

IDPacifica – the emergence of a professional community

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Abstract

The University of the South Pacific (USP) is a regional university serving 12 small island states. It has offered distance education programs for over 30 years and dominates the region's higher education provision. In relation to designing and developing distance and flexible learning it employs instructional designers (IDs) and is the only regional educational institution with a substantial body of such expertise and experience. However, ID staffing has often proved difficult, with high turnover in an increasingly competitive market, and a very limited regional base for recruitment.

In 2005 a one-week ID skills development workshop was run focusing strongly on application to regional needs, with 21 participants from USP and other Pacific tertiary institutions. Class interaction was essential to workshop progress and group work activities were a resounding success. A distinct group identity began to emerge as practitioners shared experiences, and participants agreed that the community of ID practice should be extended in the region to further collaboration, mentoring, knowledge sharing and professional development. An on-line network has been established to facilitate discussion and partnerships for expansion of regional expertise. Originally envisaged as a one-off staff development exercise, capitalising on the momentum is developing a self-sustaining professional community of practice.

INTRODUCTION

The South Pacific is a region of islands, small widely dispersed populations, richly diverse cultures, limited social and economic resources, and difficult and expensive communications. It is a region where open and distance learning has enormous development potential. Distance education has been offered by several regional tertiary institutions, including the Solomon Islands College of Higher Education (SICHE), University of Papua New Guinea, National University of Samoa, Fiji Institute of Technology and a scattering of smaller colleges. The University of the South Pacific (USP) is however by far the largest and most widely reaching provider, with a campus network covering twelve island nations across 33 million square kilometres of ocean. Established as a regional University from its outset in 1968, USP has been delivering distance education programmes across the South Pacific for over 30 years, from pre-tertiary foundation studies to internationally recognised vocational and degree qualifications.

Course development for distance and flexible learning at USP follows the course team model with a strong foundation in instructional design. Early reliance on print materials supported by satellite audio tutorials (the dominant delivery model of the 1970s and '80s) has evolved through developments in educational technology, and courses may now be offered through combinations of satellite mediated videobroadcasts, WebCT, audio and videotutorials, CDs, DVDs and videos. There is still however a commitment to the ongoing use of print materials and audiocassettes to deliver core components of the more popular courses to students scattered in more remote parts of the Pacific where electricity is still a scarce commodity. (The mail is indeed still collected by canoe in some parts.)

Such a context poses some most interesting challenges to instructional designers, not only in the development of flexible courses to suit the remote user as well as the urban dweller, but also in their own professional development. USP maintains its body of expertise in course development with some difficulty as there is a high turnover of

experienced senior staff and a limited pool of expertise to recruit from within the region. Other tertiary institutions with less developed networks, reputation and funding find it even harder to attract experienced staff; academics with a good teaching background are typically appointed but then need to learn their course design skills for distance education development on the job. Fortunately there are now good graduate courses available part-time at a distance from universities outside the region that provide excellent grounding in the theory and practice of flexible teaching and learning development, but these do require long-term commitment and come with significant associated costs which limit their accessibility to the less developed world. It can also be difficult to develop a depth of expertise and understanding in a local context without the advantage of local mentors. Those who do succeed in becoming qualified and experienced in distance education find themselves in a very marketable position and are tempted to migrate to more developed countries with higher wages, a higher standard of living and greater political stability.

In addition, the lack of breadth of experience of regional staff in course development issues has contributed to the paucity of research in this context. Preferred learning styles of indigenous Pacific peoples are, for instance, greatly under-researched. Concern has been expressed by educationalists in the region that the imposition of external models of distributed learning is frequently unsuited to the local context (Helu-Thaman, 2001) and lack of local content in courses developed by external providers makes local application of learned knowledge and skills hard for students to assimilate. Building up the local level of expertise in instructional design for distance and flexible learning would be a solution to the need for application and adaptation to regional needs.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGNERS

Course development staff at USP are encouraged to further their qualifications in instructional design but they have often lacked the opportunity to develop as local experts in a mentored environment. With this gap in mind a one week Workshop in instructional design skills was run in September 2005 focussing on application to local needs. This was initiated as part of a wider AusAID sponsored staff development program for flexible teaching and learning at USP; some other regional institutions were also invited to send a delegate, and in all there were 21 participants from Fiji (USP and FIT), Vanuatu (USP) and the Solomon Islands (SICHE). The Workshop was designed and facilitated by 'expert' instructional designers with significant experience in needs identification for a variety of indigenous contexts including the Pacific region.

The Workshop consisted of a mixture of lecture, class discussion and group work. As all participants were already employed in course development for distance education and had an understanding of the field and their own institutional context, theoretical components of the instructional design process were reviewed succinctly (as were the classical educational considerations of media characteristics, matching assessment to learning objectives, writing style, etc.). Using a problem solving approach, more time was devoted to considering features of the local learning system and identifying their impact on design for delivery of learning, i.e.:

- What are the characteristics of your students?
- How can you meet their learning needs?
- What are the constraints you face?
- How can you realistically apply project management processes to the development of learning materials in your institution?
- What can you learn from research in your region?

As Workshop participants had the novel opportunity of sharing experiences and insights with instructional designers from other regional contexts, focussed group work activities emerged as being the most productive and well received, and more time was devoted to these as the Workshop progressed (Osborne, 2005). Some participants

made such comments as: " I didn't say much to begin with, but then I found out that everyone has the same problems and there isn't just one answer. It was a big relief to hear that."

Overcoming this barrier was the main catalyst to group problem solving, and as camaraderie developed a distinct group identity emerged during the week. Although the Workshop had not been charged with the delivery of formal output, class discussion resulted in the cooperative formulation of a list of recommendations impacting on the development of distance and flexible learning in their region. Of particular relevance to the topic of this paper: "The current community of instructional design practice should be developed and extended to include staff in the field in the USP region for the purposes of: collaboration; mentoring arrangements; professional development; sharing knowledge; and recognition of the role and professional status of instructional designers." (Osborne, 2005, p.6)

Considerable enthusiasm was expressed for the continuation of interaction in the region, especially as an opportunity to include isolated instructional designers as part of the professional community. Follow-up sessions were also suggested to maintain the theme of professional development (the most popular request being for a review of contemporary learning theory and its application to design for distance education) and there was brief discussion on how this might be achieved economically.

Enthusiasm for further group interaction was still evident when some members of the Workshop group met again in Australia a few weeks later at a forum of the Open and Distance Learning Association of Australia, where the Commonwealth of Learning was collaborating in the facilitation of a pre-conference workshop on open and distance learning as a tool for sustainable development in the Australia and Pacific region (COL/ODLAA, 2005). In a wider consideration of the role of professional organisations for open, distance and flexible learning in the South Pacific region, it was evident that there would be further potential for the facilitation of more professional development opportunities for course developers, many of whom are operating in a 'sink or swim' environment with little experience to guide them. Discussion between the authors of this paper following this meeting in Australia sparked the idea of a distributed community of practice. In consideration of the suitability of different communication tools to link such a community, it was evident that as all members of the original Workshop group were employed in institutions with satisfactory computer links an on-line community presence would be viable. Capitalising on the Workshop momentum it was desirable to harness enthusiasm as soon as possible and an updated email list of all participants was accumulated. Delays over the summer vacation meant the first email to the whole group was sent in early February 2006, to announce the intention of formalising our community of instructional design practice with an on-line presence. There were 28 members on the email list, including Workshop participants, contributors and two new instructional designers who had since joined USP.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DISTRIBUTED COMMUNITY

Coincidental events assisted the collaborative development of the on-line community presence. One workshop participant at USP was a course developer currently completing studies in educational technology and chose to establish a 'wiki' as one of his projects. (A 'wiki' is a type of website that allows users to edit and change most content themselves so creating a collaborative site.) Thus 'IDPacifica' achieved its on-line presence in March 2006 as an interactive presence on the world wide web (now located at <http://idpacifica.xwiki.com>). An externally hosted site was created to avoid implicit institutional alliance; due to staff mobility there are now members in five tertiary institutions in three countries, and participation and facilitation are entirely voluntary activities. The original eight recommendations emanating from USP's instructional design Workshop were the first posting inviting further discussion. A senior instructional designer recently arrived in Fiji from the USA had a strong theoretical background in learning and teaching design and started a discussion on learning theory as applied to instructional design and student learning. Papers have been added to the wiki to stimulate group discussion.

Establishment of the wiki was announced by email to the members. This was followed up by an emailed survey to remind members about the new site, check their degree of interest and discover if they had any issues with access and registration. Responses received by email confirmed a continued level of enthusiasm and enabled problems to be resolved quickly. At the time of writing there are 15 members registered, including eleven of the original workshop participants (anecdotal reports indicate that others have viewed the pages without registering as contributors). Discussion facilitators are in Australia and Fiji, the wiki administrator is in Fiji and there are registered participants in Fiji, Australia and the Solomon Islands.

Although all feedback received via email has been positive that the initiative should continue, active on-line participation has been slow, members citing lack of time and pressure of work as their major barriers to contributing. It is possibly emerging that the on-line presence, IDPacifica, may be most actively supported as a resource base and springboard rather than an active discussion. The authors intend further surveying of participants and will continue to monitor the community's progress and questions this raises.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THE LITERATURE?

Defining the community

Wenger et al (2002) describe the essential features of a community of practice at the hub of our discussion: "Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this by interacting on an ongoing basis. ... As they spend time together, they typically share information, insight and advice. ...they develop a unique perspective on their topic as well as a body of common knowledge, practices and approaches" (p.4-5). Communities of practice all share a basic structure comprising three elements: "a *domain* of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a *community* of people who care about this domain; and the shared *practice* that they are developing to be effective in their domain" (p.27). These three elements define the particular nature of this emerging group as members are in a position to develop a body of knowledge to inform their shared practice in an area where reports of applied research are sparse.

Studies of communities of practice (CoPs) have mostly been on those evolving within an organisation which may be harnessed for institutional staff development purposes; participation may even be a requirement of employment. While many have informal roots they may be established or legitimised as the solution to a problem of maintaining and upgrading knowledge and practice, especially in a widely dispersed professional community. Original discussions of 'distributed CoPs' tended to assume a large global population generally organised into local subgroups (Wenger et al 2002, p.119; Wenger, website). On-line communications have enabled a whole range of virtual communities with members united by Wenger's common elements but who have never met each other.

The IDPacifica community so far established has members who have (largely) the advantage of having met each other face-to-face and established a common foundation upon which to build. It is therefore a 'real' community rather than a purely 'virtual' one. But with a possible membership of only 28 individuals, smallness in itself could be an issue for healthy survival, as any community needs a 'critical mass' to succeed (Brown, 2005). The authors have discussed the possibility of extending an invitation to join the discussion to other practitioners of instructional design in the region; this would seem to be of mutual benefit because of the lack of alternative professional development opportunities. It would however alter the innate trust that may currently exist between members who know each other and for whom the forum was originally intended. The wiki currently exists with a non-institutional identity, and for wider regional recognition might be better placed under an organisational umbrella - perhaps a regional professional organisation rather than one institution. The defining parameter of 'instructional design in the Pacific region' needs to remain (rather than widening it to include other matters of educational development, for instance) - as Callahan (2006) discusses, the title and scope is important for group cohesion and should not

include too broad a categorisation. He describes a simple test to gauge whether a community of practice might form: "When someone says, 'I would like to start a community of practice', I ask, 'Can you describe the potential members by completing the following sentence? I am a' If they can fill in the blank in a way that people can passionately identify with the descriptor then there is a chance a community might emerge."

Cultural contribution

Discussions of the globalisation of education have expressed frustrations over the need for academics in the developed world to adapt their teaching to accommodate cultural norms in the countries who are receivers of transnational education. Local teachers are often employed as tutors to 'interpret' the message to suit the context, but professional development opportunities for these local tutors may be few and many do not identify as members of a professional community of teachers supporting the course (Dunn & Wallace, 2005). Leask (2004) points out that many offshore programs - where the curriculum is planned and developed in the 'first world' country with no reference to local staff - merely mimic a colonial structure, and argues that local tutors should be brought into the teaching team as academic equals bringing curriculum content as well as contextual delivery expertise. How more so should local instructional designers develop an international insight for the design and adaptation of flexible learning to suit their own regional contexts?

Wesley-Smith (2003) advocates the development of regional learning communities and the medium of interactive technologies to assist a constructive approach to teaching and learning, which by removing the 'sage on the stage' model of teaching hold the possibility of rapidly decolonising educational delivery (Pacific Islands studies being his main concern). Helu-Thaman (2003) believes that globalisation is behaving like colonisation by its disempowerment of Oceanic peoples, and Smith (1999) expresses concerns about 'native' intellectuals with 'western' training who acquire a degree of alienation from their own culture. Facilities like IDPacifica that can be provided for education professionals to take a lead in their own regional curriculum development and delivery can strengthen local identity and confidence in a global world.

Facilitation

It seems a community of practice needs constant facilitation, however. You cannot, as Brown (2005) repeats "build it and expect everyone to come". A facilitator must market the community and participate regularly to encourage others to contribute. It is necessary to 'stir the pot' occasionally, as low activity makes the community look dead and starts a vicious cycle (Wenger et al, 2002, p.131). The original instigator of IDPacifica admits that she did not envisage this high need for ongoing input, and happily thought that the community would take off with only the occasional provocative contribution necessary as discussion waned. A facilitation/coordination role holds many unseen elements, and especially if the community is widened gains responsibilities beyond networking, such as ethics, conciliation and constant surveying of community needs. As facilitation is a voluntary activity lacking formal recognition, is such a move recommended?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

This distributed community of practice has potential - members express continued support, and the region needs to develop its practice base. But active contribution is minimal. We need to decide how best to develop.

- Should we risk losing our small/friendly entity by inviting others to join?
- Is a wiki the best tool to encourage collaboration?
- Would the community benefit from institutional/organisational legitimisation?
- How do we make our online community sufficiently meaningful and engaging to generate the shared sense of identity and purpose required for a

community of practice?

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