Developing a "Community of Practice" in Local Authority Information Workers

Paul Haslam
Head of Learning Technology
King Alfred's College
Winchester, UK
SO22 4NR

Phone: +44 (0)1962 827450
email: P.Haslam@wkac.ac.uk

Mike Hart
Professor of Business and Informatics
King Alfred's College
Winchester, UK
SO22 4NR

Phone: +44 (0)1962 827323
email: M.Hart@wkac.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper considers how Hampshire County Council and King Alfred's College developed an academic programme in partnership to meet corporate needs. The programme has proved successful and has begun to add greater value to organisational performance than was originally envisaged. This is largely because it has helped establish a community of practice among course members. The paper considers how this came about and how the community can be sustained and nurtured.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of Communities of Practice, articulated by Lave and Wenger (1991), is assuming increasing importance in the knowledge economy. A range of authors have propounded the view that informal communities of practice potentially offer more fruitful ground for learning and generating new knowledge than formal corporate structures. Brown & Duguid (2000) have identified that work, learning and innovation are inter-related and that much takes place in non-canonical activities undertaken in communities of practice. Stata (1989) has pointed out that organisational learning occurs through shared insights, knowledge, and mental models ... [and] builds on past knowledge and experience.

Lesser & Storck (2001), Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) and Healey (2001), have explored the positive influence of communities of practice on the development of social capital and organisational performance. Much of the literature emphasises the importance of finding ways of nurturing them within formal organisational structures. Several authors (Healey, 2001, Lesser & Storck, 2001, Nixon 2001) have offered models for building and harnessing social capital in different types of organisation. McDermott (2001) has outlined critical factors for building communities of practice.

Most frameworks appear to generically applicable to practice-based learning, but surprisingly few authors have identified their potential relevance the public sector, beyond medical education and teaching. In addition, the role of external partners, such as educational institutions, in supporting the development of communities of practice seems neglected. This seems curious, given the emphasis placed on the role of education in underpinning the knowledge economy. We believe that the current climate of co-operation between industry and academia offers institutions significant opportunities to become partners or catalysts in the development of social capital.

In this paper, we outline how a local authority and higher education institution worked in partnership to develop an academic programme, which addresses specific corporate needs. We argue that the programme established has not only proved a success, but is proving capable of adding greater value to organisational performance than was originally envisaged. This has occurred largely through the process of uncovering and nurturing a putative community of practice among the course members.

The paper considers how this has been achieved and looks at the ways in which the community of practice might be consolidated and expanded beyond the programme.

CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Healey (2001) contends that the knowledge economy is made up of industries and firms that rely, now more than ever, on knowledge and networks. An increasing body of literature is concerned with the interface between communities of practice, social capital and knowledge management. Although definitions of communities of practice vary, a reasonable consensus exists about their characteristics and potential contribution to the development of social capital and organisational value.

Wenger (1998) suggests that communities of practice are groups of people who share information, insight, experience and tools about an area of common interest.

McDermott (2001) points out that communities usually focus on a professional discipline, a skill, or a topic. Lesser & Storck (2001) emphasise notions of professional or occupational commitment, rather than interest and highlight the role of communities in generating social capital in organisations. Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) contend that, through sustained interaction, communities develop tacit knowledge that may be invisible with reference to individuals. Healey (2001) stresses that this tacit knowledge can be converted into explicit knowledge only with great difficulty.

A number of common characteristics emerge from the literature:

- Communities of practice evolve from formal rather than espoused practices
- Common interests and challenges provide the basis for regular sharing and learning
- Communities of practice exhibit high levels of trust and collaboration
- Communities of practice are responsible for their own destiny
- Members gain a sense of identity from belonging to them and recognise that continual learning is required to keep their knowledge and skills up to date.

Many of these characteristics are evident in the group we consider in our case study.

CASE STUDY

Certificate in Public Services Information Management (PSIM)

Our case study focuses on the provision of a professional development programme for local authority information specialists and the community of practice that has begun to grow out of it.

The Certificate in Public Services Information Management (PSIM) is a part-time, in-service programme run by King Alfred's College of Higher Education for Hampshire County Council. It was designed to meet the growing needs of front-line public service employees, who provide information services through reception centres, specialist libraries, information centres and corporate communications departments. The PSIM programme was run for the first time during the 2001 – 2 academic year. Prior to this, professional development for the group had largely been provided through short course and in-house programmes.

The course grew from the need to equip these 'para-information professionals' to support a range of recent developments, such as the Open Government initiative, which have challenged the public sector to develop entrepreneurial responses to the demands placed on it. Almost all course members work for Hampshire County Council – a large council with over 30,000 full and part-time employees. Hampshire has achieved notable success in responding to recent initiatives and has been awarded a Charter Mark on two occasions for the successful provision of information services. In Brown & Duguid's (2000) terms, the organisation has managed to establish new rules and abstract knowledge. The para-information professionals working at the point of contact with the public are building up a repertoire of concrete practices. We have realised that one of our challenges is to help knit the two together.

Themes of the PSIM programme

The PSIM programme is constructed around three themes:

- Public administration
- Public sector information management
- The use of information and communications technology.

Participants work in local authority information points, handling a range of enquiries about services provided by the local authority. They are drawn from areas such as Social Services, the Fire Service and the Countryside Commission. Accessibility of services to the community is at the heart of the central government's modernising agenda, so the programme must help them establish a clear understanding of the distribution of responsibilities and functions across the various levels of government.

The group plays a key role in supporting central government initiatives. These currently include the commitment to higher levels of customer satisfaction, outlined in the Best Value regime (Office of the Prime Minister,1998) and Accessible Services agenda (Hants County Council, 2002). There is also a target of delivering services to the public on-line by 2005 (Office of the e-Envoy, 2001). As the first point of contact with the public, the role of these staff in generating satisfaction is hard to over-emphasise. They are influential in shaping the public's perception of local authority services and need to engage with customer care philosophies conceptually and practically.

The PSIM programme invites the group to explore the role of organisational information strategies and communication systems in supporting initiatives like the national agenda for Information Age Government. Although members are 'de facto' information managers, they usually have practical rather than theoretical experience of information management. The course seeks to deepen and extend their knowledge by covering information channels and the design and operation of data collection and management information systems.

To support the growth of electronic information services, the course includes a significant IT component. Students tend to be frequent users of on-line services, email and word-processing and many possess skill levels equivalent to an EDCL. The programme aims to enhance their skills and encourage greater understanding of the ways in which computing technologies can provide solutions to typical problems. A greater understanding of the Internet and intranets is built into the course to enhance the ability to use on-line services to provide sound advice to members of the public.

It is clear that the group shares a number of common characteristics which make it a potentially strong community of practice.

Aspects of curriculum design

In many ways, the PSIM curriculum follows a traditional pattern with a number of selective innovations, which cumulatively prove significant.

The opportunity to choose a particular path through modules has been eschewed in favour of allowing participants to construct assignments according to their needs.

Participants are encouraged to influence the course by discussing module content with tutors to ensure that examples and case studies address their particular needs. In a climate where technology is evolving rapidly and initiatives flow from central government with increasing frequency, opportunities are built in to provide students with timely, relevant material through site visits, visiting speakers and the use of innovative technology. The ethos of 'joined-up government' (Cunningham, 1999) in the new public sector is reflected in the programme and the team ensure that knowledge gained in one part is built on in others.

Support for the development of Communities of Practice is particularly emphasised in two modules - *Communication in Public Sector Organisations* and *Public Sector Information Management*.

Communication in Public Sector Organisations stresses the fundamental importance of communication to all business activities. Today's public sector organisations use a wide range of media and channels. The aim of the module is to help course members develop a strategic view of how communication mixes are currently evolving through the novel integration of formal and informal channels, centralised and decentralised networks, and a balance of the technological and interpersonal.

During the module, course members are asked use and evaluate technology by focusing on purpose and audience, rather than achieving technical mastery of particular applications. The importance of the interpersonal is emphasised at all stages. In the concluding sessions, we consider how organisational communication might be enhanced by blending the technological and interpersonal in new ways. This is a specific focus of the summative assessment.

The module helps broaden insights into formal communication channels. It also makes space (McDermott, 2001) for the group to reflect on their experience of informal channels and determine effective ways of using both. As experienced practitioners, they share a great deal of tacit understanding, which is progressively uncovered and integrated into the course. All have lots to say on the subject of communication and understand techniques that work in particular situations. Most are keen to articulate the wealth of concrete knowledge that Brown & Duguid, (2000) identify as undervalued in our society. They value the opportunity to establish a community to cope with reality as they see it, rather than as represented through abstract, canonical guidelines. Their commitment to ensuring synergies between the development of their community of practice and the organisation as a whole is strong. Perhaps most crucially to the development of a community of practice, they have increasingly gained the confidence to challenge each other in ways that produce deeper insights into important issues.

The flexibility of the module is complemented by the *Public Sector Information Management* module, which provides core knowledge to underpin the specialised requirements of the course. Senior local government colleagues contribute to both modules and their observations have helped shape our thinking about how we leverage the social capital which is becoming evident (McDermott, 2001).

How the basic framework of the programme has evolved

In designing the programme, we had certainly planned to meet the needs of a group of professionals working in similar areas across the county. However, we would be the first to acknowledge that the potential strength of the community of practice that started to emerge as the course began did come as something of a surprise. During the second semester, the programme team realised that the loose group who had joined the course had moved through the networking stage and were showing signs of becoming a putative community of practice. From then on, we began to consider how we could nurture the social capital.

We knew from the literature that we were creating a number of conditions under which communities of practice can flourish. In their study of seven organisations in which communities of practice were acknowledged to be creating value, Lesser & Storck (2001) identified a number of elements used to support and sustain them:

- face to face discussions to share insights
- formal training sessions and informal seminars
- experiences captured from senior practitioners
- use of outside speakers
- use of discussion lists

All were built into the PSIM programme from the outset. The fact that most are common elements of academic programmes is fundamental to the discussion. The programme team recognise that everything about the programme is not innovative. Informal relationships already existed between members a group who had been performing similar duties across the county for some time. Some members already telephoned each other to discuss difficult issues. Others had come across each other at meetings or training events. What PSIM did was to provide them with the space and framework to begin reshaping these contacts and networks into a community.

It is a tribute to Hampshire that the PSIM programme afforded the participants the space to discover themselves as a group. The opportunity to meet like-minded colleagues is a widely-recognised bonus of attending courses. However, the idea of building this into the course experience itself was new to a group with an under-developed sense of professional identity. Once the course began, they quickly uncovered common interests and frustrations, and realised that they had previously had little opportunity to meet and share practice. The key elements of the curriculum which provide the support not always available in more traditional programmes are outlined below.

Communication

Discussion was vital to the two modules and provided the key starting point for uncovering tacit knowledge about practice. From the early stages, it was obvious that the group had a great deal of tacit understanding about their roles and were keen to share it with their peers. This was partly through the sheer enjoyment of being able to articulate their insights to a large group. It also sprang from shared commitments. All were keen to modernise the service and meet the needs of a variety of customers as efficiently as possible. Most demonstrated a strong ethical base, being keen to ensure

that potential obstructions like the digital divide would not disenfranchise sections of the communities they served.

Presentations

If the discussions provided early insights into the latent social capital available, the presentations in the second semester offered the group the chance to share practice at greater depth and explore potential synergies.

Like many programmes, PSIM requires participants to undertake assessed presentations. Participants were offered topics which encouraged them to concentrate on real world activities. Several took the opportunity to use the knowledge of the group to create and refine presentations on 'hot topics' for their service. The presentations gave them the chance to collaborate and allowed them to share descriptions and narratives about their practice and the activities they perform on a daily basis (Brown & Duguid, 2000). By the end of the presentations, a number of potential synergies had emerged and most of the group were keen to explore innovations that would help their front-line services remain relevant during a period of rapid change.

Although it is fair to point out that the presentation assignment was originally designed to help participants rehearse communication principles, it quickly opened up an opportunity to inform others in the group of the expertise available through the peer network to which they all belonged. The insights gained during the presentations allowed us to address with some conviction the strengths of non-canonical or dynamic aspects of organisational communication.

Use of a virtual learning environment

The King Alfred's Virtual Learning Environment was used on the programme to offer facilities for collaborative work and learning. Computer-mediated communication was used to complement face to face discussion and support further consideration of issues raised in the presentations. After a relatively slow beginning, it established itself as a key communication medium and offered concrete experience of a model which could potentially support collaborative activity by a community of practitioners.

Before the programme, none of the participants had used a virtual learning environment, though other technologies encountered during the programme were familiar. All participants were regular email users. Most used databases. Some had to supported presentations with PowerPoint. Almost nobody had been offered the opportunity to use Dreamweaver for Web page design. One or two were members of discussion lists but nobody had experienced computer-supported collaborative work. The use of the virtual learning environment encouraged them to realise that many familiar technologies could be integrated to provide an environment capable of supporting learning, work and innovation (Brown & Duguid, 2000).

Experience of communications channels outside the formal, organisational infrastructure was also limited. The King Alfred's VLE offered them an accessible means of networking their know-how. It also allowed them to think about how they might use technology to support collaborative work and give the community of

practice access to the social capital available in the group. To ensure that every member of the group experienced the VLE, contributions were initially assessed and moderated by the tutor. By the end of the module, contributions to the VLE had grown significantly and were largely being managed autonomously.

Use of the VLE developed greater understanding of the way collaborative technologies are evolving. It helped the group consider how they might contribute more actively to electronic services initiatives. After a guest lecture by a senior information strategist of the council, we began to realise that the VLE had the potential to support collaborative working and learning beyond the life of the programme.

The arrival of a central government consultation paper on electronic government (e-Gov@local, 2002) was timely. It helped us rehearse the ways a community of information professionals might develop the knowledge base required to contribute proactively to consultations and pilot projects that might lead to genuinely useful developments. The publication of the paper early in 2002 neatly illustrated the way traditional organisational forms sometimes inhibit the involvement of the very groups who might contribute most effectively to success on the ground. Despite the fact that the government were seeking to involve those who deliver the services in the consultation, none of the group knew of the consultation and were not in a position to contribute. This is a typical organisational picture which needs to change if communities of practice are to have a key in shaping effective interventions. At the moment, they are rarely given the opportunity to do so. Communities often lie outside the formal organisational map and have a limited track record in contributing to this type of intervention. Perhaps just as significantly, the opportunity to work on interesting projects with interesting people has also tended to be the province of a professional elite.

The examples outlined show how the curriculum has evolved dynamically since the start of the programme. We intend to make sure it continues to do so. Many of the innovations are based on familiar educational structures. Others have been adapted from the experience of supporting practitioners in other disciplines, such as medicine and education. They illustrate how a curriculum can be adapted in small but significant ways to support the growth of communities of practice.

Further areas for development

One could argue that the outcomes so far have largely been what one might expect of a group of professionals experiencing an opportunity to come together to share, learn and innovate for the first time. The key question is actually about how we move to the next stage. A considerable body of knowledge exists about social capital and communities of practice. Our challenge is to identify how far relevant frameworks and models might be translated into supportive structures.

We recognise that there are potential problems about density and inter-connectedness. Size is clearly an issue. Although incoming course members naturally expect to have access to this growing and vibrant community, scaling-up beyond this group poses some interesting questions. Hampshire County Council and King Alfred's have already begun to discuss the feasibility of extending the community to all people in

information-providing roles across the county. Estimates suggest that this could involve up to a thousand members. Much of the literature indicates that communities of practice should have a maximum size of around fifty and many practitioners would argue for substantially smaller groupings.

The use of smaller cells is appealing, but notions of artificial construction contravene the very nature of communities of practice. The greater size of some virtual communities suggests that electronic communications may address a number of issues, but caveats abound. McDermott (2001), for instance, points out that there is so much technology for collaboration and information sharing that it is tempting to focus on functionality, rather than the social aspects of information technology. He also warns of the dangers of adopting solutions from other domains, and that using typical knowledge management methods to leverage tacit knowledge often results in information junkyards and empty libraries. This reminds us that technology can only supplement face to face interaction. We should remember Handy's dictum that trust needs touch and that human sociability is a fundamental reason behind the development of communities.

Maintaining spontaneity and avoiding organisational disruption is another important issue. Communities of practice evolve from informal, rather than canonical or espoused practices. Handy points out that professional knowledge workers often feel they owe a higher allegiance to their profession than to their vertical lines of accountability. The status of our target group as para-information professionals may minimise the tensions that can exist elsewhere, but we are conscious of the need to empower the community without undermining normal working patterns or formal reporting chains. However, if an organisation values a community, it must provide conditions which help it flourish. This means making space beyond normal organisational patterns.

Brown & Duguid (2000) distinguish between communities of practice and groups or project teams. Communities are not created in top-down fashion and their 'healthy autonomy' needs to be preserved if spontaneous learning and innovation are to be encouraged. Stewart (1996) warns that requiring communities of practice to adopt formal procedures, such as meetings and reports, is potentially inhibiting to the informal exchanges on which learning depends. This is partly because tacit knowledge is complex and bearers of it generally know more than they can tell, and tell more than they can write (Healey, 2001).

However, we acknowledge the dangers inherent in prolonging informality. If ongoing support for the network is to be achieved, managers will need to be convinced of the potential competitive advantage to be gained. However, they may have to be educated not expect too much too quickly. Transferring problem-solving strategies, for instance, is notoriously difficult. For a solution to be reusable it must be viewed in context to appreciate the reasoning behind it and the collaborative activities that led to its construction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). If we are to engender learning through actual practices and help the community find solutions to organisational problems, de-contextualisation has to be avoided (Brown & Duguid, 2000).

CONCLUSION

This paper has offered a case study of a community of practice that has begun to emerge from a relatively homogenous group enrolled on a dedicated academic programme. The paper has attempted to outline elements of the programme that have contributed to its formation. Although the putative community has been uncovered somewhat serendipitously, aspects of the curriculum may be relevant to practitioner groups elsewhere.

Having helped establish an influential practitioner group, we intend to see how far we can help sustain and nurture it. This will require collaboration between the emerging community of practice, the host organisation and the academic provider. It is encouraging that County Council leaders have already begun to appreciate the potential of the community of practice and the need to provide space to nurture it during its early stages.

During the next phase of development, we have identified three targets for action research. We intend to consider the behavioural changes that have taken place in the target group since they began the programme and see how these might be sustained. We will also investigate how far the community can be broadened and explore the ways technology can be used to support it.

We look forward to reporting progress.

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