

Community Based Learning

Developing the interface between formal and informal learning communities

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Abstract: This paper asserts that the natural starting point for any learning is an informal learning community with family, peers, elders, etc. With the need for socialisation and preparation for economic activity formal learning communities assert their role in the life of the learner. The convergence of formal and informal learning communities provides the basis for real lifelong learning, a process accelerated by the role of information and communications technologies removing traditional barriers to learning and empowering communities to take actions to meet their own short and long-term needs. Community based learning is integral to the sustainability of active citizenship which is itself being transformed through the increasing availability and accessibility of information and communications technology in all societies. The role of the school is changing; it is becoming extended, with a role at the heart of a learning, social and cultural community, for young and old.

Key words: citizenship, community learning, diaspora, extended school, learning communities, informal learning, people, partnership, self-organised

INTRODUCTION

It is easy to assert that the natural starting point for learning is the informal learning communities to which we all belong, whether it is with our family, peers or elders. Whether this is a baby learning from their mother, the older child listening to the stories told by their grandparents, children sharing their adventures with each other, listening to another person in their community, or indeed a community elder learning from a child: many of us would recognise such activities as taking place within childhood. The acknowledgement of such learning communities is helpful in considering the basis for community based learning, where an interface with formal learning can develop. However, it also needs to be acknowledged that for some families informal learning has a low priority, which inadequately prepares the child, and hence an earlier or more intensive interface with formal learning may be required with an increased role for community based learning. "Not all children have an equal chance to achieve their potential at school. Growing up in a family with financial difficulties is closely correlated with poor school attendance, poor literacy and low qualifications. Inadequate adult interest and involvement in children's development coupled with a lack of opportunities to learn at home lead to low expectations and lay the foundation for failure or underachievement in too many circumstances." (DfEE 1999; p.50).

It should not be assumed that the natural starting point of an informal learning community only applies to children, it can apply to anyone. In identifying such learning communities, it is possible to envisage social, economic, residential, knowledge and educational as well as familial communities, all of which are undergoing change, often as a result of the impact of new information and communications technology. "Visions of learning have been evolving, and informal learning communities and communities of practice have become important concepts that highlight the fact that learning is no longer happening in classrooms or through formal e-learning mechanisms. The 'Knowledge Economy' implies a far reaching transformation of the learning process." (Tremblay 2002) The way we visualise learning communities has also changed, as the Archbishop of Canterbury noted in 2000, "Increasingly we are not only citizens of the world but also citizens of the World Wide Web." Hence our experience of learning communities, whether formal, non-formal or informal has changed, hence the spaces and times in which community based learning can take place is also changing. Perhaps one of the advantages of informal learning is that activities are not mapped to a formal learning process or qualifications, and are often motivated by fun, or the sense of achievement that comes from completing a project.

INFORMAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES: A CHANGING ROLE FOR INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY

If we consider the impact of television and the internet on young children, and their family and carers, we will see considerable change. In the UK, the BBC has broadcast a children's television series called Teletubbies since 1997 which provides "...a foundation for learning in literacy, numeracy, social skills, story, movement, music and the wider world. It was a radical departure for pre-school television. And the website, packed with educational activities, receives over a million hits a week... In 1997 the BBC took educational programming out of the classroom and into the home. For the first time, children and their parents were viewing educational programmes together." (Dyke 1999) The BBC, as a public service broadcaster, was seeking to use its "...ability to reach very large numbers of people through its television and radio services ...to sell the new opportunities for education ...to play a major part in the learning revolution in the 21st century [and] if we don't, millions could be left without an education, and, as result, without a role and without a future." Dyke went on to talk about politicians use of the phrase 'learning revolution' and their desire to leave a legacy of change, not wanting to leave "...just the memory of a soundbite, then it must engage a very high proportion of the population." This change in the way in which learning is taking place is evident from other services which the BBC provide, such as the 'GCSE Bitesize' exam revision support service provided for 16 year old students which is an interactive, multimedia service used by 60% of the student cohort. Another service for adults in 'BBC Webwise' a free service to increase confidence and competence in using the web, providing an opportunity to explore, participate and learn, connecting to learning with the BBC. We may recognise similar provision from our own experience – the BBC is one such provider in the UK, changing the nature of mass public broadcasting services from one-to-many, to one-to-one, recognising, and "...one-to-one communication is perhaps the best and most natural basis of effective learning." (Dyke 1999) See www.bbc.co.uk

The learning communities created with the support of such provision, just like any other learning resource or opportunity, can be informal and of a short duration or can be longer term. However, we know that "...TV and computer games, or the peer group" (OECD 1999; p.14) are a powerful influence on young people, and the not so young, and is then likely to have an effect on the nature of learning communities, formal, non-formal and informal. With public and private sector organisations overtly supporting the

learning revolution, any boundary between formal and informal communities is increasingly indistinct.

The example of the BBC demonstrates what is being achieved when a large organisation decides to change its focus on education and seeks to develop its role as a mass public service broadcaster, to one that can support the individual and small communities. With the extension of their services using the internet and the world-wide web then it is possible to access differentiated supplementary materials which can be accessed at any time, anywhere. It is possible to support virtual learning communities who can further develop their learning with others with a similar interest.

Others organisations around the world have also taken this approach. For example, Sesame Street (USA) was established in 1968 as the Children's Television Workshop, a non profit educational organisation to help prepare children from low income families for school: and it has had a worldwide impact with some versions available in different language and cultural forms. See www.ctw.org

The reach of the BBC and Sesame Street has been local and global through the normal processes of the sale of television programmes, but they have also been able to extend global services with the creation of the web as the "...largest public space in human history." (Dearnley & Feather 2001) The provision of such web based services has grown with millions of web sites provided by individuals, interest groups and organisations which couldn't previously reach audiences and interact with communities of interest, whether formal or informal, through the traditional media with printing and television. We now see the convergence of broadcasting and digital interactivity: no longer is cost of distribution a major barrier, assuming access to the internet is available. Indeed, many organisations now exist to support communities and informal learning networks to utilise the web for communication, collaboration, celebration and support. Many of these organisations are community based and specifically provide an interface with the formal organisations of learning and other services.

COMMUNITY BASED LEARNING SUPPORT NETWORKS AND ACTIONS

With the growth of web based communities, or communities making use of the web, large and small scale support networks have been established, some by like minded people collaborating, sharing experiences and providing mutual support, others as formal actions by public, private and voluntary organisations. The support networks for community based enterprises emphasise support in creating local content to meet local

community needs and actions. A feature of informal community support can be its short-term and task focussed nature, rather than broadly based programmes of activity. The sharp focus supports the achievement of short-term goals, but it is likely that any systemic changes will occur when local groups collaborate, possibly under the umbrella of a larger organisation. Many examples of community support networks can be found around the world. A few examples are presented below to illustrate their difference in scale and links with other organizations:

– www.contentbank.org

A web site designed to spur the development of needed online content for and by low-income communities. The Web site includes recommended web sites for health, education, jobs and housing; message boards; information and tools to develop local content; and Web-based tools that will read the text aloud or translate it into Spanish to ensure the content is accessible to many communities (a project of The Children's Partnership, USA).

– www.techpolicybank.org/clevelanddesc.html

A city example showing leadership in addressing the digital divide Cleveland, USA is using a creative source of funding, its cable franchise renewal, to secure subsidies for community technology programs for youth and low-income communities.

– www.techpolicybank.org/cctpg.html

After-school and community technology agendas for youth explores ways after-school leaders and community technology advocates can work together to equip youth with the technology skills they need to reap the benefits of a technology-oriented society (from the California Community Technology Policy Group).

– www.rosettalife.org

Rosetta Life is particularly unique, working in three hospices and using the web to help people put their memories on line during creative arts workshops. They use the web as a platform for communication, self-expression, shared experience and lifelong learning for a client group that is often socially excluded.

Actions by local, national and supra-national governments and organisations can be initiated to provide the building blocks for community based learning, whether it is formal or informal. The UK government decided to create the People's Network, providing all public libraries with an ICT Learning Centre and high speed internet connection, with free public access by 2002 www.peoplesnetwork.gov.uk This free facility has provided over 4000 sites across the UK, complementing the existing role of the public library service in supporting local access to information and services,

generally staffed by local people with local interests, at the heart of many informal and formal communities of interest that are now extended by access to ICT. Recognising that not all communities had ready access to a library, and that disadvantaged individuals and communities may prefer a different sort of facility, a further 700 ICT Learning Centres have been established in the most disadvantaged communities, generally provided within the buildings owned and used by charitable and educational bodies. The UK Department for Education has also placed a requirement upon schools to provide community access to ICT, where practicable, which for many schools has presented a difficulty as they were not designed for open community access, resulting in limited initial opportunity, but with a changing public policy agenda increasing opportunities for access through schools – see below.

The intention of all these UK policy actions has been to ensure that an accessible and robust public and private ICT infrastructure is in place to support community based learning; moving learning from formal institutions to reach the learning, making accessible learning for all. “Social participation is essential for the successful development of ICT initiatives in education... the community must be able to participate in and benefit from an innovation process... Much effort must be expended in strategies that enable communities to take advantage of new technologies, so that local populations become fully acquainted with their potential.” (OECD 2000; p.30) Such actions can of course be taken at an individual level and on a small scale. For example, why not let the computers used as a workstation during working hours be used to produce support the community group in the evening and at weekends. Once people have access to the technology, they will produce content, perhaps for themselves as excluded groups, reducing their reliance on seed corn projects that may revert to philanthropic gestures for particular groups rather than mainstreaming good practice. Social inclusion often appears to be something you do to people: what about people themselves leading their own inclusion with ICT: to provide access to new content and learning opportunities; to offer opportunities to create new opportunities, locally; to reduce barriers between providers of formal and informal learning opportunities; to support the blending of informal and learning opportunities; and to challenge existing views on what is the product of learning (or education).

FORMAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

The impact of information and communications technology on formal learning institutions is considerable, whatever type of institution you

consider. This is in terms of the formal curriculum, management and pedagogy applied to traditional provision, or when you are considering the impact of e-learning in its many forms. The drivers on the formal learning communities tend to be driven by the demands of the funding body, whether from the public or private purse, with the "...most strident and compelling demand for more, and more efficient, education and training is without question driven by economic considerations, and by a desire to contain the cost of education and training. The need is also expressed for more education and training to address social equity issues and to combat social exclusion." (OECD 2001; p.7) In this paper, consideration will be given to the role of schools in extending provision to address social exclusion and equity issues, and their impact on learning.

In developing their policy responses to the need for lifelong learning, governments have at times to support what can at times be conflicting policy statements and action programmes. For example, on the UK Department for Education and Skills web site www.dfes.gov.uk the following statements are published, the first of which emphasises the economic imperatives and second, the social inclusion imperatives: they are not mutually exclusive, but do illustrate the tensions that can be apparent on differently funded public programmes.

Lifelong learning is the continuous development of skills, knowledge and understanding that are essential for employability and fulfilment. Increasingly, lifelong learning opportunities are aimed at everyone, not specific groups and cover many different opportunities for gaining skills and knowledge. These include apprenticeships, higher education, job-related training and access to ICT facilities.

The vision of Cybrarian is:

- To increase Internet usage throughout the UK;
- To help to develop basic skills among users;
- To provide easy access to information and knowledge services that will be of interest to target users (i.e. informal learning);
- To allow target users to become involved in the electronic community and, as a result, to engage more positively in modern society;
- The target users will be those who do not yet use the internet, and in particular, the socially excluded and disabled.

EXTENDING SCHOOLS

The school is generally a focal point within a residential community, where people come together, where generations meet, where new social and community bonds are established. "...the central organising point in our

society at the neighbourhood level is the school – elementary and secondary, as well as child development centres. Children could thus act as the fulcrum around which family, community, and the future worker (the child) are brought together in a system of interaction, blending instrumental goals (child-care, development and education) with expressive, emotional, and social interactions.” (Carnoy 2001) With a strengthened community based role that extends beyond what is often seen as the traditional role of the school, the school is no longer isolated, but “Through the school, other social networks organised at the municipal level could come into contact with each other. [And] The development of electronic communications also offers the possibility of creating virtual communities, in a new form of spatial organisation...” (Carnoy 2001) However, in extending the role of schools, caution is often expressed about expecting schools to do everything, “...they must concentrate mainly on what they are better equipped to do than the rest of society...” (Aalst 2001) such as teaching basic skills; although the same report “*For the love of learning*” published by the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning in 1994, also called for a new alliance between the school and the community to form “...engines for transformation...” which included making schools the centres of physical networks. If schools are to be centres of physical and virtual communities then it will have to be in ways that ensure the traditional and extended roles complement each other. But, what is driving such proposals; the OECD (2001; p.59) argues that the current universal model of schooling is relatively recent and not permanent and susceptible to change in the future, with patterns of compulsory attendance at school blurring with non-compulsory attendance, despite a strengthening of initial education.

Part of the drive for change is to understand the role of schools in attaining the goal of ‘lifelong learning for all’ adopted in 1996 by the Education Ministers of the OECD – which is in line with principles adopted by other organisations and countries; see for example, *A Memorandum on Lifelong Learning*. (Commission of the European Communities 2000); *Lifelong Learning in the Global Knowledge Economy: Challenges for Developing Countries* (World Bank 2002).

The present UK government has been increasing its investments through a broad range of initiatives since 1997, initially in the most disadvantaged communities, but now extending these more widely, although generally with lower levels of investment. The Social Exclusion Unit established by the Prime Minister in 1997 identified a number of established Policy Action Teams to take forward the recommendations in their report published in September 1998, *Bringing Britain together: a national strategy for neighbourhood renewal*. The research undertaken by the Social Exclusion Unit found that in many disadvantaged communities the only major public service still provided was

the primary or secondary school, all other public services had withdrawn, and in many communities this also applied to private services such as shops, leisure facilities and employment. The opportunity to use schools, building on pioneering work undertaken in a limited number of areas, to raise the quality of life, with increases in the formal and informal esteem of learning, as well as providing public services all contributing to community renewal was recognised as a major opportunity that needed to be put into action. Hence, a *Schools Plus* Policy Action Team was established with a broad remit to report and recommend actions on education projects that increased support for children and families beyond the traditional focus of the school, increased community use of school in core and non-core hours, encouraged co-location with health and other social services, involving parents in their children's learning, indeed to identify ways the learning community of the school could be enriched and extended with the goal of raising individual and collective community achievement. This policy has now been established formally, including necessary legislative changes, with a programme to establish 'Extended Schools'.

An extended school (DfES 2002) is one that provides a range of services and activities beyond the school day to help meet the needs of its pupils, their families and the wider community. Such a school will provide support for and access to, for example, adult education, study support, ICT facilities, community sports programmes, access to health and social services. Through extended schools, children, families and the community will secure ready access to learning through ICT, providing opportunities to use ICT to support such informal as well as formal learning opportunities, and support the home use of ICT for learning. Services will not just be provided for those people with children attending the school, they will also give children an excellent start with "Children's Centres providing access to integrated early years education and childcare with health, family and parent support services for communities in disadvantaged areas, building on other integrated programmes." (DfES 2002).

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper has been to explore the interface between formal and informal learning communities and the contribution of information and communications technology to their development. In developing the argument, a further purpose has been to explore the opportunities for people not to have to rely on 'top down' provision for their learning and community, but to support lateral communities. Increased access to the web in all communities in the developed world, and

increasingly in the developing world, is supporting a move from the external, local and central government defined organisations to strong self-organised groups, which may exist physically and virtually.

“Today we know that... real networks are not static... Instead, growth plays a key role in shaping their topology. They are not as centralised as a star network is. Rather there is a hierarchy of hubs that keep these networks together, a heavily connected node closely followed by several less connected nodes, trailed by dozens of even smaller nodes. No central node sits in the middle of the spider web, controlling and monitoring every link and node. A scale-free network is a web without a spider, there is not meticulous design behind these networks either. Real networks are self-organised. They offer a vivid example of how the independent action of millions of nodes and links lead to spectacular emergent behaviour.” (Barabasi 2002)

The role of ICT should be to support community networks, including, but not exclusively on-line communities. Such communities are relatively new, although as the paper has illustrated, also strong and diverse in nature.

“The limited evidence available suggests that the relationships people develop and maintain in cyberspace are much like most of the ones they develop in their real-life communities: intermittent, specialised and varying in strength. Even in real life, people must maintain differentiated portfolios of ties to obtain a wide variety of resources. But in virtual communities, the market metaphor of shopping around for support in specialist ties is even more exaggerated than in real life... The provision of information is a larger component of online ties than real-life ties. Yet despite the limited social presence of online ties, companionship, emotional support, services and a sense of belonging are abundant in cyberspace... People of the net have a greater tendency to base their feelings of closeness on the basis of shared interests rather than on the basis of shared social characteristics such as gender and socio-economic status... the homogeneous interests of virtual community participants may be fostering relatively high levels of empathetic understanding and mutual support... The distance-free cost structure of the net transcends spatial limits even more than the telephone, the car, the airplane because the asynchronous nature of the Net allows people to communicate over different time zones. This could allow relatively latent ties to stay in more active contact until the participants have an opportunity to get together in person.” (Wellman and Gulia 1999; p.186)

The two lengthy quotes are included by way of conclusion to support the argument that self-organised communities are supported by networks of people and actions, and that these can exist in real-life and online, but will be different in nature due to the differing ties and resources that are available. Such communities could be formal or informal, but if they are self-organised they are more likely to be informal learning communities, at least initially, as they will be communities of interest. However, it is likely that they will need to develop themselves to interface with the formal learning communities in situations where mutuality is beneficial. A clear example is proposed with extended schools, where the need of society to regenerate neighbourhoods causes formal communities, schools, to radically change their purpose and the way they interface with their communities.

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