

Finding and mending potholes in the laneways connecting higher education institutions with their part-time e-tutors: Virtual learning communities fostering organisational learning

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This paper reveals the experience part-time e-tutors when a mid-sized regional Australian university first offered online programs. Potholes and laneways are metaphors to highlight the fragility of linkages when institutions rely on those outside their core staff for the success of new enterprises. The study examines the interface between part-time (sessional) e-tutors and the variety of institutional units they must work with through the structure of a learning community. The investigation illustrates how institutional policies and procedures established for the status quo may place these e-tutors in unanticipated and uncomfortable situations. For confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for the institution's name (*Banksia University*) and the School involved (*MGS*).

The study has two foci; e-tutors and the organisation. Because e-tutors are readily accessible to students, they often buffer students from elements of an institutional system not yet evolved to meet e-student needs. In effect, e-tutors form part of a malleable interface between mature (and often sophisticated) organisational systems that would otherwise chafe emergent needs. When normal workplace interdependencies fracture, subsequent mis-matches of expectations may spawn zones of contention. In this study a virtual learning community is developed to provide a shared space for staff inhabiting this zone.

Living with Flux and Flow: Sessional Staff and the Higher Education Sector

Martin's observation that 'change and actions and reactions reverberate at such speed that stability and predictability are, at best, fragile' (Martin 1999 p.3) holds as true for the higher education sector in 2007 as was the case when written.

In such an unpredictable environment, sessional employees (those employed on short-term contracts for specific tasks) become an indispensable asset to the higher education sector. Typically sessional staff help institutions to respond to dynamic conditions and foster currency with professional disciplines and are increasingly involved in pedagogical innovations as academic agency is asserted by those with permanent positions (Park 2004). Ironically, despite their vital contributions, sessional staff are invisible to many full-time staff as their on-campus presence is mostly confined to the classrooms, and they are relatively poorly supported by faculty administrators (Rajagopal 2002).

WebEase: A Virtual Learning Community for *Banksia* e-tutors

Senior *Banksia* administrators created a learning community to support the implementation of an innovative program, the *AMan*. The *AMan* was:

administered by the School (*MGS*) not a single Department); staffed almost exclusively by sessional tutors; was the first wholly off-campus program offered by *Banksia*; and was the first program reliant on online teaching and learning.

A learning community, *WebEase*, was created to address emergent problems inevitably arising during the initial offer of the *AMan*. Its design was based on models of learning organisations and action learning. The intent was to quickly move the e-tutors out of zones of discomfort, by providing seamless connections with *Banksia* staff responsible for supporting *AMan* students. *WebEase* membership was created around the objective of realising graduates and establishing a successful base for extending online delivery of courses. By including administrative, library, and information systems staff in the e-tutors' virtual community, the essential elements of an activity-orientated learning community were present. *WebEase* used the same Learning Management System (LMS) used for course delivery. The LMS was selected for convenience - an area regularly visited by *AMan* e-tutors with ready access by *Banksia* administrative and technical staff.

Learning Communities and Learning Organisations

Learning organisations aim to check fragmentation and build capacity by creating an organisational umbrella for communication, considerations and reflection permeating organisational entities such as teams, communities and units. Their focus is mostly problem and practice-centred. Senge observed that organisations without a 'memory' and without feedback to guide actions were at a disadvantage. Instead they needed to 'directly experience the consequences of our ... decisions' (Senge 1990 p. 23). Although learning organisations can develop both vertically and horizontally, the latter is more congruent with adult learning principles (Owenby 2002). An emergence of learning organisations from the overlap of learning communities (Reil and Polin 2004) are described as richer and more enduring than management designed learning organisations because of the power inequalities and pervading impact of structure and culture from the top-down direction-setting of learning goals (Owenby 2002).

Arguably the terms Learning Community and Learning Organisation have been over-enthusiastically and inappropriately applied to groups in which learning takes place irrespective of the nature of the learning; independent or interdependent (Owenby 2002; Reil and Polin 2004). Riel and Polin (2004) drew on numerous studies of learning communities to develop a taxonomy to differentiate and validate these communities using four dimensions: mechanisms for growth and regeneration, membership, task or learning goals, and participation structures. The categories are: task, practice and knowledge-based.

Tasks are central to the task-based learning community. This community has least need of a past or future. Typically it is purposefully created to bring diverse perspectives to a problem or issue. Strong group identity forms as the task draws the community together from different parts of the organisation in intense activity.

Learning is characterised as a modification of understandings, atypical of any member unit. It is 'very different from simple collaboration' (Reil and Polin, p.20).

Practice-based learning communities draw cohesion from shared goals and interests of practitioners - people in the same occupation or career to establish tools, gain access to resources, and develop protocols to enhance practice. These communities function in complex and contextualised environments, often crossing organisational boundaries when sited within an institution. Knowledge-based learning communities are very similar but their cohesion is drawn from knowledge building and transmission.

One of the best-known practice-based learning communities are Community of Practice (CoP). Key characteristics are: (a) establishing a sense of joint purpose where members rely on each other 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).

A commonality between task-based communities, practice-based communities and learning organisations is intentional action. These actions are modified by the organisational setting, its context, culture and history.

Activity Systems, Communities of Practice and Learning Communities

When studying organisational learning, it is important to distinguish between the learning of individuals and community learning; Schwen and Hara (2004) warn against assumptions of 'community learning' based solely on evidence of micro (individual) learning. CoP are first and foremost naturally occurring communities, not naturally occurring 'learning units' (Wenger 2000; Yamagata-Lynch 2003). They are dynamic, evolve and are focussed on practice, and retain substance with a fluid membership and have a life exceeding achievement of particular tasks (Barab, McKinster et al. 2003). Within this milieu, learning is a by-product, grounded in situated activity. Activities (and learning) occur within a dynamic of social and cultural settings, influenced by the organisational environment its structure and individual dispositions.

Because of the range of components involved in an activity system (see figure 1), they are rarely stable. It is more useful to view these systems as landscapes open to internal contradictions where participants may be influenced by, or may change the system. By focussing on issues raised by the e-tutors allowed them to be addressed in a timely and sensitive manner and to establish meaningful alignment with *Banksia*.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The extent of an individual's ease with workplace innovations is at the heart of much of the educational reform literature (Ellsworth 2000; Fullan 2001). This study examines selected critical incidents identified by the *AMan* e-tutors; choice, academic agency and action-as-meaningful, are key concepts. Fullan observes

that “[e]ducational change depends on what teachers do and think – it is as simple and as complex as that” (2001:115).

The investigation 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. An interpretative model was selected to reveal the meanings of observed participant-action (Carr and Kemmis 1986; Denzin and Lincoln 2003).

The methodology, based on a responsive-constructivist evaluation (Foster, Bowskill et al. 2002) used activity theory to highlight conflicts or concerns. Located within the sociocultural paradigm, activity systems provide a framework to examine the learning that occurs in a group, and ascertaining whether the group can be characterised as a community. As an analytical tool, activity theory applies investigative and interpretive strategies to understand the particulars of perspectives (Engeström 1987; Hung and Chen 2002).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected from *WebEase* focus groups, semi-structured interviews with the administrators and all four e-tutors, CoP electronic transcripts, e-mails and Committee reports and minutes. Two anonymous student surveys preceded the focus groups. These surveys were scheduled between weeks three and four of a thirteen 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 was verified by member checking, triangulation through other sources or complementary data collections.

Data was analysed using the three stages of grounded theory methodology: open coding to determine significant concepts and properties; theoretical coding that focuses on relationships; and selective coding that limits analysis to the concepts and relationships relevant to the core explanatory concepts.

Date Analysis - Activity Theory

This theory examines mediated actions within an activity system - mediation via tools, rules and designated roles pertinent to the community – see Table 1.

Element	Description	Application in <i>WebEase</i>
Object	Purpose, motivation for and focus of activities.	Online delivery of <i>AMan</i> courses
Subject	The focus group for the activity	<i>AMan</i> e-tutors
Tools	Instruments or artefacts that mediate to transform the object into an outcome. Tools can be social or cultural (eg language) as well as instrumental.	Learning management system; (Blackboard); Student administration system (PeopleSoft); e-Library; webmail; furnished offices.
Outcome	The intention / purpose of the system	<i>AMan</i> e-tutors feel a valued part of the <i>Banksia</i> teaching team
Community	Groups or individuals with whom the Subject interacts in	<i>WebEase</i> CoP: <i>AMan</i> e-tutors; MGS program coordinator; Departmental Student

Element	Description	Application in <i>WebEase</i>
	order to achieve the Object. It is normally where the subject is from.	Admin Officers, Technical Officer, Librarian. Liaison with others: MGS Marketing Officer; e-students; MGS Head
Rules	Imposed by the Community on the Subject	<i>Banksia</i> and <i>AMan</i> policies & regulations
Roles	The manner in which Community members share the responsibility of achieving the Object. Mostly procedure-based.	E-tutors asked questions and highlighted inconsistencies / gaps; Technical Officer, Student Admin Officers and Librarian assisted students; MGS Marketing Officer surveyed students and made recommendations to Head of MGS

Table 1: Elements of an activity system (see Figure 1) with the intended outcome of *AMan* e-tutors feeling a valued part of *Banksia*'s teaching team.

Individual actions are differentiated from and set in collective activity (Barab, McKinster et al. 2003). See Figure 1 for relationships.

Results: Critical Incidents and Concerns Raised by the E-tutors

Figure 1 represents the mediation in an activity system designed to achieve the goal (object) of online delivery of *AMan* courses at *Banksia* where the outcome is e-tutor institutional allegiance. The community in Figure 1 was two-tiered, where *WebEase* members, (the e-tutors, program coordinator, student administrators, technical officer and librarian), liaised with the School's marketing officer and Head of School. Roles were emergent.

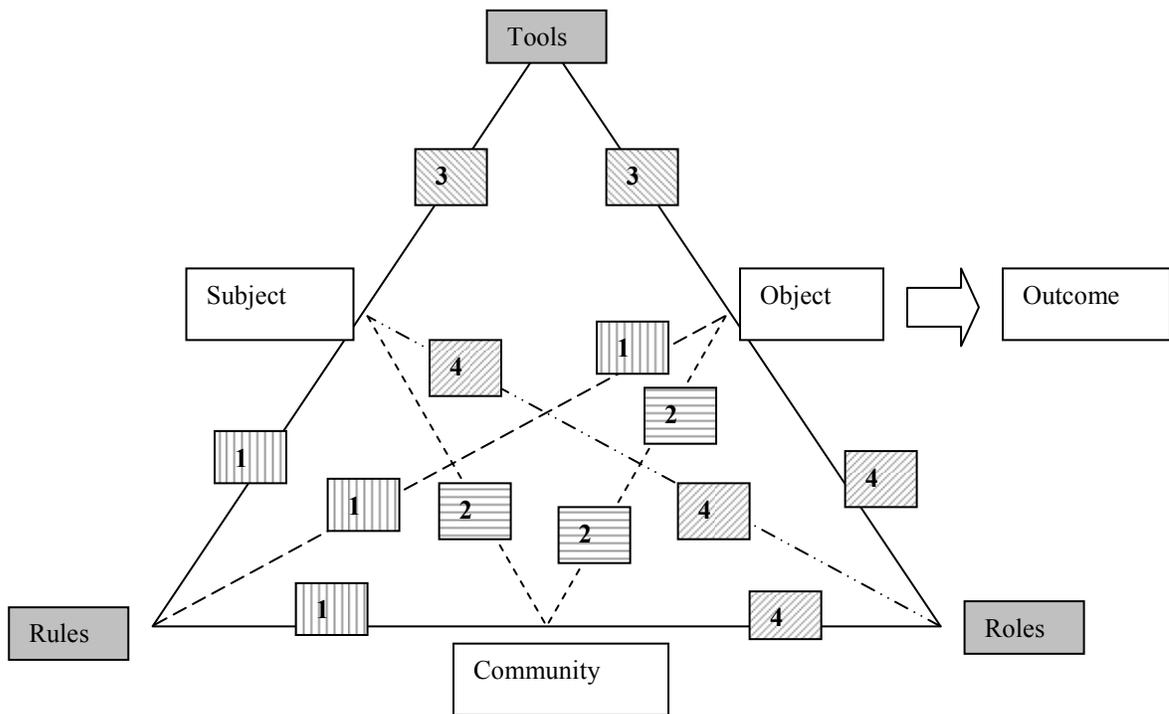


Figure 1: Activity diagram

Each number in Figure 1 represents activity between the elements outlined in Table 1, and hence potential for conflict or synergy between the elements. Note that while the entire system is geared to achieving the Object of the activity system, activity is always mediated between the Subject and Object. E-tutors (the Subject) are situated within the *Banksia* community (as outlined in Table 1) by observing rules and facilitating an *AMan* course in accord with *Banksia* rules (represented by “1” in Figure 1). The e-tutors will work with particular members of this community to offer an *AMan* course – “2” above. To support student learning (the object), e-tutors (subject) will use an array of tools (see Table 1). This is represented by “3” in Figure 1. With their colleagues, the e-tutors will be responsible for undertaking particular roles (procedures to develop and assess student learning) – “4” above.

The themes in Table 2 emerged from the distillation and analysis of the data from the e-tutors. The numbers correspond to those in Figure 1.

No.	Concerns Revealed by the E-tutors Through the Structure of Critical Incidents
1	Rule violations or ambiguities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disruptions caused by late entry into the course – pedagogical, social and lack of access to course materials. • ‘Any time commencement’ causes pressures for e-tutors
2	Community nebulous <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Negative impact of external presence in the course, particularly when academic norms are ignored / administrative processes over-ride. • No work space available in the GMS • Isolation – no one notices.
3	Tools and resources not always available or relevant / complete <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LMS unreliable for synchronous assessments • Some students initially have no access to library • Developing resources for e-tutors to share evolved after initial reluctance by the e-tutors to ‘become involved’ with other e-tutors.
4	Roles ambiguous: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not clear who is can assist / is responsible • E-tutors feel responsible to accommodate deficiencies

Table 2: Concerns raised by the AMan e-tutors – linked to Activity System

Selected illustrations of these concerns are included below where each e-tutor is identified by a letter. The highest levels of frustration related to outcomes that apparently need not have occurred. Student acceptance into the course throughout the semester was a violation of both e-tutor and student expectations. E-tutors felt responsible for easing the students’ situation.

... MGS' fast-tracking late enrollees 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. [D]

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. [I]

E-tutors felt that they were working in isolation, with fragmented classes.

... the public holidays are different in different countries. It seems that someone is always on holidays [D]

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. [the course site] is like a graveyard – there is enough for students to do without “chatting”... [I]

Sustaining engagement and community building became a vital aspect for the second round of offers. The importance of a class community emerged in the latter half of the first semester.

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. Seminar leaders are now responsible for stimulating discussion. The class is starting to settle... We are a lively bunch with weekly seminars. Lots of work for me, but the students are starting to work with each other [G]

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... We work in groups around projects and case studies. Students have to be able to function in this environment... 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 [A]

There had been significantly different expectations of engagement which had a profound effect on implementing implicit and explicit roles. In particular, there were tensions between the MGS marketer, the Head of School and the e-tutors.

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 enquires... David sees himself as my supervisor in the course – that he has the right to interfere in my academic duties [David] is on my case because of the lack of action in the course site. It happens elsewhere, via e-mail and phone [D]

David makes announcements in the course without consulting They are lengthy, unrelated to the course...I am careful in my tone, how I present myself through friendly, relaxed, brief, focussed announcements. [A]

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". [G]

One e-tutor (I) had been overwhelmed by student expectations of unrealistic response times, the overall commitment required to facilitate learning, and her lack of control over the learning environment. She did not return for the second offer.

the workload is excessive and no real recognition – I make this decision [not to participate] reluctantly as I believe the AMan has great potential [I]

Implications of the Virtual Learning Community

The manner in which communities are created and mature has an impact on how they acquire meaning for their members (Vrasidas, Zembylas et al. 2004) Relevance is critical to community success and sustainability. The benefits of creating a community that recognises concurrent dimensions of the tutor working seamlessly within a class, Department and Institution implementing potentially challenging pedagogical practices are consistent with the data. Initially all the e-tutors failed to appreciate the potential of the management-created *WebEase*. More than half a semester passed before the e-tutors realised potential benefits.

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

We should pool ideas to acknowledge that the first time e-tutoring is challenging, and that we would do things differently second time around. [D]

The e-tutors embarked upon a task requiring ingenuity, adaptability and reflection. Through examining critical incidents in the context of an activity system, intra-institutional partnerships are revealed as potholed laneways. The lens of activity theory highlights dissonance arising from personal and professional challenges (Yamagata-Lynch 2003; Engeström 2005). Non-formal workplace learning from the first *AMan* offer formed the base for peer support in the second semester. Similarly, system breakdowns between organisational units informed policy and procedural changes.

“G” assumed the role of academic mentor in the second offer. He had demonstrated success working with the largest course, had a low drop-out rate and a high level of academic discussion. G was also keen to share his successes and was generous in acknowledging contributions from his *AMan* colleagues. He maintained a presence in all *MGS* courses for the first half of the semester, and withdrew to the *WebEase* community for the remainder of the semester.

The structure for a sustainable workplace adult learning community was established. The second offer novice e-tutors developed confidence and competence more quickly than the first group. Retention rates increased and class sizes grew, emphasising the importance of active, relevant support.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated how a learning community designed by and developed for institutional interests, can provide a critical foundation for quickly

linking students to relevant services and solutions via their most convenient point of contact, sessional e-tutors. Success of the learning community is related to the institution's willingness to adopt a key principal of a learning organisation, that organisations should experience the consequences of their actions and learn from that feedback. Community membership should be structured to include participants who need to collaborate to carry out an activity. Benefits for community members are both micro, it is easier for them to do their designated job, and meso, that the problems are sufficiently ill-defined that can be best addressed through collaboration.

By creating a virtual learning community, e-tutors who would otherwise not meet built a rich understanding of their role as facilitators. Addressing the social, historical and cultural aspects of e-tutoring rather than solely pedagogical responsibilities, activity theory provides a framework in which to recognise not only identity formation within the community but the interplay between individuals and the community which define its success.

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