NOVICE RESEARCHER + ? = NOVICE ONLINE FACILITATOR: 
THE MISSING LINK IN A LIFELONG LEARNING PARTNERSHIP
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ABSTRACT
This paper outlines how the experience of graduate research students becoming sessional part-time e-tutors laid the foundation for the creation of a virtual community of practice as a staff development initiative. This creation demonstrates several of the strategies required to make a lifelong learning partnership effective and equitable.

INTRODUCTION
Part-time staff are an integral component of the higher education sector, allowing institutions to: respond to dynamic conditions; foster currency with professional disciplines; manage the teaching of large undergraduate classes; and staff off-campus courses (Park, 2004). Curiously, despite their integral contributions, ‘sessional’ or ‘part-time’ staff are invisible to many full-time academics as their on-campus presence is mostly confined to the classrooms, and they are relatively poorly supported by faculty administrators (Rajagopal, 2002; Wallin, 2004).

Unfortunately, despite increasing reliance upon sessional staff over the years, institutional relationships with this employee group have been widely criticised as problematic (Bryson, 2004; Watters, Christensen, Ryan, Weeks, & Arcodia, 1996). This study is part of a larger examination of the maturation of online learning at a mid-sized Australian regional university named “Banksia University”\(^1\). The study examines Banksia’s efforts to establish a comfortable symbiosis with its novice researchers (PhD candidates and students) through their employment as e-tutors in its first fully online program.

The focus of this paper is on how these efforts to facilitate a transition from novice researcher to novice online facilitator constitute an attempted lifelong learning partnership. The lifelong learning in question is primarily that of the researchers taking on new roles and responsibilities (although the learning of the organisation as a whole is also affected); the partnership in making this lifelong learning as effective and equitable as possible lies in the shared and separate interests and concerns of the researchers, their PhD supervisors, their students and other staff members of the organisation. The paper deploys the concept of an online virtual community of practice to identify and analyse some of the pressures attending this partnership and the strategies developed to address those pressures.

BACKGROUND
The AMan, a multi-disciplinary online Masters program, was based around a core of management courses. It was the first program administered by the newly formed Multi-disciplinary Graduate School (MGS). The MGS was to be lean and flexible. Shane, who had recently joined Banksia, was the inaugural professor and its sole academic. The MGS contracted teaching staff from Banksia’s Departments on recommendation of the Heads of Department.

\(^1\) A pseudonym applied for confidentiality considerations.
Understanding the being of an academic reveals a rich and complex portrait of academic agency (Akerlind, 2003, 2004; Palmer, 1998). Despite Banksia’s administrators promulgating online learning as a strategic initiative, the full-time academic staff chose to invest their efforts elsewhere, declining invitations from their Heads to add an AMan course to their teaching portfolios. The multitudinous targets of the University Strategic Plan were viewed as an indication of the administrators’ inability to commit. A high level of risk defined the marginal status of the AMan and online teaching.

As online teaching had not yet been established and was seen as risky by regular academics, the teaching vacuum neatly matched situations where part-time staff are regularly deployed. Like many Australian universities, Banksia traditionally drew upon its own graduate research students to meet a proportion of its needs for sessional staff. Most Heads of Departments nominated PhD students for the AMan teaching. Although few Australian doctoral candidates enter their programs with an expectation of or interest in an academic career, opportunities to gain teaching experience are valued by many graduate students (Neumann, 2003).

While the AMan program was administered by the MGS, the Postgraduate Academic Committee (PAC) was charged with maintaining the quality of all Banksia’s postgraduate programs. Banksia directed two challenges to its PAC: the development of an appropriate support mechanism for the e-tutors; and ensuring that they felt a valued part of the university in their role as tutors. Avoiding a marginal commitment, often the case with part-time staff, was viewed as vital in establishing the strategic initiative of off-campus online learning at Banksia.

In response, the PAC proposed a Community of Practice (CoP), WebEase. The intent of WebEase was to move quickly the e-tutors out of zones of discomfort, providing seamless connections with Banksia staff responsible for supporting AMan students. Membership comprised AMan e-tutors, Departmental student administrator, the MGS program administrator, the librarian and a technical officer.

WebEase functioned as an online community adopting the Learning Management System (LMS) that was used for course delivery as their principal communication vehicle. The LMS was selected for convenience, an area regularly visited by AMan e-tutors with ready access by Banksia administrative and technical staff.

Greg, the only AMan tutor who was a full-time academic at Banksia, accepted the role of MGS academic mentor. He had demonstrated success in working with the largest course during the pilot and had a low drop-out rate and a high level of academic discussion. Greg was also keen to share his successes and was generous in acknowledging contributions from his AMan colleagues. Greg maintained a presence in all MGS courses for the first half of the semester, and remained available to the e-tutors via WebEase for the full semester.

In this section of the paper I have established a risk in undertaking innovative pedagogical practice for both the organisation and the practitioners, and that vulnerability is exacerbated when the practitioner is a part-time academic. In the next sections of the paper, I outline the theoretical framework and research methods used to evaluate the impact of establishing a CoP as one element of the support
mechanisms for the lifelong learning partnership for novice researchers becoming e-tutors at Banksia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The concepts of choice, academic agency and action as meaningful were at the heart of this study. Fullan observes that “[e]ducational change depends on what teachers do and think – it is as simple and as complex as that” (2001, p. 115). Understanding an individual in an organisational setting can help establish the suitability of support structures because decisions are made in situ, contextualised by the system in which their actions are located. Mis-matches raise the likelihood of agency (Akerlind, 2004).

Key characteristics of a CoP were identified as: (a) establishing a sense of joint purpose where members rely on one another to achieve an outcome (interdependence); (b) mutuality, establishing a set of norms and relationships; and (c) shared repertoire, (language, resources, tools, etc. which can be used appropriately). Importantly, the PAC warned against compliancy – CoP are first and foremost naturally occurring communities, not naturally occurring ‘learning units’ (Wenger, 2000; Yamagata-Lynch, 2001). They are dynamic, are focused on practice, retain substance with a fluid membership and have a life exceeding the achievement of particular tasks (Barab, McKinster, & Scheckler, 2003).

On the one hand, it was recognised that the way in which CoPs are created and then develop has a major impact on how they maintain meaning for their members (Vrasidas, Zembylas, & Chamberlain, 2004). On the other hand, the striking similarities between the naturally occurring lifelong learning ‘development’ typical of academics and CoPs suggest a natural alliance with organisational induction and development (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003; Trowler & Knight, 2000). WebEase membership was created around the objective of realising AMan graduates through the online delivery of courses.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The study, an evaluation of how WebEase achieved its mandate of developing an appropriate support mechanism for the AMan e-tutors and ensuring that the tutors felt a valued part of Banksia, was guided by a qualitative research approach. A qualitative strategy was selected to situate the study, locate the researcher and interpret observed phenomena in a naturalistic setting in terms of the participants’ meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Snape & Spencer, 2003). An interpretative approach, particularly useful when aiming to establish meaningful action (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 1998), was adopted.

Data were collected from WebEase focus groups, semi-structured interviews with the administrators and e-tutors, CoP electronic transcripts, e-mails and PAC reports and minutes. Two anonymous student surveys preceded the WebEase focus groups. These surveys occurred each semester, initially between weeks three and four of a 13 week semester, then again on conclusion of the semester.

Questions for interviews and focus groups were derived in part from analysis of earlier data collection sessions. Data were verified by member checking, triangulation through other sources or complementary data collections. Focusing on issues raised by the e-tutors was a strategy both to address issues in a timely and sensitive manner
and to establish meaningful alignment with Banksia within the context of WebEase membership.

RESULTS
The qualitative data reported here were clustered around four themes related to the pressures and opportunities underpinning the lifelong learning partnership framing the novice online facilitators’ membership of a virtual community of practice:

- tools
- roles
- students’ late entry into the course
- the ignoring of academic norms by full-time staff members and students.

Tools
Relatively few issues were raised in relation to students’ use of tools:
We work in groups around projects and case studies. Students have to be able to function in this environment. I won’t accept e-mailed files.
I schedule chats around assessment tasks. Many cannot make the session but don't use the forums to catch up[;] instead a lot of phone and e-mail work results.

However, there were occasions on which the student administration system failed:
I planned to send a ‘welcome’ e-mail to kick things off. Some students don't have e-mail addresses – they were not copied from the student admin database. David cannot help[;] he is employed by MGS, not Banksia. I now have my own spreadsheet.

Roles
The e-tutors reported exhortations to both students and themselves to work collaboratively:
I'm developing a FAQ forum with hints on what to try, who to contact if they have difficulties.
We should be sharing ideas and experiences.
I expect students to be able to function in this environment as the professionals that they are. As we will all have the same students, I think it is important to have similar expectations of their roles and responsibilities…[or] else it gets too confusing. Another job for the MGS?
We should pool ideas to acknowledge that the first time e-tutoring is challenging, and that we would do things differently second time around.

As most work happens on the weekends, I've told my students that I won't be in the course site on Monday and Tuesday. These are my study days.
I've dropped the 5pm submission time[;] instead the date is what matters for assignments.

The e-tutors reported that there had been significantly different expectations of engagement by both students and the tutors:
David is on my case because of the lack of action in the course site. It happens elsewhere, via e-mail and phone.
[The course site] is like a graveyard – there is enough for students to do without ‘chatting’.
We are a lively bunch with weekly seminars. Lots of work for me, but the students are starting to work with each other. Late enrolments are initially invisible. I have to seek them out, find their phone numbers, contact them individually for contributions. Terse e-mail from Shane. I had told the class that I would not be available when I went to China. He expects me to respond to student enquiries.

Deeply felt frustrations were articulated when solutions were not apparent:

When things go wrong, you go round in circles trying to find someone in Banksia who can help.

There were several references to the challenges of sustaining student engagement:

I'm aiming for a low drop-out rate, I know all my students. I ring and e-mail. While it is inordinately time-consuming, the strategy is working. I draw students back into the course, aiming to create an intimate learning environment. I set the tone by being deliberately ‘up close and personal’. We celebrate significant events: births, family visits, promotions. Students are so busy, I aim to make myself clear with short announcements. I make lots of announcements, 2 or 3 a day if I have something to share with the class. Each is on a different topic so students can easily skip over if it isn't relevant. On most occasions there is something new each time a student visits. Seminar leaders are now responsible for stimulating discussion. The class is starting to settle.

All e-tutors expressed concerns about what they perceived as an unrealistic workload:

Students complain about the volume of work, the staff complain – there is too much here! The weekend is never my own – students expect immediate responses when they have a question.

Students’ late entry into the course

The most frustrating concerns expressed were reserved for outcomes that apparently need not have occurred. The MGS was operating outside Banksia’s processes:

MGS’ fast-tracking late enrolees into the course. Students are in the course before receiving the introductory course materials and well before they have access to the library. We are the ones that make it work – spending lots of time one-on-one and e-mailing readings. It is madness[;] we look like amateurs. It has to stop! How do we influence the MGS?

The course is written with assignment dates so students can complete at any time, in a mad flurry at the end if need be. It is impossible to manage my own time. Students need structure – common times for completing tasks. An acknowledgment that most students work full-time. They cannot give priority to study when there isn't a due date. The ‘any time’ part of the ‘any where any time’ doesn't seem to work.

The ignoring of academic norms by full-time staff members and students
Personal concerns indicated that the e-tutors were uncertain about their ability to meet the demands of online facilitation, or even uncertain about their role. The individual responsible for resolving a situation may be difficult to ascertain and potential conflicts among the activity of e-tutoring and organisational structures, professional status or personal commitments may emerge.

Within that broader concern, a specific issue was the ignoring of academic norms:
David makes announcements in the course without consulting [me]. They are lengthy, unrelated to the course.
I am careful in my tone, how I present myself through friendly, relaxed, brief, focussed announcements. [In contrast to David's intrusions.]
The MGS does not respect the privacy of the learning environment nor consider the impact of their intrusion. Everyone (students and staff) is now careful about what they say - they don't know who is ‘listening’.

There was also a feeling that boundaries were ignored:
E-tutors use home phone for communication. Students ring them at home in the evenings and on weekends.
Shane misses the point, suggesting that I don't answer the phone at home and keep a record of the phone calls I make so I can be reimbursed…
David sees himself as my supervisor in the course – that he has the right to interfere in my academic duties.
Shane thinks we only answer questions about assignments. He keeps adding students which disrupts the teaching – discussions, group work, etc.

A sense of choice and academic agency underpinned the e-tutors’ decision to remain with the AMan. By coming in at the ground floor they had established an ecological niche free from obvious competition with established faculty; strong incentive to continue with subsequent semesters. However one e-tutor had been overwhelmed with student expectations of unrealistic response times, the overall commitment required to facilitate learning and her lack of control over the learning environment. Facilitation was compromising her ability to continue with her own studies. Her anxiety was compounded by pedagogical considerations where she felt that the writer had written an introductory course for those who wanted to become accountants rather than apply accounting principles to their own professional context. She summarised her ambivalence about leaving the AMan:
The workload is excessive and no real recognition – I make this decision [not to participate] reluctantly as I believe the AMan has great potential.

CONCLUSION: DEVELOPING A LIFELONG LEARNING PARTNERSHIP

The preceding presentation of quotations from the study’s qualitative data, clustered around four emergent themes, highlighted that the development of a tailored, community-based, staff development solution by the e-tutors is consistent with the construction of a lifelong learning partnership.

Working within, responding to and proactively manipulating and creating alternative options in a particular context are characteristics of a lifelong learner (Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, & Mauch, 2001). While writers jostle with nuances, lifelong learning is generally accepted to encompass, quite simply, ongoing learning throughout one’s life – a necessary attribute for thriving in a changing world.
However, active learning is often discontinuous where problematic situations are actively addressed, to reduce the distance between the known and unknown. Stabilisation and consolidation provide a backdrop to periods of focused, active learning. Being able to step outside one’s role/position in order better to understand others’ roles and how others interact with the situation emphasises that lifelong learning is not a singular activity. While centring on the individual, lifelong learning requires reflection and engagement across the range of communities in which one is a member – active citizenship in all those communities, not merely in the context of work and formal education. Partnerships, dislocations and problematic relationships are stimulus for reflexive change (Edwards, Ranson & Strain, 2002, p. 534). Creating a virtual CoP in which the e-tutors built an understanding of their role as facilitators of learning assists both their development of the facilitation skills and their appreciation of being a Banksia e-tutor. These are some of the strategies needed to make this lifelong learning partnership effective and equitable – and to constitute the missing link in moving from novice researchers to novice online facilitators.

REFERENCES


