

An Analysis of a Successful Online Community Within Talking Heads

Anthony Russell
Ultralab
Anglia Polytechnic University
anthony@ultralab.net
Abstract

With the CHEPS (Centre for Higher Education Policy Study) reporting that internationally change within institutions of higher education is slow this paper highlights two radical innovations and their use of community software in the learning process. It presents a case study of an online, short-life successful community within one of those innovations, the NCSL. It shows how a group of headteachers from a wide geography and all sectors came together in an online community to support and learn from each other. It attempts to answer key questions about the success of that community and suggests learning for target groups can move away from the existing core medium in Higher Education, the lecture.

Introduction

A 2002 international comparative study for CHEPS (Centre for Higher Education Policy Study) on the current and future use of ICT in Higher Education concluded that change is slow and not radical. It reported that emailing, word processing, PowerPoint and the WEB, have become part of the teaching and learning process but this has not radically affected the nature of that process. Instructors use the new technology but the lecture is still the core medium and institutions tend to focus on their existing target group, high school leavers, rather than on lifelong learners. The latter includes professional and work based groups. The report also suggested that Higher Education institutions now find themselves in competition with new providers for life long learners. (Collis and van der Wende, 2002)

One group of professionals for whom change has become a daily challenge are headteachers and one new provider competing to provide career long professional education for school leaders is the National College of School Leadership (NCSL). NCSL was founded to be innovative.

“The major part of the college’s operations must be available on-line as a virtual college.....
.....It will establish new networks within the profession, including problem-solving groups of heads across the country, discussion groups on priority issues, on-line master classes, and access to the most up-to-date and research evidence. “ (DfEE, 1999)

The National Health Service is also developing its own pathways devoted to career long learning. These are radical innovations but there is evidence that whilst they may operate in the same market place as the Higher Education institutions they seek co-operation. For example the National Health Service has provided a cohort of undergraduates for Ultraversity., a virtual university developed in 2003 by Ultralab, APU. Ultraversity offers online, work placed based study and research leading to a primary degree. It is radical in that it is completely work based, done completely by research and completely online. If successful, it may cause a re-evaluation of the CHEPS finding that change is slow and not radical. Common to both the NCSL and Ultraversity is the embracing of new technologies and the use of community software. This suggests that those who are involved in radical innovation in higher education see learning moving away from its core medium, the lecture. They see innovative software, like Think.Com, making real the statement:

“...the marriage of computing and communication gives us the opportunity to build new types of learning organizations and to support learning and discovery processes in new ways.”
(Atkins 2002)

Salmon suggested that computer mediated conferencing (CMC) using email, web based threading, and bulletin boards, which can be synchronous or asynchronous, should be viewed, “*as a new context for learning and not just as a tool*” (Salmon, 2000)

Wenger in articulating his thoughts on communities of practice attempted to describe the social structures in which learning takes place, both on and off line. Whether online or not we all belong to communities of practice therefore although the means and times of assembly may vary between the real world and the virtual world the concept of community is common to both. In both a community of practice is established by members to develop a specific expertise through open participation in the creation of learning. We belong to several communities of practice at any one time; be it in the family, at work, with hobbies or at school. “*Communities of practice are so informal and so pervasive that they rarely come into explicit focus, but for the same reasons they are also quite familiar.*” (Wenger 1998, p7) For Wenger there is no meaningful distinction between communities of practice on or off line. “*Across a worldwide web of computers, people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests*”. (Wenger, 1998, p7) For Wenger a community of practice needs, joint enterprise, mutual engagement and shared repertoire. In commenting upon learning communities Eraut suggested that they construe learning, “*as an integral part of reciprocal human interaction, constrained and facilitated by skills, structures, networks and cultural factors.*” They raise questions, “*about opportunities for mutual learning across professions and between professionals and their clients.*” (Eraut, 1999) This moves learning away from the core medium of higher institutions. It morphs the instructor into a facilitator. How can it be otherwise if according to Engestrom, “People and organizations are all the time learning something that is not stable, not even defined or understood ahead of time. In important transformations of our personal lives and organizational practices, we must learn new forms of activity which are not yet there. They are literally learned as they are being created. There is no competent teacher.” (Engestrom, 2001)

Talking Heads, which existed online as a precursor to NCSL and was absorbed into NCSL’s talk2learn, was created to be an online community of practice. Using Think.Com software its community-based approach seeks to transform the professional development of school leaders. It provides virtual communities where the

heads in England are able to support, learn from each other and have the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with policy advisers and decision makers. Talking Heads recognized that,

“headteachers are an important source of collective wisdom.” (Heppell 2002)

It hopes to make available tacit knowledge because,

“ tacit knowledge is intimately related to action and relevant to attainment goals that people value.”

It is about rules of thumb, *“for what to do under what circumstances”* (Sternberg et al. 1999 p 131) . Pat Collarbone elegantly expressed the ideal. *“Imagine a collection of individuals, working in close proximity, sharing a common purpose and passion - a desire to learn. Imagine this same collection of individuals, working closely together, sharing knowledge, aspiring to the same vision. Imagine that same collection of individuals, sharing each other’s hopes and fears, empathising emotionally, unleashing the power of their collective intelligences. This is a learning community.”* (Collarbone, 2000) Talking Heads was created in the belief that it could be such a learning community.

Thus we see that innovation is taking place not just in the type of institution offering learning but also, perhaps more radically, in the way that learning is created..

However aware of Salmon’s warning that , *“Many have tried and some have been disappointed with their efforts to date”* (Salmon, 2000 p19) over the two and a half years of Talking Heads facilitators have experimented with many types of community.

Hotseats ,where heads are in conversation with decision makers and policy makers, have been very successful. However, with reference to the online communities exclusively for heads one constant comment noted by the facilitators was that contributions could go unanswered. For example the Faith Community with a membership of over 700 and monthly hits of 1200 – 1500 had 40 contributions over two years and most of these comments were individual ice breaker comments or largely unanswered (by other heads) requests for policies or ideas or assemblies. Heads were visiting to find facilitator-generated information but were not engaging in conversation. Under these circumstances it is difficult to meaningfully apply terms like community or community of practice.

At a team meeting of facilitators in Nottingham in May 2002 the question was asked, *“If we put all the heads who complained that they had made contributions but had received no reply into one community would that create a successful vibrant community?”* From this question the ‘Challenges Now’ community was born. Given that teachers and heads have traditionally been a target group for institutions of higher education and how successful was ‘Challenges Now’ as a learning community, a community of practice?

Challenges Now

Challenges Now was created by asking the 22 members of the Talking Heads facilitation team to nominate heads whom they thought fitted the above category. 41 names were received. They were contacted in May 2002 and invited to join the ‘Challenges Now’ community. It was made clear to the heads that they had been identified by their facilitators as innovative heads interested in exploring the potential of online communities. It was explained that the community would only last for two weeks and that its only purpose was for them to identify and discuss the challenges

they were facing as the new school year unfolded. They were asked to identify the issues they might like to discuss. Of the 41 contacted, 38 accepted the invitation and 23 contributed. The community was defined within Talking Heads as a group of distinguished heads. Their discussions were open to others and there was an invitation for other heads to make contributions at any time over the two weeks. In the event three did so. The heads were from a variety of sectors and diverse geographical locations. They had little in common beyond headship.

Data Collection.

Aware that “the concept of the aloof researcher has been abandoned” and ‘that all research is interpretive’ (Denzin and Lincoln 1998) the writer was one of the facilitators involved in creating the ‘Challenges Now’ community. Given that triangulation allows the cross checking of different data sources and methods (Greenfield 1996) the data was collected in the following ways:

- By analyzing the number of contributors and contributions to Challenges Now and another mainstream Talking Heads Community, Remodeling the Curriculum.
- By using a taxonomy to analyze the contributions made by heads in Challenges Now and one other mainstream community from Talking Heads, Remodeling the Curriculum. (Table 2)

Having decided that Salmon’s taxonomy of active and interactive thinking (Salmon 2000) was inappropriate a new taxonomy was created with the help of five associates at Ultralab. In isolation, they read the contributions to ‘Challenges Now’ and each suggested a classification. These classifications were discussed by the group and a taxonomy emerged.

- By means of a collective interview with nine of the members at NCSL. Nine out of a possible twenty six were ‘returned’

On 17th Feb.2003 nine of the Challenges Now group assembled at NCSL. They were asked to consider if “Challenges Now’ as a community had come close to Pat Collarbone’s ideal as outlined above.

Three facilitators, one of them the writer, acted as summarizers.

- By means of an online questionnaire

An anonymous online questionnaire was made available to community members from mid February to mid March 2003. It was available at <http://194.83.41.231/challenges/challenges.htm>

The data was collected to address the following questions:

- What did heads do?

Russell

- What did they learn?
- Was it worthwhile?

It was hoped that this approach would allow a judgment as to whether ‘Challenges Now’ was a successful vibrant community and if it was why was it?

Data Analysis

The number of contributors and contributions

	Remodeling the Curriculum	Challenges Now
Number of Contributors	66	26
Contributed once	36 (55%)	8 (31%)
Contributed 2+	16 (24%)	5 (19%)
Contributed 3+	9 (13%)	5 (19%)
Contributed 4+	5 (8%)	8 (31%)

Table 1

Given that the central question, ‘Was Challenges Now a successful, vibrant community?’ a comparison with another Talking Heads community was considered useful. The results are presented in Table 1.

Remodeling the Curriculum was described as an open community of practice. It was open to the 10,265 registered members. It remained open from June 02 to June 03 and consisted of five contributory items including two hotseats hosted by two serving heads as well as many items offering advice and information. Given its length and high profile within Talking Heads it provides a good gauge of the relative success of Challenges Now which was also open to heads, other than those contacted to participate.

- Over its two week life span Challenges Now had 26 contributors compared to 66 for Remodeling the Curriculum over a seven month period.
- Over its two week lifespan Challenges Now attracted 87 contributions compared to 124 for Remodeling the Curriculum over a seven month period.

When the pattern of multiple contributions by individual heads is examined, (Figure 1) the Challenges Now heads made significantly more return visits with 31% of Challenges Now heads making a single contribution compared to 54% of

Remodelling the Curriculum heads making

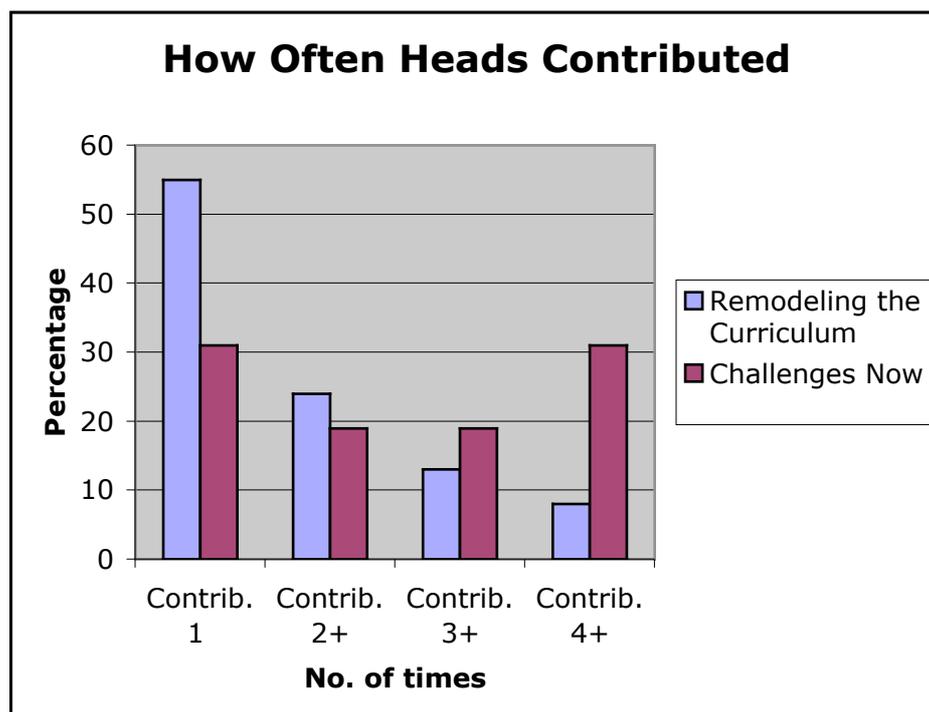


Figure 1

a single contribution. At the other end of the scale 31 % of Challenges Now heads made four or more contributions compared to 8% for Remodeling the Curriculum heads. Although the actual numbers of heads involved is small these figures suggest that the Challenges Now heads were engaging in ongoing discussions.

Thus the above figures suggest that given the number of participants, the number of contributions and the 50 % making three or more contributions, within Talking Heads Challenges Now was a vibrant successful community.

A Taxonomy

Taxonomy Analysis Data for Remodeling the Curriculum and Challenges Now

00 Remodeling the Curriculum

00 Challenges Now

Category	Description	Examples	Total no. of occurrences	Number of times assigned highest value
1	Statements	Statement Providing information Statement on an issue General supportive Comment	59 49	27 17
2	Questions	Seeking information	26 16	17 11

		Requesting dialogue Asking for support/help				
3	Answering a question	Providing information Providing advice	4	15	2	12
4	Discussion	Using names or “we” etc Engaging the individual Responding to points made/issue	91	64	64	23
5	Empathy	Supportive comments Similar situation	7	12	5	8
6	Disclosure	Sharing concerns that are difficult Sharing concerns that make the head vulnerable	8	24	9	16
7	Dialogue	Consider / reflect sufficiently to see a situation differently, or from someone else’s point	0	0	0	0

Table 2

(The one contribution could contain several categories and therefore multiple occurrences were recorded. However the highest category from each contribution was also recorded.)

Bearing in mind Pat Collarbone’s ideal, statistics recording the number of contributions are of limited value in attempting to gauge the success of the Challenges Now community. It is the quality of the contributions and the learning of the school leaders that is important. To this end a taxonomy was devised and applied to the above two communities.

The taxonomy moved along a scale from statements to dialogue with each stage intended to indicate a higher degree of community interaction. The first three levels are self-explanatory. However it is noticeable that although the Remodeling the Curriculum community included a hotseat that invited questions the contributions here tended to fall into the discussion category especially when the highest value was assigned. Participants in the hotseat raised and expanded upon issues rather than asking a direct question.

‘Discussion’ was where heads were interacting with each other in a personal and meaningful way by referring to each other by name or following up on someone else’s contribution. ‘Empathy’ was taken as a sign of community, It was considered to exist when a head was identified for particular support or reference was made to the contributor being in a similar difficult situation. ‘Disclosure’, revealed feeling, was taken as indicating a high degree of trust and involved sharing difficult concerns that could have made the head vulnerable. ‘Dialogue’, although not found by any of the 5 facilitators who looked at the contributions, was placed at the top because if the heads were seen to reflect sufficiently to see a situation from someone else’s point of view

and perhaps adjust their own opinion then significant learning has taken place. The percentage frequency for each category was calculated. (Figure 2)

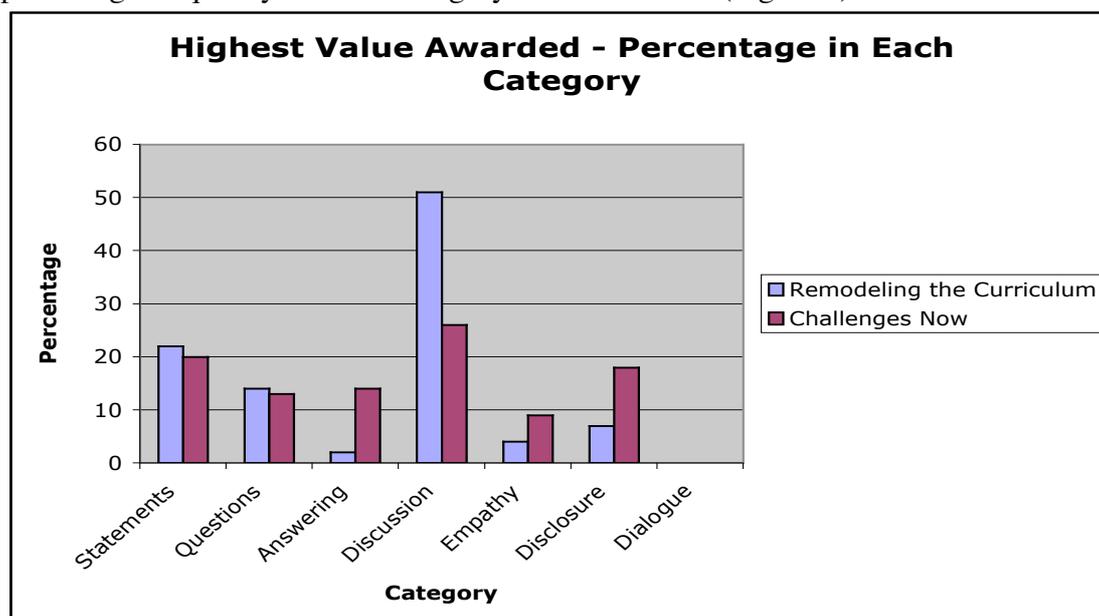


Figure 2

Whilst recognizing that the creation and use of any classification or taxonomy is subjective this taxonomy shows that within Challenges Now 27% of the contributions revealed empathy and disclosure and 53% involved discussion, empathy and disclosure.

Remodeling the Curriculum has 9% more in the top four categories. However, within Challenges Now the category dealing with answering a question was distorted because during the second week the heads were asked by a facilitator to provide their three top tips for new heads for an article in NCSL's LDR (Short for Leader). This also increased the Challenges Now percentage in the bottom three categories. However, Challenges Now has 16% more in the empathy and disclosure categories suggesting a greater degree of trust within the Challenges Now community. In both communities questions tended to be invitations to open discussion on a particular topic rather than a request for specific information. This suggested that the participants in both communities were more interested in communication than information, an observation borne out by the number of contributions classified as being above category 3.

Although none of the contributions fell into the top 'dialogue' category. The heads were comfortable and trustful within the 'Challenges Now' community, perhaps too comfortable for uncomfortable thoughts and the transformation of mind sets.

The one controversial reference in the second week (One head suggested with reference to staff, "don't get mad get even") was met with humour and even awe but no challenge. Perhaps this online community was no different from any team that was just forming. (Tuckman B 1965) Storming would have to wait.

However, the 26 heads who participated in Challenges Now engaged with each other and demonstrated discussion on professional issues with a higher degree of trust and disclosure compared to Remodeling the Curriculum. Thus Challenges Now, in terms

of the quality of the content as identified by the taxonomy, was a successful community where heads displayed a willingness to discuss and trust.

Document analysis , Interview and Questionnaire

This third part of the analysis of ‘Challenges Now’ uses the suggested framework of the Open University’s approach to evaluation. (OU, 1980), essentially asking:

- What did heads do?
- What did they learn?
- Was it worthwhile?

The evidence for this section consists of data from the online community, the communal interview and the online questionnaire. For the, ‘Was it worthwhile?’ section evidence is also included from earlier in the paper.

What did they do?

Having been identified by their facilitators and contacted by both email and letter the heads signed up for a two week online community. In replying to the email they identified the five issues they would like to discuss.

- Teacher recruitment and retention
- Performance management reviews
- Funding issues
- Thoughts on initiatives
- Out of the box thoughts
- Contributions on Each Issue

Issue	Week one	Week two
Teacher recruitment and retention	5	1
Performance management reviews	2	3
Funding issues	10	4
Thoughts on initiatives	14	3
Out of the box thoughts	13	32

Table 3

Table 3 shows that in week one ‘Thoughts on initiatives’, ‘Out of the box thoughts’ and ‘Funding issues’, were the most popular topics. However the second week was dominated by ‘Out of the box thoughts’ as the heads chose to get into discussion about the nature of their job, incidents that happen daily and supportive comments. What they mainly did was discuss their day to day work.

The document analysis reinforced not only the degree of empathy and trust identified by the taxonomy but also the involvement of three sectors (Primary, Secondary and

Special) and the wide geographical spread of the contributors. As the heads discussed the nominated issues Challenges Now gave an insight into the hectic but thoughtful world of the school leaders as they grappled with the unexpected and the dangerous.

"Stress comes in different forms. Mine this week has been building related - a refurbishment that has resulted in a flood in Reprographics from a pipe they forgot was disconnected at one end and not at the other. 3 days without electricity and water in Science and Food." Secondary School Head 25/09/02

"Sorry to bring us down from the ether of strategic and financial stuff, but my school has spent this week under siege, literally, from a damaged parent who wants to kill herself and her two boys." (age 5 and 6) Primary Head 26/09/02

Teacher Recruitment and retention attracted few comments, and only one in the second week, but there was concern about finding suitably experienced deputies and keeping young teachers in schools in inner London.

"I spent much of last year (without much success) looking for a replacement Deputy. Even though we are a sizeable village school we've been unable to generate a lot of interest in the post." Primary Head 16/9/02

"In the inner city we loose so many young teachers as they settle down and are driven out by house prices. Decent London Weighting would help recruitment and retention, for sure." London Sec. Head 30/9/02

On funding there were pleas for a fairer system of funding.

"An explanation is required as to why children attract more or less funding depending on where they live. Surely a standard amount for each child based on age and developmental need would be more appropriate. An inner city school does have different needs from a small rural Primary and these should be taken into account and adequately compensated for." Primary Head 13/9/02

The head of a small rural school defended his corner. Inclusion was recognised as "an excellent ideal" but examples were provided of situations that formula led funding doesn't recognise. Heads shared thoughts and concerns on Performance Management Reviews.

"Our vulnerability to unions and tribunals is a major issue." Primary Head 27/09/02

Under 'Thoughts on Initiatives' heads voiced support for the NLS (National Literacy Strategy) and NNS (National Numeracy Strategy) but wondered if it was at the cost of creativity and inclusion.

"Whilst we have had several, albeit valuable, initiatives imposed upon us, it is increasingly difficult to focus on what is most important. I believe passionately in inclusion, but know that the more I 'include', the harder it becomes to reach government targets for basic skills." Primary Head 16/09/02

Within this section there was praise for courses heads had attended including a conference in the Midlands on Accelerated Learning.

As indicated in the Table 3 'Out of the box thoughts' was the most popular item, especially in the second week. Heads used this heading to ask for more freedom, freedom to release the creativity of their staff, freedom to lead rather than manage.

"After six years of following Gov. initiatives and two good OfSEDS and Beacon status I have made the decision to go with my own ideas. We focus on achieving targets rather than teaching a love of learning. This year the school improvement plan will look at our creative side." Special School Head 23/09/02

"I am currently doing my best to ban the word management - believing that if its about pupils or staff its about people and therefore we have to lead them not manage them" Head of a Comprehensive 22/09/02

Russell

" Teachers want the leadership of the whole child ... not the proscribed, compartmentalised curriculum which is continually thrust upon us ,, This is the ground we all have to recover."
Head of a Comprehensive 23/09/02

There were calls for a return of professional trust, for parents from all socio-economic backgrounds to recognise their responsibilities as well as their rights. One head reported that a parent thought he had the right to break her legs.

Heads expressed a pride and confidence that schools are doing a job that is well worth doing. The social interaction that evolved in Challenges Now gave a clear message to the participants that they are not alone. There was a willingness to trust distant colleagues.

"What a range of opinions! I wish you could all be in one school. What an amazing place that would be. Reading the comments reminds me of why I am a Head and gives me strength that really committed people will win the world. Be proud of yourselves." Primary Head 25/09/02

"I am so heartened to know that despite everything, teaching is still the most rewarding profession to be in!" Primary Head 26/9/02

The results from the online questionnaire and the group interview allow an insight into the heads reflections on their participation in Challenges Now. Six out of the nine answered that they were aware that the group was independent of sector and geography. The same six said that this was a good thing and their comments referred to the quality of the discussions and the degree of trust displayed.

"It was a refreshing change to talk to a wider group knowing that there would be a response. It was a lively and successful group."

"It gave a sense of security. A sense of knowing that the audience was probably sympathetic understanding, professional and supportive"

"It was interesting to see what issues we had in common and how people in different fields had solutions to each others issues"

These were typical comments.

The group interview expanded upon this theme picking up on the encouragement provided if you know your point will be answered.

" We got a responses so you started to put your heart into and began to get carried away by it as others commented."

The group interview suggested that paradoxically trust quickly developed and heads made the comments they did because they didn't know each other. It was a trust perhaps peculiar to online communities.

"It was less threatening in a community you do not know"

Not knowing the other members was deemed not to matter in terms of disclosure provided you got a reply and your contribution didn't stay unanswered for weeks leaving you vulnerable.

"You have to be brave and sometimes you put up a major issue and no one responds and all you want to do is take it down."

In praising this sense of trust, and the benefit of the community to him, one head, in the group interview revealed that what he did was,

Russell

“... lurk quite a bit. I went through a bad patch and reading other people comments made me pull myself out of it. I did not comment but it got me started the next day because others felt the same.”

Another followed by saying,

“Community gets you over I can’t do this.”

Heads also provided tips for new heads reading LDR, an NCSL publication distributed to all heads.

Thus the heads joined this community with a competence in ICT, a high degree of trust, a willingness to share their expertise outside the community and a willingness to engage in a wide ranging supportive professional discussion.

What did they learn?

The above comments established that the heads that participated learned that membership of a short burst professional community can be pleasant experience, that they have much in common with other heads and that they face similar issues. The Questionnaire specifically asked. “Had the Challenges Now Community any impact upon you and/or your school?”

The answers here were less encouraging. Only one could refer to any impact upon their school.

“The sharing of ideas gave me a new insight to share with my staff. It made me realise I still had a long way to go.”

This comment from the questionnaire is close to the dialogue category in the taxonomy as is this one:

“There was some very exciting and thought provoking discussion back in September”

However these were isolated remarks. Perhaps to expect an impact on the school after two weeks would be unrealistic but the questionnaire was answered in February, five months after the online community closed.

In contrast eight responded positively, but vaguely, in answer to, “Had the ‘Challenges Now Community’ any personal or professional impact upon you?”

Typical comments included:

“I have benefited a lot. Several other heads have been kind enough to share resources with me. There is the reassurance that I am doing the same as other heads.”

“I have gained enormously. I am far more confident at ICT and I am possibly not as bad as I think. I am now aspiring to higher things eg attendance at a SLICT (Strategic Leadership of ICT) course.”

There were no references to specific resources or learning gains but perhaps learning in this instance lies in the realm of tacit knowledge, in observing the other person’s story. Interestingly in the group interview no reference was made to learning.

Was it a worthwhile exercise?

In terms of the comparative statistics the answer is yes. The number (87) and length of the contributions over the two week period was impressive. It prompted one head in the community to comment,

" Problem with this group of 'distinguished' heads is that you all write too much ... they are so good though that I think I shall be printing off." Junior School Head 19/09/02

It was also worthwhile in that in no other medium could these heads have come together in a community and the degree of warmth, discussion, empathy and disclosure indicate that it was a community. Seven out of the nine who responded to the questionnaire stated that they would like to repeat the experience and this was the collective view expressed at the group interview. One answer from the questionnaire ended with,

“– most rewarding to participate”

As we have seen in terms of personal and professional impact the heads referred warmly to the experience. It was worthwhile in that the heads, many of whom had expressed an earlier frustration with asynchronous discussions enjoyed lively, professional responses. It was worthwhile because it provided useful tips and learning for those outside the community.

Key Questions

Having established that Challenges Now was worthwhile and a relatively successful online community we can pose the following questions:

1. Was 'Challenges Now' one of the more successful communities within Talking Heads because of the degree of facilitation?

This community was heavily facilitated. The heads received an initial email, a hardcopy of the invitation, an email asking for issues, and an email and letter with instructions on how to participate. Those who volunteered to participate and didn't show after the first week were emailed and telephoned. After the first week and second weeks summaries were provided online and encouraging comments from facilitators punctuated the heads contributions. Heads who had difficulty logging on contacted the facilitators by email and telephone. The facilitators decided that the community would occupy an online page that was open to all rather than exist in a closed community and three 'passing' heads joined the community. Because it was a page and hits are only provided by Oracle for communities we do not know how many were 'the audience'.

In the questionnaire when asked why they agreed to participate in 'Challenges Now' three heads simply said because they were asked by the facilitators. In the group interview when asked to comment on the role of the facilitator the collective view was positive. They liked and needed to be reminded of events and one, in the group interview, referred to the role of the facilitator as being like a good PA who says, "I know you are busy but this you should really be at this." At the same interview one head spoke of the importance of the relationship with the facilitator and commented,

“You don’t refuse a friend.” Another followed up with, *“The personal approach from facilitators worked.”* However one did comment in the online questionnaire that she was nagged into participating, *“and so I didn’t really benefit”*. There is a lesson here for facilitators. However there was collective praise for the summaries provided by the facilitators at the end of the first week. In agreeing that this was valuable one head commented, *“The summaries from the facilitators were helpful in moving the discussion on.”*

Reference has already been made to the degree of trust displayed by the participants. This may be because once the criteria for membership of an online community is known then trust and empathy are given. Preece found, after looking at online medical support groups, that people didn’t want information they wanted communication with other sufferers. In one group suffering from sports injuries, 45% of the posting were emphatic, 32% were stories and 17.4% were asking for and receiving information. (Preece 1997) This suggests that when a member is aware of the qualities of the group, even when the individuals aren’t known, then he/she is prepared to invest trust, empathy and disclosure. It has also been suggested that one feature of online communicating is ‘the kindness of strangers’ or the “strength of weak ties” (Constant et al.1997). However the Challenges Now participants were known to and trusted the facilitators and this may also have been an additional and important factor for the degree of comfort, trust and empathy shown by the participants.

Thus given the amount of facilitation and the generally positive response to that facilitation it is reasonable to suggest that the degree of facilitation was an important factor in the success of Challenges now.

2. Was ‘Challenges Now’ one of the more successful communities within Talking Heads because of the feeling of belonging to a selected group?

When asked in the online questionnaire, ‘Did the fact that you belonged to a group identified by facilitators as distinguished heads increase your comfort and confidence within the group?’ seven out of the nine answered yes. This finding is supported by the high degree of trust that the participants took into a community of strangers and which was identified in the application of the taxonomy. Perhaps this is not surprising since those selected to participate had earlier expressed to their facilitators frustration at not getting responses online.

3. Was ‘Challenges Now’ one of the more successful communities within Talking Heads because of a higher degree of familiarity with the software?

Given that the members of this community were known to and selected by facilitators we would expect this to be a factor in the success of the community. Seven out of the nine who answered the questionnaire were comfortable with ICT and thought that online communities were the future. Not surprisingly therefore seven out of the nine said they used Talk2Learn at least once a week. Their comfort with the soft ware is supported by the frequency and volume of the contributions. When asked about the weaknesses of online communities, in the questionnaire, two out of the nine mentioned problems of access but one of these was a complaint about not having broadband at home.

We can conclude that the participants’ familiarity with the software was a factor in the success of ‘Challenges Now.’

4. Was 'Challenges Now' one of the more successful communities within Talking Heads because of the likelihood of having contributions acknowledged quickly by other heads?

Given that this issue was the *raison d'être* of the community the evidence here is particularly significant. From both the questionnaire and the group interview there is a clear message. These are typical comments from the questionnaire.

"I agreed to participate in 'Challenges Now' in the knowledge that there would be a response"

"I was encouraged to come back because there was dialogue. Over months and months is not dialogue"

"We got a responses so you started to put your heart into and began to get carried away by it as others commented."

In the group interview there was general agreement that this was a successful community and that it should be repeated because the "short burst" idea meant that you wanted to be involved and others were there to reply when you commented. Thus whilst asynchronous contact has its advantages these advantages are of dubious value when comments are left for a long time without reply. The heads liked the asynchronous environment but were comfortable participating in Challenges Now because they were confident of a reply.

Conclusion

In terms of triangulation, the evidence from a variety of sources, including document analysis, frequency statistics, a taxonomy and a group interview supported the view that Challenges Now was a successful online community. It revealed active involvement by participants, animated discussion of professional issues, empathy and disclosure. It highlighted the following:

- Short burst communities can be relatively successful
- Selected heads will come to such a community willing to discuss and trust
- Discussion and trust are possible online between heads from a variety of sectors and a diverse geography
- The role of the facilitator is key in identifying the membership and providing constant background administration and encouragement.
- Asynchronous communities work when there are responses within a reasonable period of time.

For a two week period in September 26 heads gathered in an online place, in front of an online audience (Orange recorded 8055 hits on the Community of Talking Heads for September) joined as a community of strangers to get to know each other (Kim 2000) (White 2002) and to discuss the issues facing them as the new year unfolded. They demonstrated that trust does not need touch (Handy 1995) (Paccagnella 1997) They were involved in a joint enterprise, engaging with each other and sharing their repertoire of skills and experience. (Wenger 1991) They were learning physically distant from both the sponsoring institution and its lecture rooms.

Remembering CHEPS suggested that in future Higher Education Institutions will be looking for new target groups and recent innovations point to radical change involving co operation between old and new providers this study has suggested how provision could move away from the existing core medium, the lecture. Given the above and with the tutors becoming pro-active facilitator new target groups, beyond and within the campuses of existing institutions of Higher Education, could come together to learn in vibrant online communities.

References

1. Atkins, D. E., answering a question at *The Chronicle of Higher Education Colloquy Live* November 2002, available at <http://chronicle.com/colloquylive/2002/11/research/>
2. Collarbone (2000) Introductory article for a TH Hotseat in DfEE in Dialogue, a closed community in Think.com
3. Collis, B. van der Wende, M. (Ed) (2002) *Models of Technology and change in Higher Education*, Centre for Higher Education Policy Studies. Available at http://www.utwente.nl/cheps/publications/downloadable_publications/downloadables_english.doc/index.html.
4. Constant, D., Sproull, L. and Kiesler, S., (1997). *The Kindness of Strangers: on the usefulness of electronic weak links for technical advice*. In S. Kiesler (ed). *Culture of the Internet*, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 303 – 22
5. Denzin, D. K. Lincoln, Y. S. (Ed.) (1998) *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and Issues*. London: Sage p22-26
6. DfEE (1999) *National College of School Leadership - A Prospectus*
7. Eraut, M. (1999). Conceptual Analysis and Research Questions - do the concepts of 'learning communities' and 'communities of practice' provide added value? Paper for AERA Annual Conference, Montreal, 1999
8. Engestrom, Y. (2001) *Expansive Learning at Work: toward an activity theoretical reconceptualisation*, *Journal of Education and Work*, Vol. 14, No 1, 2001. p.137
9. Greenfield, T. (1996) *Research Methods*. London: Arnold p9
10. Handy, C. (1995). Trust and the virtual organization. *Harvard Business Review*, 73 (3), 40-50.
11. Heppell, S., (2002)
12. Kim, A.J. (2000) *Community Building on the Web*. Berkeley: Peachpit Press. Pps x –28
13. Open University/Schools Council (1980) *The Curriculum in Action: an approach to evaluation*, Milton Keynes OUP p234
14. Paccagnella, L., (1997) *Getting the Seats of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities*, available at <http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol3/issue1/paccagnella.html#rjonesb>
15. Preece, J. (1999). *Emphatic Communities: balancing emotional and factual communication*. *Interacting with Computers*, 12, 63-77
16. Salmon, G., (2000). *E-Moderating: The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*: Kogan Page: London.
17. Sternberg, R. J., (1999) *What do we know about tacit knowledge? Making the tacit become explicit*. In *Tacit Knowledge in Professional Practice* (ed. R.J. Sternberg and J. A. Horvarth), New Jersey: LEA. P131

18. Tuckman, B. (1965) *Groups and group dynamics*, available at <http://www.onepine.info/mgrp.htm>
19. White, N., (2002) *What is a "Virtual Community" anyway?* Available at <http://www.fullcirc.com/community/communitywhatwhy.htm>
20. Wegner, E., (1998). *Communities of Practice Learning, Meaning and Identity*, Cambridge: CUP.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Simon Patton who was the other lead facilitator within Challenges Now and who worked hard to make that community a success. Simon also provided data, help and encouragement in the writing of this paper.

Thanks to Leonie Ramondt, Carole Chapman, Manoah Smiley, Ken Allen and Pete Bradshaw who co-operated in the creation of the taxonomy.

Thanks to Alan Sargeant who along with Simon Patton helped facilitate the group interview and to Greta Mladenova who created and posted the online questionnaire.