

Professional learning and the on-line discussion

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Abstract

This paper explores the growing interest in professional development through asynchronous electronic discussion. It presents an excerpt from within a recent forum on telematic learning and analyses ways of initiating discussion; styles of messages and learning through on line discussion. The paper suggests that electronic forums have huge potential for developing professional knowledge but points out some of the complexities and paradoxes involved.

Background

In recent years there has been growing interest in the idea of using asynchronous E Mail discussion lists and conferencing software for professional development both within formal and informal learning contexts. Gundry, for example, describes the use of such on line discussion within a business organisation, in this case a large multinational computer company in which nearly everyone has Internet or Intranet access and where people willingly share information on line as part of a culture of continuous improvement (Gundry 1991). This is a rather unproblematic view of professional learning but does draw on some key contemporary concerns for anyone involved in their own or in other's professional development. The first, is the idea that professional development requires peer exchange (rather than top down transmission) of ideas and information which best takes place within "flattened" organisational hierarchies. The second, is that the creation and assimilation of knowledge has become a commercial imperative for many companies with the idea that knowledge has become the greatest commercial resource (eg Thomas, 1992). The third, is the idea that professionals are working in a climate of accelerated change in which they need to access up to date knowledge and to apply new skills flexibly in changing circumstances, (eg Hargreaves, 1994 pp 3-92).

These three concerns have helped inform the development of various professional development forums and accredited courses. For example, Bonamy and Hauglusaine- Charlier discuss the idea that knowledge can be created and assimilated through on line exchange of, and reflection on, practical and contextualised examples and descriptions, (Bonamy et al, 1995). Lewis argues that collaboration between individuals on line provides access to a much wider knowledge base than that of any individual (Lewis 1995) and McConnell has argued for a form of collaborative supported co-operative learning both for motivational reasons and for learning in ways appropriate for professional needs, (McConnell 1994).

The Just in Time Open Learning project (JITOL) at the University of Sheffield has been exploring some of the issues associated with on line learning for professional development within different contexts (<http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/jitol/> and see Hammond, in press, Edwards and Hammond, 1997). These projects have demonstrated the opportunities which network learning offers for learners to get to know each other; to articulate ideas through writing; to pick up new ideas through reading messages; to be stimulated by working with other learners and to explore and develop their own on line resources. However projects have demonstrated the constraints on participation. These include lack of time; server unreliability; the difficulty of acquiring sufficient technical skills; physical constraints on writing; reticence in communicating in public; access to technology and, most crucially, organisational or course culture. The projects have illustrated the complexity of developing on line

sharing but also found a desire to continue and learn from experience. In this paper I will draw on work in progress within the JITOL project to discuss some of the issues associated with on line discussion. There have been numerous approaches to describing such discussions (see, for example, Harasim on the idea of mapping interconnection between messages, Harasim, 1989; Henri for a schedule for categorising the functions of different messages, Henri, 1991; Mason for a general overview, Mason, 1991; and Hodgson and McConnell for a gender analysis of messages, Hodgson et al, 1995). The approach taken here is to use an extract from a discussion within a forum for members of an MEd course in telematic learning in order to focus on the initiation of on line debate; the characterisation of the messages and finally the idea of knowledge creation within a conference. The discussion chosen concerns a comparison between images and text and contains contributions from myself, a tutor, Greg, course director, and two other members of the course Lesley a librarian, with responsibilities for providing library resources on the course, and Juliet a lecturer at a college of further education. Both Lesley and Juliet are working towards their MEd degree. This excerpt is a snapshot from a longer discussion and those taking part have contributed to many other discussions using a wide range of writing styles.

The excerpt

Mick on 22/10/96 at 12:00

Good to see you have got started with Lotus Notes, looked interesting the comments from Deakin University, btw do you have any thoughts on the limitations of text based communication in comparison to multimedia?

Lesley on 04/11/96 at 16:23

Multimedia obviously gives the advantage of combining visual and audio aids as well as plain text. However multimedia over a network requires much higher bandwidth and specifications for PCs so might reduce access if the technology isn't available to distance learners. Multimedia on a CDROM in the post to everyone might be cheaper than downloading from a central service. Personally I feel that it is the interaction between learner and tutor that is important. Some of the computer aided learning packages that have been developed have the problem that they do not allow for this interaction but are too didactic. When I was looking at CMC tools for Module 2 I found the Moos interesting from that point of view, you could show/play clips of material, either text, audio or visual; use a whiteboard to draw diagrams, cut and paste Web pages etc; and carry on a conversation at the same time - either to one individual or to a group. Only problem as far as I could see was that the technology required a *very steep* learning curve in finding out how to navigate through the virtual space both on the part of the tutor and then on the part of the students. Given existing problems with getting to grips with new applications and technical hitches, I am not sure that this could be easily overcome at present but am positive that with the development going on in this area it will not be long before somebody has devised a user friendly interface.

Lesley

Mick on 18/11/96 at 15:01

Lesley, sorry I misspelt your name, before, I haven't dipped back into LN as I have been following the email and COW stuff, I was intrigued by your thoughts on multi media, I agree very often learners are left alone on the machine and it is the interaction between learner and tutor and between learner and learner where it all takes place, still I look forward to full multi media in conferences like this - would you rather post a video footage of your self or text?

Lesley on 18/11/96 at 15:28

Text generally. I remember things I have read better than what I have heard. Having said that the two combined are even more effective. My main concern with using video via telematics is the access to the technology - video over the network requires a high level of bandwidth to get any quality of picture. Do prospective students on telematics courses have the necessary hardware and access over phone lines. With people being used to television, video conferencing generally compares badly unless of a high quality and can detract from concentrating on the message. Clive Cochrane from Queen's University Belfast has written quite extensively about this. One of his papers is available on the 1st International Symposium on Networked Learner Support WWW page. http://panizzi.shef.ac.uk/nls_symp/cochrane.html

Lesley

Mick on 20/11/96 at 12:47

Lesley I have responded to your message as a new thread in case anyone wants to join in, my feeling is that in the future dont know when, we will send video clips all the time and people will look back at text based email as the days of the wireless before telly - I actually like the radio but that is another point. The key point for me is that no-one can write as quickly as they can speak, I actually like writing but I think that most people will prefer speech. Anyway I throw it out for discussion.

Juliet on 20/11/96 at 20:13

Hi Mick I agree entirely with your statement. From past experience with students verbal discussion, once started, was no problem but as soon as pen and paper was introduced, moans and groans were evident.

Greg on 24/11/96 at 19:30

yes take the point juliet....but different media can be used for different purposes. Writing is deemed to be THE important medium in Universities...how important is it for your students to be able to write ?

Greg

Juliet on 02/12/96 at 21:47

Writing is important for the students I am currently working with in SME's. I was referring to my experiences with students in the past who had just left school and college I felt was perhaps a second or even third option. Having a job and earning money is really what the majority of young people wanted. Since gaining qualifications could not guarantee a job it was a difficult task trying to motivate these young people who were understandably disillusioned with their lot.

Juliet

Discussion

Here I want to address four questions about the process of on line debate:

How did the discussion get started?

Is there a preferred style or "genre" of message?

Are the contributions to the forum best thought off as text or speech? and

What can one learn by taking part in this debate?

These questions emerged through reflecting on my own participation in different forums and, in particular, on my tutor role in this forum. This led me to carry out a series of semi structured and open ended interviews with participants taking this course in order to compare and contrast perspectives on electronic discussion. I also sought specific comments from the contributors to the discussion on image and text.

How did the discussion get started?

This discussion began with the remark, 'btw do you have any thoughts on the limitations of text based communication in comparison to multimedia?'

Although I had the role of tutor this was an off the cuff question to an individual on the course, there was nothing programmed into this part of the course which involved a discussion of multi media and no attempt to direct the discussion either by imposing time deadlines for a response or setting a task around the discussion.

There have been various attempts to describe the initiation and maintenance of on line debate. For example, Muscella and Di Mauro suggests that an approach of 'oblique assertion', followed by the citing of personal learning experience and, finally, stating of belief has proved effective way of triggering responses to a message, Muscella et al (1995). Others have used the idea of comfort zones to argue that participants need experience of non controversial debate before embarking on a discussion of contentious issues. These are both useful insights and indicate strategies

available to participants and moderators within an electronic forum. But equally important is to recognise the serendipitous nature of much debate. Of course every forum is inevitably structured through the influence of the moderator/tutor and through deciding issues of access (eg is it an open or closed forum?). However there is less opportunity to elicit responses on line than in a face to face context where eye contact can frequently invoke a contribution to the discussion and silences are invariably filled. Perhaps a paradox of on line debate is that its asynchronous nature encourages participation as there are more opportunities to contribute (you can do it as and when you like), but also discourages participation as this flexibility, combined with a sense of a removed audience, means that message writing can be put off. The difficulty of structuring debate has the advantage of openness, giving participants more control over their learning, but can make it difficult to maintain the forum over time. In the exchange quoted both Greg and myself asked open ended questions but we had very little control over who, if anyone, would respond.

Is there a style or “genre” of message?

In this example there is little convergence in style of messages. My contributions begin with acknowledging an earlier message and raising the issue of multi media. In these messages I have constructed the tutor role as one of being quite cautious in offering a view and raising open ended questions for others to follow. The style is reasonably informal and contains an awareness of the audience ('good to see you got started with Lotus Notes', 'sorry I misspelt your name before' (this refers back to an earlier 'typo'). I do offer an opinion on image over text but produce ambiguity by acknowledging that my view is probably a minority one ('I actually like writing but I think that most people will prefer speech'.) My own writing draws on past writing experiences, such as contributing to 'chatty' newsletters, but like other writers I use colloquialisms such as 'telly' which are more associated with conversational discourse, as well as telegram style abbreviation ('good to see you', and 'btw'). I remember writing these messages fairly quickly, probably just checking them once for meaning and for obvious spelling mistakes (though 'misspelt' and 'haven't' have slipped through). I was interested in the topic through other research I was doing felt fairly confident and relaxed about contributing to the debate.

Lesley's messages are much longer 254 and 124 words respectively. They carry a strong sense of professional voice; the first paragraph of the first message perhaps reads as something she might write in an essay or to a professional forum. They are strongly “message” rather than “audience” focused messages (Tannen, 1985). The first message is written as a reply to my query but it is also for general consumption. This creates difficulties in getting the right pitch:

'In this piece I felt I was talking to one person. I was aware that other people might not understand the jargon but then I could rephrase it if someone asked, but where do you pitch it? You don't want to talk down to someone but you don't want to lose them either?'

Lesley's messages are well considered and she obviously took care and attention to the coherence of what she was writing as well as to grammar and spelling. The topic was one of professional concern to her and it was because of this that she found the time to reply in such detail.

In contrast Greg's message is much shorter (35 words) and is much less formal in style, signalled by colloquialism ('I take the point Juliet') and by its apparently unedited structure. Greg's message seems more in the style of a scripted conversation (scripted as it lacks the 'ums', 'ers' and other fillers of most conversation) and is abbreviated into a kind of telegraphese ('yes take the point') What is important to Greg is to contribute, to signal a presence, and this is done, because of both time pressure and conscious intention, through a spontaneous response. The role of the message is to try to keep the debate alive by seeking clarification or more information - Greg too takes a responsibility for asking open ended questions.

Meanwhile Juliet describes her message as a hybrid of the formal and informal. It is casual but influenced by the kind of writing she has done at work and her background training in word processing. She begins informally in the first message ('Hi Mick I agree entirely...' but then moves to more formal vocabulary 'I agree entirely with your *statement*', not the more informal 'I agree with what you were saying'. The next sentence begins with the more formal passive form but then uses the informal vocabulary of 'moans and groans'. She recalls feeling relaxed about sending this message but being continually aware that messages might not be read as she intended.

Nearly all contributions draw on personal experience for agreeing and disagreeing, and are prefaced with comments such as 'from past experience', 'I actually like writing', 'when I was looking at CMC tools', 'I remember things I have

read better'. There is a strong sense of audience involvement here (notwithstanding earlier comments this includes Lesley's messages) and a desire to make a point but not to offend. As one participant on the forum put it:

'I write about my experience, that's how I would disagree with someone, I would speak from the heart, it means saying what you think . You have to consider their feelings as you can't see them bristling, so what I put is fairly mild.'

The much publicised incidences of flaming would more likely be associated with forums which had a weak sense of audience (some of these issues are discussed further in Perolle, 1991 and Sproull, 1991). Here the tone of the discussion is cautious and respectful; perhaps this is because the context is one in which participants are feeling their way or perhaps this reservation is characteristic of the academic culture of which contributors are part and perhaps participants feel this is the most effective way of offering support and maintaining a learning community.

One good reason for being cautious in affirming or disagreeing is that messages are permanently stored and it is not as easy to retract or refine a position as it would be in conversation in which we use phrases such as "what I really meant to say was.." to what seems, at times, effortlessly shift position. Messages arrive without non verbal clues and can easily misinterpreted, eg irony can, and frequently does, sound like sarcasm. In this excerpt writers have used capitals and asterix for emphasis, ("Writing is deemed to be THE important medium"; "the technology required a *very steep* learning curve") and could no doubt make use of other devices such as "emoticons" to soften the impact of any disagreement, but this can only go so far in clearing the ambiguity. In any case not everyone is comfortable with emoticons; as one of the contributors here said, "I am slowly getting used to them and used one the other day but I do find them rather twee".

Would participants benefit from adopting a more direct style, there is for example something much brusquer and challenging in Greg's message? One cannot say with any certainty. Greater directness would make it easier to pull out just where agreement and disagreement begin and end but it might also impact on the development of a mutually supportive learning community in which writers express their concern and respect for all contributions. There is also a cultural context too, and participants on several forums have noticed a directness in strongly North American based forums with which they are simply uncomfortable.

In this brief exchange all contributors stressed that getting a response was more important than the style of the response; as one participants put it "we can all learn from each other, it doesn't matter how confident they are in their writing." And within the course as a whole, contributors felt a great deal of satisfaction whenever they got a response. This led to a multiplier effect, if a message received few replies the discussion would dry up but if there were many replies contributors felt not only did they have points to which they could respond but they also felt a greater willingness to engage in the whole process of on-line debate. However while the importance of getting any sort of reply was valued there were variations in emphasis within the forum as a whole. One of the course members said that in fact she did find grammar (or at least coherence) and spelling were important while another was far more laissez faire about style. Some one else spoke in general terms about their problems in finding the time to process very long messages, while others said that there was little value in short, one line messages and could be irritated by them.

Are the contributions to the forum better described as text or speech?

Several course participants have suggested that electronic text is a half way between writing and speech as it carries some of the spontaneity of speech with the coherence and permanence of text. The question here is whether speech or text work better as a metaphor for on line "conversation" and does it matter?

My own view is that messages are best thought of as writing for the very commonsensical reason that contributing is an act of writing and that writing can cover a wider range of activities. (As Tannen points out it is common to equate speech with impromptu conversation and text with the literary essay (see Tannen, *op. cit.*), but there are many styles or genres within each form of communication.) Of course electronic discussion is more interactive than many forms of writing but interactivity is by no means unique to electronic formats (for example, think about the practices of a writers' group or even the letters pages in newspapers). The interactivity of the format allows question and response (for example Juliet's second message, in response to Greg, allows her to define which students she had in mind) but this brief misunderstanding also suggests shows that a reader cannot butt in to seek clarification, as can often be done in conversation, and nor can the writer pick up on non visual clues in order to tailor their remarks. The writing metaphor also helps us to understand that contributors might feel constrained by the medium, as even

with typing skills it takes longer to write something than to speak. In addition, many people do feel anxiety about expressing their thoughts through writing, especially writing for 'publication' as in electronic discussion lists, and this holds for academics and library professionals who often carry a sense that they will be judged not only on what they say but how they say it. If all this makes writing sound quite unattractive the other side of the coin is that contributors often value the 'plasticity' of the medium, i.e., the way they can reflect on what they have written and re shape their text to get the meaning clear both for themselves and for their audience. In addition the absence of non visual clues can actually be an advantage in reading as such clues can distract as well as inform. Finally, the very notion of writing for publication is what many people value within on line forums as they are provided with permanent records of other people's views on which they can reflect.

The writing metaphor then works in drawing attention to the features of electronic discussion, but falls down if it leads us to see on line debate as a literary/academic form. Of course in some contexts discussion might well be literary/academic in style but it does not need to be. The metaphor of writing needs to be qualified to show the nature of different styles and the desire contributors have for interactional messages, which may do no more than signal presence.

The search for metaphor is an important one and unless we can make these metaphors clear, or agree to live with divergence, there is a real danger of mismatch. In the extract we can see competing styles of communication and while there is tolerance this can lead to tensions. For example, if we decide on the essay as a metaphor for on line discussion we might be expecting fewer contributions but ones which are more considered, we might also get irritated with short, apparently flippant, one line comments. If we use the conversation metaphor we would expect frequent messages, short and apparently spontaneous in nature, and we might become irritated by long messages which we have neither the time nor inclination to read. The hybrid, say, the letters to a newsletter metaphor, is a convenient half way house, but might not be the preferred style of the group. Further clarity over metaphors might also help those who are reticent to participate; the advice we give is so often 'just go for it and send something off' but we can rarely describe what 'going for it' means.

What can one learn by taking part in on line debate?

From following the exchanges within the extract someone with an emerging professional interest in networked learning might learn that there are different views of pedagogy concerning the use of computers in education; that there are pedagogical issues associated with computer conferencing; there are references to further sources on the WWW (the urls of two sites are included); there are different experiences in comparing multi media and text and generally feel able to orient themselves within a new field. Some of the abbreviations and terminology may prove difficult but a participant to the forum would be able to seek clarification from writers. In addition participants would have the opportunity to sharpen their own ideas on the topic through more extended contributions of their own. These are by any account important outcomes and help explain the excitement many of us feel for networked learning. However there are two limitations of this kind of asynchronous discussion to which I draw attention.

Firstly, much discussion within electronic forums concerns mediated knowledge, that is it deals with descriptions of events and is one removed from the experience of the events themselves. In the excerpt this was only partially true in that the shared direct experience of contributing to the discussion could have been part of the discussion itself. But in the main, writers were *sharing* experiences not talking about *shared* experiences. This means, and it is important to say it, that taking part in a discussion would not have equipped anyone to introduce video conferencing within their institution. Other experiences, including hands on demonstration and practice would be needed for that. Of course mediated knowledge is a valuable kind of knowing and one particularly valued in academia but it is not the only kind of knowledge and not the only route for professional development. There is a strong case for a "multi modal" approach to professional learning which integrates on line discussion with face to face activity based learning.

Secondly, the idea of professional development within an on line learning environment needs to focus on individual engagement with the discussion. This engagement may or may not mean participation within the debate but it would certainly main an active attempt by the learner to compare and contrast new view points in the light of their existing knowledge and professional experience. This is a time consuming and complex process. The implication here is that if we are seriously promoting on line learning as a form of professional development it will require learners willing to learn and organisations willing to provide technical, time and other support for learners and to nurture a culture in which continual development is not only expected but valued.

Summary

At the start of the paper I suggested that electronic forums have the potential to support new approaches to professional development which are every appropriate for contemporary working environments. My discussion illustrates some of the opportunities which electronic debate give learners to develop up to date knowledge in new areas of expertise. However my discussion also highlights some of the complexities of on line debate; the difficulty of structuring debate, the variance in approaches to writing and the search for an appropriate metaphor for describing on line discussion. I also argue that on line discussion requires commitment from those taking part and a culture, within a course or an organisation, which nurtures the sharing of information and perspectives. I argue that on line debate is both complex *and* valuable.

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