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Establishing On-line Communities for School Leaders An Interim Report.

(The NCSL pilot, Talking Heads - January to December 2000)

AUTHORS: S, Jones, G. Lang, I. Terrell, K. Thompson; L. Ramondt, and ULTR△L△B associates.

Abstract

The National College of School Leaders (NCSL) Talking Heads on-line community for Head Teachers of English Schools, has grown out of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) successful Talking Heads pilot project. This project was undertaken in collaboration with Oracle and ULTR L B who have a strong track record in designing successful online communities. The pilot demonstrated that Talking Heads can help school leaders to be more effective in their roles.

This paper seeks to outline the development of Talking Heads and reports the key findings of the pilot project.

Introduction

Talking Heads was funded by the DfES in the UK as a one year online community pilot project for newly appointed Head Teachers. This cohort consisted of approximately 1,200 English Head Teachers who were appointed to their first post in the 1999/2000 academic year. The participating Head Teachers were given a laptop, and were shown how to access Talking Heads via the web.

A facilitation team consisting of 12.5 full-time equivalent staff were employed. It's members were an established team of advisory teachers, who had previously worked in the development of 'Tesco SchoolNet 2000', the world's largest on –line schools' project .

Talking Heads built upon the lessons learnt from two previous ULTR L B projects. These are The SMILE Project (http://www.smile.anglia.ac.uk) an On-line Community for Engineers and The Online Learning Network (OLN) (http://online.learning.net.uk/) an Online Community for Learning Professionals.

An On-line Community of School Leaders in England

Talking Heads is a community forum, which provides Head Teachers with an opportunity to talk freely and in confidence to other colleagues about all aspects of leading a school. It facilitates discussion and networking, and provides opportunities to share common problems with other school leaders.   Furthermore, it also provides them with the chance to share best practice, debate current professional issues, and develop new approaches to tackling the real issues facing schools today.

Built on Oracle's new and innovative online community software called think.com, a range of software tools are offered ranging from brainstorms, debates and hot seats, to online conversations and articles. Key issues are shared and discussed with colleagues with similar or contrasting experiences. There are also many opportunities to participate in on-line conversations with leading UK and international professionals and DfES policy makers. The aim is to generate a virtual community of school leaders which:

- facilitates discussion and networking
- shares good practice
- provides support for those in isolated circumstances
- tackles real issues facing schools today
- increases knowledge and use of ICT and thereby,
- enhances effective school leadership

Talking Heads provides an opportunity for Head Teachers in England to share and build on the wealth of their hard won experience.

On-line Community

Much of the expertise most valuable to Head Teachers has been hard won by their peers, yet they are often isolated because opportunities to share information are rare. It takes rapport and trust to be able to discuss uncertainties and this takes time to generate. The think.com software provides an excellent tool to bridge time and space so this may evolve.

Lazlo, A, and Lazlo, K (1997) describe community as "a group of two or more individuals with a shared identity and a common purpose committed to the joint creation of meaning". M. Scott Peck (1987) states that "If we are going to use the word (community) meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to "rejoice together, mourn together," and to "delight in each other, make others' conditions our own."

Rheingold (1984) suggests that the more society fragments, the more people have the need to seek kindred minds with whom to extend their understanding and share their experiences. Simultaneously the new web technologies are providing unprecedented opportunities for communication

yet this must be built on an uncommon foundation of flexibility and responsiveness (Davis, S.M., Meyer, C.,1998*).*

How this flexibility might be mobilised is described in the growing body of literature on systems theory and learning organisations (Marcquardt, 1996; Senge, 1994; Senge et al, 1994). Integrated into this literature is the understanding that for people to move towards a shared understanding that has the potential to transform work practice, they need to engage in dialogue. Isaacs, (1994) identifies dialogue as a climate of openness, free of preconceptions, which supports people to acknowledge each other beyond their roles. This provides the foundation to generate new insight and deepen understanding. He describes the progression that ends either at "metalogue" the level of true shared meaning, or alternately debate, which readily becomes a process of beating each other down. The outcome depends on the willingness of participants to suspend their preconceptions and to be open to listening to each other's perspectives. The power of asynchronous communication is that it allows participants to join in online conversation at their convenience, to reflect upon what was written, and then to return to affirm, clarify or challenge.

Preece (2000) stresses the importance of designing online community software to support sociability, and Lazlo, A, and Lazlo, K (1997) emphasise the evolutionary nature of online communities.

We also accept that for genuine on-line community to evolve Head Teachers must be supported to develop a sense of ownership of the environment. Chapman & Ramondt (1999) identify ownership in online communities by the change in language use and behaviour. The participants' references to "we" and "us", deepening dialogue and the voluntary initiation of community events and activities indicates that the community stage has begun. They also identify that this stage (stage 3) is not reached until participants are comfortable with the navigation and use of the software (stage 1) and are readily answering each others questions and providing information online (stage 2).

As Head Teachers became increasingly familiar with the on-line tools and their use within the various communities, they were encouraged to increase their ownership of their own communities. One example of this is the Special Educational Needs Community. Facilitator support empowered these previously isolated Head Teachers to run this community themselves as far as possible.

Facilitation

> *"Online communities and virtual workgroups do not always "happen" spontaneously. They require care and nurturing: facilitation. The core of facilitation and hosting is to serve the community and assist it in reaching its goals or purpose ... Facilitators and hosts encourage member interaction and participation. But their most important skill is as a genuine, authentic communicator"* White, N. (2001)

It is evident that the facilitator is central to establishing an online community, keeping it vibrant until Head Teachers can be scaffolded (Vygotsky, L.S. 1986) to "appropriate" it (Dwyer, Rignstaff, Haymore, Sandholtz, 1997). Once Head Teachers understand its strengths and limitations they can successfully apply and/or adapt it to their own needs and context.

Berge (1996) classifies the facilitator's role as pedagogical, (questions/ probes and focus); social, (developing human relationships, group cohesiveness, maintaining the group as a unit, helping members work together), managerial (organisational, procedural and administrative ie setting agenda/objectives/ timetable/procedural rules/decision making norms), and technical, (making users comfortable with software and system - preferably making it transparent). White (2001) describes the role more simply as " The Social Host, The Referee, The Project Manager, the Cybrarian, The Help Desk, The Janitor, The Town Council"

The Talking Heads facilitation team engage in all of these activities and ensure that the communities are vibrant places with engaging conversations and that Head Teachers can easily find those that are most relevant to them. Facilitators also identify the need for new communities in response to Head Teachers' needs. They encourage members to join and develop their own online communication and facilitation skills. A facilitator is allocated to each community member to provide help and support especially during the orientation period.

In Talking Heads it has been important not only to try and meet the needs of Head Teachers but it has also been important to keep in mind the needs of our collaborators and partners. It was they who provided the finance. As Kim (2001) points out: "a cornerstone for building any successful Web community is to focus relentlessly on understanding and meeting the needs of the members, while also achieving the objectives (be they personal, financial or social) of the community owners and/or leaders." The DfES is committed to increasing transparency at a policy level. To this end, Head Teachers are able to directly question DfES policy experts on topical issues such as Threshold Payments to teachers. The DfES community has also hosted a number of "hotseats" with policy makers leading to some in-depth conversations. This caused Michael Barber to comment

> *"The online learning community is the thin end of the wedge. I'm sure it will become a standard means for policy-makers to learn from experienced practitioners and to gather and disseminate best practice. The National College for School Leadership will lead the way, but government as a whole will follow. As we move into an era of transformation, policy success will depend on the capacity to learn from the front line."*   (Barber, 2000*)*

Context

Because the use of 'the new technologies" can potentially make a major contribution to creating an interactive network among the 24,000 Head Teachers in education, the DfES commissioned the pilot in advance of establishing the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). The NCSL prospectus gives clear recognition to the fact that the establishment of a physical college would not in itself be sufficient to meet the needs of the UK's school leaders. In England alone there are in excess of 24,000 Head Teachers. Consequently,

> "*the major part of the college's operations must be available on-line as a virtual college… . It will establish new networks within the profession, including problem-solving groups of heads across the country, discussion groups on priority issues, on-line master classes, and access to the most up-to-date research evidence.* " (NCSL, 2000)

The majority of the participating pilot group of Head Teachers came on-line during March 2000 and had access to a range of communities within Talking Heads. These focused in the main on topical issues of school leadership and management within their particular age-phase and specialism. The overarching topic domains included Managing Staff Performance and Development, Learning and Teaching, and Finance, Budgeting and Data and an informal social community called Heads and Tales. Realising that the rapport required for disclosure is generated from informality and relaxation, Talking Heads also aims to encourage the exchange of anecdotes and humour.

One of the benefits of an asynchronous community is that each member can respond to discussions or join in debates at a time and place that is convenient for them because Talking Heads is accessible from any computer with an Internet connection. The "thin client" web-based think.com software frees community members from the requirement to know html and allows them to publish their own views, questions, requests for information and to share success via the internet.

Access to Talking Heads is via a URL, and is password protected, but full access is restricted to registered Head Teachers and facilitators. As a sense of audience clearly matters (Heppell, S., & Ramondt, L. 1998), there has been a strong emphasis on preserving the confidentiality of members. To this end, audience statements are posted within each community. However, access to the DfES via their own community has been greatly valued.   As Talking Heads became established, feedback from Head Teachers suggested that these previously unavailable avenues of communication were a welcome means by which they could respond quickly to government initiatives. They also appreciate the opportunity to inform the decision-makers about what workd and what doesn't. Numbers of `'Hot seats`'' (a question / answer format) have been run to date, giving Head Teachers the chance to question, challenge and inform policy makers

such as Michael Barber (KS2/3 Performance), Tim Brighouse (KS3 Achievement) and Ralph Tabberer (Staffing).

Primarily, the project encourages participants to initiate their own conversations and where appropriate groups, supporting participants to network with colleagues with similar problems or interests from all over the country. Alongside the smaller open specialist communities such as SEN, is also a small closed Community of Practice (Wenger, E. 1998), which focuses on the domain of Pupil Behaviour Management. This group sprang up when a crisis in a school generated the need for guaranteed confidentiality amongst participants so that litigious issues could be discussed openly.

The think.com software

The first phase in the evolution of the 'virtual college ' for school leaders began in earnest within online community software called 'think.com'. This software was developed by the international database company Oracle, in collaboration with ULTR L B, to support online community within and between UK and US schools. This software provides free ICT tools to schools, as part of the "Oracle promise". Although this software has been and continues to be developed specifically for classroom use, the ULTR L B team worked collaboratively with Oracle to adapt the appearance for Talking Heads. With the help of Sodium, a design team based at ULTR L B, an adult "skin" and icons were designed for the pilot.

The community software allows members to be grouped by interest in "communities". And provides members with software "tools" to use as appropriate. As mentioned previously, the hotseat tool has proved to be very effective. It allows questions to be answered by a specific person or group directly below each question, therefore allowing on-screen "threading" within the web page. There are also other "tools" within the think software that have proved very innovative.   The 'Brainstorm' enables participants to respond to a question anonymously thus protecting their identity and allowing contentious issue to be raised. The member clicks on a light bulb on the screen and enters their text in the box that opens, once the message is saved it is coloured to indicate its currency (from red for new, to grey for old). The brainstorm tool is also used as; an icebreaker (eg "how to do you boost staff morale?"), to encourage spontaneity and informality, and to collect feedback before a hotseat.

Another tool which has been adapted for numerous purposes, is the "debate" tool. This allows a colour to be assigned to up-to five "position" statements, thereby visually identifying threads. It has successfully been appropriated for Bulletin Board use as the colour allows social conversations to be differentiated from announcements, "must reads" and information, thereby supporting quick scanning. This tool also groups "positions" by colour to facilitate ready summarising once a conversation has closed.

"Stickies" are also very popular. This web-based version of the post-it note encourages quick and informal communication between participants, and has the added advantage that members are automatically notified of any messages left on their homepage and articles or conversations they've created.

Research

Much data has been collected over the term of the project. For this paper, we present the results of an online questionnaire, posted during July/ August in 2000. It is understood that there is some bias in the data sampling. Of the 118 people who responded during this period, nearly 50% were frequent users (logging on 3 times or more a week) although 10 non-participants also responded to a sampled mail out to non participants. It must also be remembered that this initial cohort of participants were Head Teachers who had been given a laptop and had been requested to log on a minimum of three times a week.

For the project to be deemed successful, we would expect to see reports of;
- increased effectiveness as a school leader,
- information exchange not only amongst the Head Teachers and with policy makers, but also in the school environment,
- increased productivity through the use of ICT,
- reduced isolation and increased moral support and
- a sense of community

Findings

84 Head Teachers wrote a response to the question "What in your opinion is the best feature of Talking Heads communities?".

Best Features	Proportion
Communicating with peers/sharing ideas	49%
Community feeling/reduce isolation	20%
Up to date information	21%

Increasing Effectiveness.

One of the first goals of the initiative was to increase the effectiveness of leadership and management of schools and thereby increase standards of both teaching and the learning and achievement of pupils.

The on-line questionnaire asked: '*Is participating in Talking Heads increasing your effectiveness as a Head Teacher?'*

Talking Heads- findings from the first year pilot

no
18%

yes
82%
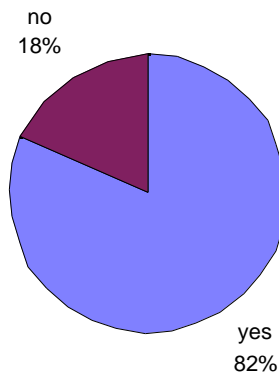
Of the 103 (total respondents 123) Head Teachers who responded 'yes' to the above question, 50 gave an example of how it increased their effectiveness.

Thirty-nine Head Teachers gave an example of gaining access to a wide spectrum of advice/information:

> "G*aining information from others in similar situations regarding the implementation of Curriculum 2000*"

> "G*etting information about performance management, from both the horses mouth and from other heads*"

Eleven Head Teachers gave an example of increased knowledge of/discussing the threshold:

> "M*ore up to date info on Threshold for example. Today reading guidance on how to proceed. I know what are the expectations instead of responding to staff with don't know…*"

> "*Drawing on ideas from threshold discussion to share good practice and pitfalls with other staff*"

One head said that Talking Heads had helped through:

> "*Debating new initiatives and gaining a greater understanding of the implications from fellow heads has enabled me to implement some policies more effectively, by being aware of some of the pitfalls others have faced.*"

The Information Exchange, Discussion and Flow

Talking Heads is not merely a conduit for governmental and official information to be transmitted to Head Teachers. In the survey there were 76 responses to the request to describe any unexpected benefits of participating

Three examples illustrating effective emotional and professional support were:

> *"I got some good advice on-line regarding a tricky parent, plus felt that I was less isolated and that at least someone else could understand the dilemma."*

> *"I asked for advice in writing my SIP and a number of people made very useful suggestions. I now think I have a good SIP."*

> *"I can find things out easily and without thinking it's something I should already know. There are some things you just don't ask county advisors for fear of appearing inadequate."*

The last comment underlines a perception amongst Head Teachers that a secure environment such as Talking Heads provides a safe environment to discuss uncertainties and to access different perspectives. This is picked up by another comment that valued Talking Heads for:

> *"Giving instant access to a range of opinions from professionals with no vested interest."*

And a further stated:

> *"I really enjoy hearing the views of other heads, particularly after national training e.g. threshold and knowing others are in similar positions."*

These comments also suggest that Talking Heads not only impacted upon knowledge but also allowed opinions to be exchanged and thereby impacted on attitudes and values. In a number of instances this has provided valuable opportunities for reflective practice as the following quote further illustrates:

> *"The contact with other people who face similar challenges has been very helpful, but more importantly, I can 'benchmark' my ideas against the opinions of other professionals, and so have a relative measure of how I am doing."*

Flow of Information to teachers.

Some evidence was collected that suggested teachers and governors also benefited from the flow of information via the Head Teacher.

> *"Teachers can ask me questions and if I don't know the answer at least now I can find it out."*

And

> *"I have a greater knowledge and understanding of the latest issues which means I am more able to advise my Governors, staff and other Head colleagues."*

Communication with Policy makers

Appreciation for the timely communication with policy makers was commented on frequently:

> *"I wondered why I hadn't been invited to the Performance training for heads. It was through the DfEE chat on Talking Heads that I learnt that nursery heads would be trained next year. I have not been given that information in any other way."*

Dissemination of research

Another category of information exchange was the dissemination of research:

> *'Communication with other HTs about the research of Shirley Clarke - especially people outside my own immediate area - confirmation of what we are doing successfully in my school."*

Promoting the Use of ICT

Talking Heads and the issuing of a lap top to Head Teachers is explicitly an initiative designed to impact upon the use of ICT in schools. This in its own right is a planned outcome and is also part of the question of improving the effectiveness of leadership and management of schools.

A number of examples were collected of Head Teachers who had developed their own use of ICT:

> *"For the first time ever I made a PowerPoint presentation on Investors in people, using clips from web etc. Very , very impressive INSET for a cluster of schools. Highly effective and it inspired every one there. Mostly-I was able to do this at home…*

> *"I recently attended a training day as a senior member of staff in the LEA Behaviour Support Service. We set ourselves the task of redrafting Referrals, Admissions and Outreach Policy and I was able to DTP the amendments as we discussed them."*

> *"I am now an active advocate of computer use-in fact the change has been unbelievable to those who know me. Rather than avoiding computers if at all possible, I seek uses and particularly value the online support and advice of*

colleagues. What remains significantly is to further my keyboard skills."

Head Teachers were also asked to describe any unexpected benefits. These again emphasized increased use of ICT by Head Teachers:

"I realized how easy online publishing can be without html, so that the school now has a web site."

"I didn't know I was going to increase my ICT skills to the extent that I have in such areas as being able to drop graphics into articles and send attachments with notes."

Productivity and the laptop

One way in which effectiveness was increased by having the laptop was explored by one comment (although perhaps not all Head Teachers would agree that this is a benefit):

"I take work home from the office to complete, work on at home. From letters to target setting to ...I even take it in the car on long boring journeys to catch up at the weekend. How sad is this?"

Towards community

The exchange of information, discussion and support for implementation were key ingredients which supported the claim that Talking Heads has a positive effect on the effectiveness of Head Teachers and schools. However, there was considerable evidence that Head Teachers also benefited from effects within the emotional domain including; reducing isolation, building confidence, and morale boosting.

Reducing Isolation

Of the 122 Head Teachers teachers who responded to the quantitative question asking whether participating in Talking Heads was reducing isolation, 52 reported that this was signficant. As one elaborated:

"Communicating with others in dark moments."

And,

"Reducing that awful feeling of isolation Heads can feel, what an inspiration and comfort to know there are others 'out there' feeling and worrying and thinking the same."

Morale Boosting.

OfSTED, morale boosting of staff ideas, and sharing ideas on Threshold assessment were also frequently mentioned:

> *"Hearing that other people have similar problems, are*
> *weighed down by paperwork. It makes me feel that*
> *perhaps it is not just me being useless!!"*

Another added:

> "*I am becoming more confident in my decisions through*
> *discussions on talking heads, such as TA, making me*
> *realise I'm not the only one feeling as I do sometimes."*

The affective domain is as important as the transmission of knowledge and ideas in building the foundation for the supportive community of practice we aspire to.

Community (in the sense of belonging).
"It must never stop, it gets better all the time."

And

"Its small community feeling all have incredibly similar experiences. The sense of humour and a realisation that there is more to life than the job."

One measure of 'community' builds upon a sense of identity, relevance and a sense of belonging to something that is worthwhile. Hence some Head Teacher comments towards the end of the pilot included;

> *"I would like to see the communities already set up continue so*
> *that as we develop into more experienced heads we can still*
> *support each other and watch each others schools grow*
> *through our own development."*

This sense of ownership and belonging is reflected in the comment:

> *"I think there is a danger that expanding talking heads to*
> *involve too many more will … lose the family feeling*
> *because it will be difficult to get to know people. On the other*
> *hand it seems unfair to restrict it."*

A further sense of ownership of the community is reflected in the notion of 'we' and being involved in a project with others that could grow in size and influence, as in the comments:

> *"We could be really ambitious and extend to an*
> *international community of school leaders. I recently*
> *attended a European Conference in Sweden, which*
> *was really interesting and motivating*."

And

> *"I think Talking heads needs extending to include all head teachers so that eventually it could become a tool for the Government to receive views directly from Head Teachers and to float ideas and receive answers from those who know!"*

The Social Environment

Some Head Teachers valued the social environment of Talking Heads. Four comments were:

> *"I like the social room. A good bit of light relief."*

> *"Contact and e-mail friendship and companionship."*

> *"Meeting interesting people electronically.",*

> *"Discovering a long lost friend is now a newly appointed Head Teacher."*

Discussion

The notion of Communities of Practice is not an easy one to research empirically and although there are signs in our data that we are building such a community we would not argue that we have moved far enough in that direction. Dialogue online, as face to face, is not common. It is generally easier to exchange information and opinions than to generate new understanding, especially when time is short.

Although Talking Heads was identified by many Head Teachers to be a community it could easily be argued that it remains one where the Facilitation Team retain a large degree of control over the structure and activities. It is too early to tell to what extent busy Head Teachers can be expected to take over the running of the communities.

In terms of the interim report our key findings are:

- Laptop provision has greatly boosted the use of ICT and Talking Heads.
- It is easy to underestimate the amount of training and technical support a Head Teacher requires to effectively adopt ICT technology.
- Improving ICT skills was one of the most frequently cited reasons for using Talking Heads.
- Talking Heads provides a compelling context for the use of ICT.
- The facilitation team support was rated highly
- Participants were appreciative of the peer communication the project provided.

- Talking Heads useage can be defined as: need for information, affective support, and professional development. Although we see the need for some of the former, we believe the domain for Talking Heads is primarily the latter two.

The fact that the emphasis was still primarily on the use of ICT is leading us to focus on developing strategies to optimise future professional development and community building through;

- Building consistent needs identification into the project.
- Integrating a professional development model.
- Educating Head Teachers about the use of Talking Heads as a tool to extend their effectiveness online.

Our current research agenda

A large number of questions still remain, and our second year research of the Talking Heads NCSL online project includes:

- The elements for generating successful online professional communities of practice.
- Strategies for empowering Head Teachers to participate, "own", and appropriate online community technologies.
- Strategies for massification whilst keeping community alive.
- Clarifying the elements of effective facilitation in order to roadtest/ pilot alternate models of facilitation with their associated costs.
- Models for the management, quality assurance and CPD of the online facilitation team.

As Talking Heads expands we work to preserve and strengthen the community ethos which is the heart of online community. To this end, we are seeking to identify "champions", ie. Head Teachers or experts who will initiate and co-ordinate a range of topics and Communities of Practice. We are also increasingly focusing on enrolling Head Teachers' natural networks so that Talking Heads can serve to extend on their effectiveness.

Conclusion

Talking Heads is an evolving project based on established and accepted literature and ideas. With the 1200 Head Teachers on this pilot project, we have built the beginnings of a successful on-line community for school leaders. As the NCSL begins to make Talking Heads available to all Head Teachers in England and beyond, we need to refine our strategies and practice to support the growing numbers so that the pilot members don't lose their "sense of community" and the newcomers who are eager to join and participate are integrated effectively.

So far our research has shown that those Head Teachers who are actively engaged within the Talking Heads on-line community have been able to

communicate in a way that has not previously been open to them, both synchronously, or asynchronously. In so doing, they have been able to develop their leadership knowledge, share good practice and reduce the isolation in which they find themselves by tackling the issues that concern them through discussion and networking and being a part of an on-line community.

This paper is an interim report and as such represents work in progress. We must stress that we are not in possession of all the answers to all the questions that have been raised and continue to surface as the project progresses. However we feel that a successful start has been made to a project that has the potential to involve every Head Teacher in the country in a creative network of communities. Heads traditionally isolated by distance and workload will find peer support, shared experience, knowledge, and access to the decision-makers --- at their fingertips.

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