Adapting an established community of practice to improve open engagement within the digital technologies sector

Or – How we set fire to an established community of practice

STEM / Computing + Communications
Who am I ...  

Andrew Smith

• Senior Lecturer at Open University in Network Engineering
• Been teaching, since late 90’s
• Used to teach in Further Education for a long time
• Now been teaching in Higher Education for slightly longer
• Also consult awarding organisations and have been a chief examiner
• Worked with multiple tech Vendors / Cert bodies - including Cisco, Oracle, Amazon, Microsoft, CompTIA, VMware, OpenEDG etc
• https://www.linkedin.com/in/teraknor/
Cisco NetAcad…

Corporate Social Responsibility based education programme

• Focussed on Coding, Network Engineering, Internet of Things, Computer Systems Support, Operating Systems, CyberSecurity, Data Analytics etc
  • 1200+ hrs of content
• Cisco works with local/national education to support delivery and engagement within the digital technologies sector
• Been in action since 1997

Historically (pre-2014)

• Pyramid support programme
  • ASC’s charged for support (Academy Support Centres)
  • A typical ASC would have 20+ up to 100 organisations to support
• Organisations had to meet fixed standards
• Organisations were encouraged to purchase £15K+ worth of equipment
Cisco NetAcad...

- Let us be realistic, CSR it may be, Cisco is still a commercial organisation
- They have a protectionist view of their intellectual property
- By 2014, this model was struggling in the UK
- Numbers going down – well, they were haemorrhaging students, nationally and locally
- Various external economic and academic pressures, undermining their model
- Many Cisco Academy Support Centres (ASCs) still charging for support … and losing organisations, hand over fist!
- Yet so much potential to offer resources, for free!!!

• So what did they do!
So what did they do!

They did …

NOTHING

Everybody kept doing the same and moaning that it wasn’t working!

Still charging for support, charging for teacher training.
Time to start some fires …

- Started supporting education for free – in 2014
- Offered free teacher education using social media
- Flipped the model – made it semi-open-source and gave it away
Twisted Firestarter …

Add matches + openness and watch it burn!…

• Some hated us, there was some serious abuse!
• Many liked us and wanted more (lots more)

Cisco was bemused and wanted to watch and wait, they were open to learning from us and seeing what the community would do!
And it grew …

- OU moved from 600 to c5K ‘NetAcad students’ – growing our community – grew our academic (associate lecturer base) and student community.
- Our support community grew from 3K to 35K students and continues to grow.
- Educators grew (we had around 50), where we have reached 16K+.
- Was support ten education organisations – now supporting 327.
- Found alternate income and funding opportunities.
- 40+ nations …

We now work with other organisations that what to replicate our model (including UHI).
Danger Illustrated ...
Now creating new leaders in this community of practice!

Cisco NetAcad

• Now giving much more away, for free
• No longer expect anyone to buy anything from them within NetAcad
• Working with OU and other ‘partner’ organisations to
  • Explore how to reach and support educators
  • Engage with underserved students
  • Creating new Communities of Practice!

• Globally!

And let us all be Firestarter's ... like Flinty