Jim



[Matt Endean](#)

4:13pm 13 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Moderating is a good point Louise, with the online forums that I use I find those which are well moderated are the ones which are the most useful, and leads to more support for each other.



[Dr Simon Ball](#)

2:47pm 15 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Hi Jim

Please find below the main questions and comments from your live presentation. It's up to you how to answer them, whether you wish to group them, or whether you wish to point to an answer already given above, for example.

Best wishes

Simon

- ▶ I like Salmon's model and the distinction between technical support and the more pedagogic focus of moderation.
- ▶ Do you see similarities in the request to have more private, online place to share, with face to face learning experiences? (Am thinking of the efficacy of getting students into small groups and of the lecturer leaving the room in order to get conversation going.)
- ▶ We still routinely use teleconferences for those still scared of webinar discussions.
- ▶ Why do you think that it was the non-teaching members and not teachers who

responded mainly?

- ▶ What you see as an educational researcher looking only at the official platform may not be all that is happening (all that is being shared)?
- ▶ It is interesting whether students in online sessions are inhibited in discussions by tutor presence. Having tried break out rooms have found these to be a disaster unless students have previously met each other face to face. Seems to need some social connection before students can work together well
- ▶ I think that is really insightful Jim - we are asking people who are expert in one learning culture to adopt what may be a completely different model of learning.
- ▶ You mentioned a request for more private space, was the type of private space mentioned, ie. how private
- ▶ These issues stop a number of developments in schools.
- ▶ I think a key question for me is - how can we get teachers to induct themselves into this way learning e the question as it is going to be one of the main their students learn in the future
- ▶ I have a similar problem with a level 3 group in using forums. They want to share but by this they mean they want others to explain and give material - they are less keen on posting themselves!!
- ▶ I wonder if that's another layer of 'culture' around sharing.
- ▶ A generational issue?
- ▶ yes i was wondering around the significance of age and cultural differences
- ▶ I know from experience that time can be a big factor. Finding time during the school day can be difficult.
- ▶ I asked students why they preferred facebook for discussions rather than the official course forum and it was because they wanted to gossip and didn't want tutor to see this - even if this caused problems. They just came back for clarifications
- ▶ I don't think it is generational though. When I was a teacher I was often just not logged on to anything - mobile, laptop, PC - it is just not what you are doing - I didn't have a desk or anywhere to put my stuff apart from a bag most of the time when I was teaching. In at least a small part it may simply be a physical/spatial thing
- ▶ Very interesting to reflect on the discussions between students that they want to be private from teachers.



[James Fanning](#)

9:32am 18 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

Why do you think that it was the non-teaching members and not teachers who responded mainly?

Non-teaching staff were used to using these communities - they had used a number of Yammer groups on the platform - they saw it as a priority piece of work.

Teaching staff on the other hand had many priorities to juggle with.



[James Fanning](#)

9:33am 18 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

I don't think it is generational though. When I was a teacher I was often just not logged on to anything - mobile, laptop, PC - it is just not what you are doing - I didn't have a desk or anywhere to put my stuff apart from a bag most of the time when I was teaching. In at least a small part it may simply be a physical/spatial thing.

Yes, that came through clearly in discussions with teachers. They simply felt they did not have the 'physical/spacial' opportunity to contribute.



[James Fanning](#)

9:34am 18 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

What you see as an educational researcher looking only at the official platform may not be all that is happening (all that is being shared)?

Absolutely - this is only a 'beginning' piece of research that will extend to other platforms over the course of 2017/18.



[James Fanning](#)

9:36am 18 February 2017 [Permalink](#)

You mentioned a request for more private space, was the type of private space mentioned, ie. how private.

The space used was private only in the sense that it was on the Glow platform (in theory open to every educator in Scotland) and membership of the group was approved by the moderator (but in fact anyone with a Glow account would be approved for membership).



[James Fanning](#)

10:49am 18 February 2017 (Edited 10:50am 18 February 2017) [Permalink](#)

INTRODUCTION (SCRIPT)

My name is Jim Fanning and welcome to my conference paper which is called '**The Fiction of Open Online Collaboration: they want to share, don't they?**' The **theme** of this paper is the implementation of an online community of practice. The **topic** is a critical analysis of the ways in which education cultures may influence sharing and collaboration within that community. **(SLIDE 1)**

BACKGROUND

I work for Education Scotland which is an improvement agency of Scottish government. The online community that this paper analyses was established as a Yammer group, on Glow, the Scottish national intranet for education. **(SLIDE 2)** Yammer is a Microsoft application that supports group collaboration. **(SLIDE 3)**

The aim of establishing an online community of educators, was to enable teachers involved in similar projects to share information and collaborate in aspects of joint delivery, as well as facilitating access to a range of professional advisers who could support this.

The educators involved in the community were civil servant advisers, local authority education officers, senior teachers and teachers who were working directly with learners.

The developer of the community was a Career Long Professional Learning adviser, who was well versed in the work of Gilly Salmon and based the implementation of the community around her 5 Stage Model.

THE SALMON MODEL

Salmon's model involves a linear progression through the following 5 stages (**SLIDE4**):

Stage 1 involves access into and motivation to participate in the learning community.

Stage 2 encourages online socialization – getting to know other participants (a key element in online learning).

Which in Stage 3 leads to information exchange between participants.

And in Stage 4 leads to a better understanding of existing knowledge or the construction of new knowledge as discussions take place.

And finally, in Stage 5 the ongoing development of learning outside the closed conference or community.

The e-moderator plays a pivotal role in facilitating learning as they encourage participation and discussions, summarising those discussions as they take place and identifying key themes that will develop deeper learning.

Whilst Salmon draws a distinction between learning support and technical support, in the community there was no such differentiation. There was an expectation that group members would support each other.

The term e-moderator is one that was not used in the community. There was an assumption that learning in the community would be mainly self-led by participants taking a shared responsibility, with the role of other professional advisers being to support, facilitate, make introductions and network.

An ICT Coordinator provided welcoming messages – Stage 1 in the model – and the Career Long Professional Learning adviser supported ongoing socialization – Stage 2.

The welcoming message to participants, asked them to introduce themselves and describe two areas where they could help colleagues and one area where they were looking for support.

The message also stated that the community had been established on Yammer because, (quote) 'Many colleagues have asked for a more **private**, online place to talk and share'.

So, there's an assumption built in from the start that there may be some anxiety over openly sharing information and collaborating.

SLIDE 5)

I want to focus now on the activity that was taking place in the community over a three-month period from October to December 2016:

- There were 39 educators who requested and were granted membership of the community

- 26 of these were classroom teachers (15 secondary and 11 primary)

This reflected the make-up of the community where the ratio of teachers to advisers was 3:1.

39 introductory messages had been sent by the IT Coordinator.

There were 2 responses to these from members, although these did not follow the format requested for posting introductions **(SLIDE 6)**.

There were 15 examples of a resource (mainly a web link) being shared with the community **(SLIDE 7)**

Most links and resources were posted by non-teaching members (10 out of 15).

- There were 9 examples of a threaded discussion taking place, where two or more participants had engaged in an online conversation and responded to each other and most of these initiated by an adviser.

- **(SLIDE 8)**.

Most messages posted on the community were from non-teaching members of the community.

There were many messages but few if any examples of deeper collaboration.

There was plenty of evidence of non-teaching members - encouraging, socialising, supporting.

So, where were the teachers?

In my introduction, I referred to educator cultures, but it's essential to begin by understanding the culture – the way of doing things – associated with online communities.

The key elements of these are (and I know this is open to debate):

Asynchronous interactions *where* learning conversations take place over a period of time and anytime (they are not time dependent).

They are not location based – wherever you have access to a device connected to a network you can access the community.

They are – and again I know this is contested territory – non-hierarchical – online interaction has none of the social clues that influence interaction in the physical, face-to-face world.

Social collaboration is the focus for learning – its learning through conversation.

And very often the learning outcomes can be unintentional as learning is co-constructed by participants. **(SLIDE 9)**

Primary and secondary classroom teachers were the target group for support and collaboration in the community.

The key elements of teacher cultures I would identify as:

Synchronous interactions – interaction with learners and other teachers takes place live and in the moment and during the school day.

They are location based – in a school building, in a classroom.

They are led and influenced by senior teachers and Headteachers – schools are built around hierarchies.

Learning is curriculum led.

There is a focus on formal assessment.

(SLIDE 10)

The 'other' educators in the community included civil servants and local authority education officers.

The key elements of their culture of work I would identify as:

Blended interactions, with asynchronous being a feature – they have the opportunity to mix the synchronous and the asynchronous – they are not restricted by office hours.

They may be location based – an office – but can be flexible.

They are led and influenced by senior officials – they work within a formal hierarchy that will govern their responses to teachers.

There are formal outcomes from the work they are involved in.

They support an approach to formal assessment.

(SLIDE 11)

What emerges here, I would suggest, is a mismatch between the culture of the online community and the cultural lives of teachers and other educators.

The cultures within which other educators operate matches more closely that of the online community than does that of the teachers.

Salmon's model favours the culture of the non-teaching educator and this aligns with the culture of online communities.

The statistical evidence from the virtual community supports this analysis: for example, whilst other educators participated in the community at a variety of times, much teacher input either took place at the end of the school day or on Friday afternoons (many Scottish schools close half day on a Friday with the afternoon session dedicated to staff training).

The following statements were typical of teacher responses in face to face discussions:

'If I have to access the community there are only certain times in the school day that I can do it – I have a 15-minute slot in the morning when I can get on to a PC – after that I am teaching.'

Responses also included concern about the nature of the community. 'It was set up by Education Scotland. Can I really be as open as I want to be in the discussions.'

And drew a comparison with membership of other communities. 'I am a member of a closed group on Facebook and to be honest the discussions there are more open and frank. I know there is not a local authority or government adviser reviewing what I am saying.'

Discussions with those other educators similarly reflected the findings from within the community:

I love the flexibility of being able to access the Yammer group on my mobile.

And highlighted specific areas of concern that may not be apparent to teachers.

'We are all subject to Freedom of Information Requests. Anything that appears on the community – whether it's a closed Glow group or not – is subject to these requests.'

'Our other team members are all inspectors, some of whom have expressed concern about interacting online as they believe that anything they offer may be taken as instruction rather than participation in professional dialogue and an exchange of ideas.'

Conclusion

The Fiction of Open Online Collaboration: they want to share, don't they?

Well, yes, they do. There was no educator who said that they did not want to share, or that online communities were of no value.

There is a mismatch however between the culture of the online community and the cultures of those teachers and educators involved in the community.

Salmon's model, useful as it is, even when adapted, in its implementation it is still focused on a flexible-anywhere-anytime approach.

Trying to impose a flexible way of doing things that does not recognise the inflexible elements within teacher cultures – the nature of the school timetable, access to technology, a teacher mind-set around how learning occurs – leads to limited collaboration.

The deeper impacts do not surface.

This is an area that I will be pursuing further research into.

Thank you for listening.

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