

# ONLINE FORUMS AS RESOURCES FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FROM A WEB-BASED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE AND INFLUENCE.

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## ABSTRACT

This paper describes a number of small-scale studies that focus on the ways in which e-learning can be integrated in a range of settings for teachers and their pupils. They examine a range of projects: those based in classrooms; home-school environments; after-school activities; school-based continuous professional development (CPD); subject-based CPD in national contexts and post-graduate accreditation. The work of primary and secondary school pupils and adult learners is considered.

## KEYWORDS

Online discussion forums continuous professional development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since its inception MirandaNet has developed online forums as both learning resources and a medium for learning. MirandaNet Fellows have conducted evidence-based research projects evaluating the ways in which online environments can contribute to, and enrich, a range of learning situations.(Stuckey, 2004). Many of these have been written up as case studies and can be downloaded from the MirandaNet site ([www.mirandanet.ac.uk](http://www.mirandanet.ac.uk)).

The case studies have all been published in the MirandaNet eJournals, in which work in progress is read and critiqued by the community. The completed study is then subject to peer review. The affordances of the MirandaNet eJournals reflect Braided Learning Theory (Preston, 2002), a development of Communal Construction theory (Holmes et. al., 2001) in which ideas, like single hairs, become stronger as they are braided together. Thoughts, ideas and practices braided together by education professionals represent a new form of knowledge creation and practice that supports peers and contributes to praxis.

The work in the United Kingdom was undertaken as a response to the problem faced by many educationalists – that of implementing effective e-learning strategies. Virtual, and managed, learning environments had been introduced in the UK since 200, but many teachers struggled to integrate them into their own activities (Cuthell, 2005). These environments were often seen as top-down content management systems with built-in assessment and recoding tools: not necessarily the affordances that would support a constructivist approach to learning. The schemes described here are, in essence, small scale, even though each may be part of a much larger project.

These case studies cover five main areas – although they are not equally weighted – and there are obvious overlaps, and findings and conclusions can be applied across a wide range of learning contexts. The largest set of studies looks at the ways in which classroom teaching and environments can be enhanced through online work. A number of these look at Think.com and Grid Club (available free of charge to educational institutions from Oracle) and the ways in which they can be used as a focus for both classroom and out-of-school activities.

The issue of home-school links builds on some of these studies. Ways in which young learners can use such environments for their own learning communities is explored. Other case studies look at the ways in which online forums and environments can be used to support staff in their continuous professional development (CPD). Some of these look at uses within an institution, others, within a specific curriculum context, and another, at the ways in which evidence can be gathered and analysed to contribute to our understanding of concept formation in children.

The final case study uses observational evidence to reflect on the ways in which e-learning contributes to the overall pedagogical and developmental process.

## 2. ENHANCING CLASSROOM TEACHING AND ENVIRONMENTS

A number of these studies utilised Think.com, a web-based environment available from the Oracle Corporation that is free to schools. Think.com underpins Grid Club, a freely available resource for Primary pupils.

Fanning (2004) used this environment in his school during one school term of about twelve weeks and evaluated the impact on both the pupils and his own teaching. He found that the use of think.com in the classroom changed teaching methods. During the time span of the project teachers used the system to distribute teaching materials via class web pages; they collected and returned homework by email; they set up online assessment tasks for students. A move towards a constructivist method, where teaching becomes more learner centered and the teacher assumes the role of facilitator, required appropriate training for teachers, a change in classroom/school organisation and new methods of assessment. His full case study can be downloaded from:

[Fanning, J. \(2004\) : Can the use of think.com transform classroom teaching?](#)

Turvey (2003) also used a Think.com environment for his study, based in a one and a half form entry primary school with Year 5/6 children. The aim of this project was to investigate the perceived advantages and disadvantages of an online community within the primary school setting. He examined the use of discussion forums to facilitate the construction of knowledge in a range of contexts, bringing together individuals with common ground to share and exchange information. Much has been established regarding the stages of progression within online collaborations through socialisation to knowledge construction and development (Salmon, G: 2002). Turvey was keen to determine whether these models of e-learning could be successfully emulated within the context of the primary school, and whether they herald the introduction of a potentially new teaching and learning style. The study is available at:

[Turvey, K. \(2003\): Online communities within the Primary School Context](#)

Riley (2004) used the online discussion forums available in World Ecitizens ([www.worldcitizens.net](http://www.worldcitizens.net)) available from MirandaNet. His case study focused on e-learning as a tool for extending and enriching pupils' learning through the dialogical learning that online forums support, and the concomitant key life-skills that are developed. In embedding e-learning into the curriculum the existing practices of communities of enquiry provided guidelines for implementation. By using online discussion environments pupils were given opportunities to develop the exploratory talk required to promote collaborative knowledge construction through dialogical learning. Evaluation and assessment of learning required the use of innovative techniques of concept mapping and content analysis of discussions based on phenomenography theory.

The case study established that critical learning and key skills development took place to a significant degree. Analysis of attitudes and intentions towards e-learning established that pupils were highly motivated and found e-learning to be a valid and valuable learning tool. The use of the Internet as a resource as well as a forum and publication interface aligns with Stephen Heppell's model of e-learning as combining the affordances of a library, forum and publishing house.

[Riley, N. \(2004\): An investigation using online environments and collaborative e-learning with primary pupils.](#)

Robinson (2003) study looked at the ways in which Think.com could extend and enrich student learning outside the timetabled structures of a large secondary school. The core group of students that became part of this study were all year nine students, aged 13 to 14 years old. As a major emphasis was the role of the Gifted and Talented student, the students he chose to concentrate on were primarily from the Gifted and Talented register in year nine, based on teacher assessment, test scores and identification of specific learning skills. The register identified two levels of gifted students, 'A' students, seen as gifted and talented in more than one subject area, and 'B' students, seen as having a talent in an individual subject area. There was a conscious effort to obtain a gender balance within the core group.

To create a form of control students who were not considered gifted were chosen either because they had been part of a writing group through their enthusiasm for English or had particular interests that were felt would motivate them to be part of the group. The study can be read at:

[Robinson, R. \(2003\): The impact of Think.com on the learning of gifted students in English](#)

### **3. HOME-SCHOOL LINKS**

The use of an online environment to support student learning through homework activities was the focus of the work of Hanrahan (2004). She used an online forum on World Ecitizens to establish an environment to encourage pupils to develop independent communication skills in Modern Foreign Languages. Each strand in the discussion forum constituted a homework task: pupil threads within each strand were contributions to the task.

The project involved two groups of Year 7 students (a French class of 29 students and a German class of 28) within a large 11-18 comprehensive school in East Sussex. The idea for this project germinated from two distinct and (fairly common!) difficulties she had encountered, namely access to the IT suites in school and the setting of meaningful yet interesting homework. Therefore, the project's aims were to investigate the viability of students' use of ICT for Modern Foreign Languages at home (including their response to their own private forum) and whether this had any impact on their attitude to language learning. In addition, she proposed to examine her own e-learning throughout the project.

The homework tasks included visiting different language websites to complete various activities, writing reviews and reports of chosen language sites and games which students would then email to her, and participating in a language forum that was set up specifically for the project on the MirandaNet site. Her findings examined ways in which online homework could be monitored, and the effects of e-learning projects on students' attitude to language learning. The final analysis looked at the success of the Year 7 discussion forum and ways in which it differed from an adult forum.

[Hanrahan, K. \(2004\): Modern Foreign Languages Elearning Project:](#)

### **4. CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

Thomas' (2003) study was initiated by the need to ensure that CPD gains from short school-based activities could be embedded into professional practice. Continued professional development (CPD) through professional dialogue is difficult to maintain over diverse groups. Groups such as PGCE, GTP and existing teaching staff of varying levels of experience have a valid contribution to give any professional development group. Time to talk within any stage in the profession is always at a premium. His aim was to enable staff to develop professional dialogue after focused professional sessions on issues. The time to talk is sometimes difficult or impossible to find as the groups of people involved are diverse and on different time allocations and levels of professional experience. Dai was keen to change the reflective professional dialogue that in part takes place as a plenary of a session to an asynchronous online activity

Dai used open source solutions such as PHP BB, which allowed him to develop his own online community with little or no funding, and also to control and customise his community solution to the needs of his organisation and its users. He also used solutions such as Mambo Server technology, Moodle groupware, Groove Workspace and PhpWebsite.

[Thomas, D. \(2003\): Continued professional development \(CPD\) through dialogue online](#)

McDonald (2004) also looked at CPD, this time through the impact of a subject association online community on his own professional development, and on others. He describes the community as 'the largest history department in the UK', and examines the ways in which its users contribute, and draw from the community.

[McDonald, N. \(2004\): Teachers' Use of Forums for E-Learning](#)

Dave Wallbanks and Neil McDonald both collaborated on the forum. The separate study by Wallbanks (2004) describes ways in which the teachers used the forum for e-learning.

[Wallbanks, D. \(2004\): Teachers' Use of Forums E-learning](#)

A slightly different professional development forum was examined by Semwayo (2005). The discussion forum formed part of a joint project between MirandaNet and Select Education to train supply teachers as e-facilitators. These e-facilitators would then work on the Select Education discussion forums to support supply teachers and contribute to online CPD. Ben's study examined the ways in which the discussion forum progressed and how it compared with other discussion forums.

[Semwayo, B. \(2005\): The Select Education Discussion Forum](#)

A project of a rather different type was initiated by Witherington (2004). The project, conducted over a six-week period in the summer term, involved setting up and facilitating an online discussion forum for all 200 staff at his school. The project aimed to establish the feasibility, effectiveness and sustainability of such a forum and to investigate whether it could help to build a one-school ethos in a school created from two institutions. Evidence from questionnaires, interviews and from the analysis of transcripts was used to form some conclusions. The processes necessary to set up a forum were clearly established and a community of mutually supportive staff, reflecting on professional issues began to develop. Although only a small number of staff were actively engaged in the forums, the support for the idea and its potential was much more widespread. Barriers to wider use were the inevitable 'lack of time' and a number of other tensions for staff in a school facing challenging circumstances. The school has now formed a hard federation with two other schools and the need for such a forum for sharing of good practice within the federation is enhanced.

[Witherington, A. \(2004\): Creating an online community in a large secondary school](#)

## **5. PUSHING BOUNDARIES**

The issue of virtual CPD activities was examined by Worthington (2004), whose research question was whether working with a colleague online (from the same setting) supported both individual's learning. The study explored ways in which context and language supported learners in constructing understanding, and assessed the impact of involvement in collaborative discussion, on classroom practice. A further concern was to evaluate the extent to which e-learning provides an effective means of professional development. Innovative online facilities were used within a MirandaNet discussion forum to enable staff to exchange and critique images of children's work.

[Worthington, M. \(2004\): Collaboration and co-construction through on-line socialization](#)

## **6. E-LEARNING**

Work with pupils engaged in online activities led Smith (2005) to investigate the reality of what constitutes e-learning, and it concludes with a model of e-pedagogy, and the specific ways in which it can be related to the school environment. From a case study of the observation and description of a pupils' online community, phases in the e-learning process are identified. A key theme is transformational learning. E-learning is seen as an emancipatory knowledge creation process in which teacher and pupil interchange roles in a collaborative learning environment. The teacher as facilitator guides the learners through the process of acquiring skills to the collection of information, which is then developed into knowledge streams for group analysis. The Internet offers a global information network and ICT hardware assists in maintaining an interactive learning environment. An important part of successful e-pedagogy is effective e-facilitation.

[Smith, M. \(2005\): An investigation into what constitutes e-pedagogy and e-learning](#)

## 7. THE MIRANDANET ACADEMY

A number of MirandaNet Fellows have developed projects that they originally published on MirandaNet and have submitted them for post-graduate accreditation through the MirandaNet Academy, working in conjunction with Bath Spa University, whose innovative post-graduate programme enables teachers to obtain postgraduate qualifications for evidence-based curriculum and development work they are undertaking in their schools.

## 8. CONCLUSION

What these case studies illustrate is the effectiveness of online forums as a vehicle for local e-learning activities in schools. At the core of all of these case studies is the need for teachers to use an environment that can be customised for their specific project. In all case the main focus was on dialogic spaces for learning that afforded the greatest number of possibilities: when assessment of learning took place it was a formative process that did not need the sophisticated tracking and assessment tools provided by the major commercial e-learning platforms and managed learning environments. Large-scale online environments, centrally administered and imposed on schools and teachers, assume a 'one size fits all' solution. The key to successful implementation of e-learning, therefore, would appear to be the provision of tools that enable teachers to customise the environment to their interests and the needs of the learners, rather than having to work with a centrally-imposed and managed 'learning platform'.

O'Neill and Luck (2006) comment on the fundamental importance of communities of learning to the learning process. In the case of teacher professional development the importance of a community that links members across a range of contexts – temporal; spatial; educational stage – and enables all to focus on the critical conditions of learning cannot be too highly stressed. At a time when, for many administrators, teacher professional development extends no further than the demands of the latest examination syllabus or curriculum prescription, teachers can now determine their own priorities and interests. The ultimate beneficiaries are the learners in their classes.

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