BUILDING COMMUNITIES OF EDUCATORS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract
This paper sets out how the Learning Development Centre at City University London has responded to the challenge of producing a professional development opportunity for staff to engage with a wide range of educational technologies which they can implement in their professional teaching contexts. It explores the Community of Inquiry framework as a model for designing and delivering a Masters level module in Technology Enabled Academic Practice and reports on the experience of staff who have undertaken the module. The paper details some of the assessments and activities which staff undertake as part of the module and demonstrates how this equips them to design pedagogically informed blended programmes of study for their own students. The paper embeds the discussion within the discourse of Generation Y and the digital native–digital immigrant divide and seeks to expose this as to some extent a misleading and false binary in terms of the willingness of staff to engage with new technologies, including some Web 2.0 tools, in their own practice.

Introduction
In the joint report produced by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) called Higher Education in a Web 2.0 World (CICLE, 2009), the authors drew attention to what they described as a digital divide between students and their tutors in their use of leaning technologies. The report identified an urgent need for “professional development in e-pedagogy” (p. 29), noting the “capability divide between tutors” (p. 34) in their use of technologies. The report goes on to encourage the development of “the teacher/tutor” as “a facilitator of learning, designing learning experiences that help students to become self-directed, independent learners” (p. 36). This paper sets out to explore how the Learning Development Centre at City University London is implementing a module on Technology Enabled Academic Practice (TEAP) as part of a post-graduate programme at certificate, diploma, and Master’s levels. It sets out how the university is responding to the challenge set out in the report through the development of a creative online community of university lecturers. The module is embedded in the theoretical framework of Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) and Garrison and Vaughan (2008) and especially the latter’s concept of a Community of Inquiry.
Background to City University London and the Learning Development Centre

City University London is a medium-sized university which focuses on courses for business and the professions. Approximately 40% of the students are international, drawn from 156 countries. In common with other Higher Education Institutions in the United Kingdom responding to profound changes in the external environment in terms of funding, regulation, and accountability, the university is developing its vision to accommodate 21st century learners and has long recognised that this includes the creation of innovative curricula and a strategic learning environment in which learning technologies play a key part.

Purpose and Remit of the Learning Development Centre

The Learning Development Centre at City University London aims to support staff and learners through the creation of new and responsive learning opportunities. It encompasses academic practice, educational development, and technology-enhanced learning. At the core of the Department’s professional development programmes is the Master’s in Academic Practice post-graduate degree. Part of the underpinning philosophy of this degree is to embed the use of relevant technologies in the delivery of all the component modules. Among the important characteristics of the programme is the emphasis it places on peer learning and support. The programme comprises a wide range of modules including learning, teaching, and assessment; student support; curriculum design, the use of technologies in higher education; academic leadership; mentoring; and the undertaking of educational research. Since 2010 a new technology-enabled route through the programme has been accredited by the Higher Education Academy of the United Kingdom. Students in the programme who pass the 30-credit module on Technology Enabled Academic Practice (TEAP) and a 15-credit module on Information and Communications Technology in Higher Education are awarded the Master’s in Academic Practice (Technology-Enabled). This new route has been developed partly in recognition that, as a recent publication by the Joint Information Systems Committee remarks, “Learning technology is set to change both the prevailing teaching paradigm and the academic role” (JISC, 2010, p. 4).

Of course there is still much debate about how and to what extent the teaching paradigm is changing and what impact this is having on the traditional role of the academic. A popular trope in the literature on staff development in recent years has been to highlight the differences between learners and their teachers in terms of their facility in the use of technologies (Bayne & Ross, 2007), especially those technologies loosely collected under the broad term Web 2.0. The binary opposition which is asserted to exist between Generation Y, or the Net Generation (Net Gen), (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005) and their teachers has been described as contributing to a form of academic moral panic (Bennett, Maton, & Kervin, 2008) where academics feel pressured to change the way they
construct learning opportunities to accommodate changing student learning styles, which are themselves determined in large measure through their engagement with the suite of new learning technologies. The assumption, popularised in recent books such as Carr’s *The Shallows: How the Internet Changes the Way We Read, Think and Remember* (2010), is that Net Gen learners learn differently because their use of digital tools is, in effect, rewiring their brains. New theories of learning such as connectivism are proposed to explain and describe the radical transformations which, it is claimed, the affordances of digital technologies are producing in Generation Y learners. Siemens and Downes, authors of this new theory, argue that “millennial learners” needs are not sufficiently being met by traditional training models of instruction, information growth has necessitated new means by which to navigate and filter the information that is available, and advancing technologies are increasingly enabling learners to connect to one another and to knowledge networks of their own making” (2008b, p. 7, quoted in Kop & Hill 2009). However, as Kop and Hill have observed, “Connectivism is lacking an extensive body of empirical research literature to lend it support.” Nevertheless, Kerr (2007) and others have argued a “radical discontinuity” is developing in the production, distribution, and consumption of knowledge which has arisen because of: a) the impact of new technologies; and b) the networks and communities of practice and interest which extend beyond the traditional boundaries of formal education whose development is accelerated in the digital world.

The task for the Learning Development Centre has been to develop a programme which will engage staff with learning technologies and to provide them with the skills to respond effectively to the challenge of this emerging paradigm shift. What follows is in the form of a case study, offering a model which combines pedagogic principles embedded in the latest research in learning theory and design, with practical application of skills and knowledge which both earn credit as part of a Master’s in Academic Practice programme as well as facilitating the development of a community of blended learning practitioners. The combination of a credit-bearing award and a practical project to implement in the professional context offers a clear motivation for time-poor staff who want to engage with new approaches to teaching and learning, yet have to balance the time required for professional development in this area with the competing demands of the modern university career. The enthusiastic engagement of staff in acquiring the skills required to employ these new technologies suggests that the binary opposition mentioned above may be, at the very least, an exaggerated view of the divide between generation Y students and their teachers.

**Technology Enabled Academic Practice Design**

In designing the Technology Enabled Academic Practice (TEAP) module, the team have been mindful of the need to create a learning opportunity which offers both practical and academic support for a wide range of staff whose levels of technological confidence varies. Also, it has been important to design a curriculum which allows the flexibility to
meet the needs of a diverse staff working in a range of contexts. In terms of induction, assessment, support, and duration the module is developed on a different pattern from the traditional Master’s level modules delivered elsewhere in the programme. Building on a previous post-graduate certificate in Online Tutoring delivered by the Learning Development Centre, the TEAP module reflects some features of the Community of Inquiry framework first developed by Garrison et al. (2000). As Shea and Bidjerano (2008) observe, this framework “focuses on the intentional development of an online learning community with an emphasis on instructional conversations that are likely to lead to epistemic engagement” (p. 544). Although the majority of programmes delivered by staff at City University are based on a face-to-face model, there is a rapidly growing use of blended learning, with considerable variation in the balance of online learning and face-to-face contact. In terms of the design of learning activities and assessments the TEAP module seeks to support and enable students to develop pedagogic approaches and implementation of learning technologies which are appropriate for — and relevant to — their own professional contexts.

How does the module facilitate these goals? To begin with, the students are introduced to a range of learning technologies during a two-day face-to-face induction. These include learning to access and use a Virtual Learning Environment, posting messages to a discussion forum, setting up a blog in an e-portfolio system, setting up a social bookmarking account, joining a social bookmarking group and participating in an online video conference. The blogs are set up so that students can keep their reflections on their progress and learning throughout the module. Their entries can be either private, or shared with their classmates and colleagues as well as the module leaders. In this way they are introduced to the potential collaborative aspects of blogging as well as developing confidence in a technology many of them have not used extensively or in some cases even encountered. Follow-up sessions on using these technologies are made available for staff who ask for them once the induction is over. Additionally, the class is introduced to some of the pedagogic principles which frame the module through an introduction to the first two units: Building Learning Communities, and Learning and Teaching models in Technology-enabled Environments. Students are introduced to the social, cognitive, and teaching presence model which informs the Community of Inquiry (CoI) as developed by Garrison et al. (2000) and Garrison and Vaughan (2008). The activities related to these units, which form the basis of the learning over the following ten weeks, reflect a social constructivist approach to learning and aim at first to build a social presence. As Garrison and Vaughan (2008) argue, “Establishing social presence is a primary concern at the outset of creating a community of inquiry” (p. 21). The small scale summative assessments (for example posting to a discussion board, producing a collaborative wiki, or participating in an online debate) which are associated with these units invite the students to share and comment on each other’s experience of online communities and their posted summaries of a pedagogic theory, concept, or approach. The remaining units follow sequentially, with seven weeks allocated for each unit, all of which are conducted online, through a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous activities.
By encouraging the students to collaborate in this way, the class is building on the social presence which was established at the face-to-face induction, as well as the ice-breaker exercises which were started there and carried on in the Virtual Learning Environment. The ice-breaker exercises include the opportunity for students to share a profile, interests, and their teaching or professional context. These are subsequently displayed in a Wordle which introduces the students to new ways of displaying information. This social, collaborative aspect is further developed by the sharing of resources through the social bookmarking activity and assessment which is completed mid-way through the module (currently using the Diigo tool, previously it was de.li.cious). Here, students are required to curate a collection of resources and to comment on other resources collected by other members of the class. The assessment requires students to develop a social bookmarking network and to explore non-mainstream resources alongside more traditional resources. The kinds of resources collected reflect the specific interests of the individual student and are normally related to their final assessment. Thus, during the induction the students are introduced to the concept of a folksonomy\(^1\) and are able to explore how they might use it in their own teaching context. Some of the staff have subsequently incorporated this kind of activity into their own modules delivered at both under- and post-graduate levels. In this way the students (who are drawn from a range of academic disciplines and professional services) are able to understand and share ideas and approaches to teaching and learning which span diverse contexts and professional practices, and are able to familiarise themselves with the benefits of this social media tool.

At the end of each of the six units which comprise the TEAP module the students are invited to reflect on their learning through posting to their e-portfolio or reflective blog. Unit three of the module has an explicit focus on reflection as a core component of learning and continuing professional development, and materials and theories on reflection are made available to scaffold the learning on this topic. As part of the overall assessment, two of these reflections are selected by the student to be put forward for assessment. This constructive reflection, together with the collaboration and exchange of ideas, information and resources developed through all the units, underpin the cognitive presence on the module. Whether constructing a wiki or contributing to an online debate or video conference discussion, the students are engaged in “purposeful discourse to collaboratively construct, critically reflect and confirm understanding” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 21). Application of the principles and theories underpinning instructional design, e-assessment and evaluation are all captured in the final project.

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\(^1\) Folksonomy is the result of personal free tagging of information and objects (anything with a URL) for one's own retrieval. The tagging is done in a social environment (usually shared and open to others). Folksonomy is created from the act of tagging by the person consuming the information. [http://vanderwal.net/folksonomy.html](http://vanderwal.net/folksonomy.html)
where students can choose to develop an artefact, learning object, module or other use of learning technology appropriate for their own professional context. This assessed project, which also includes a reflective account which demonstrates how the learning on the module has been applied to the final product, counts for 50% of the overall assessment. As indicated above, the projects which have been produced by students on this module have deployed a wide range of technologies to support a variety of blended learning models.

The third component of the CoI model, teaching presence, is developed in part through the design of the module. The assessed activities which accompany each unit are intended to give the learners the experience of being online students through introducing a range of learning technologies and activity and assessment types. The module team also facilitate these activities through weaving commentary in online discussions and providing a meta-narrative and summary of each activity, both through asynchronous postings and synchronous video conferences which are timed to coincide with the end of each unit of study. Those unable to participate in the video conference are able to access a recording of the session posted to the Virtual Learning Environment. Each member of the module team offers their personal tutees support for their learning and formative feedback on their projects. In these ways teaching presence is maintained at both the class and individual level throughout the duration of the module.

**Technology Enabled Academic Practice Evaluation**

In terms of learning outcomes, the major focus of the module design and assessment is to equip the students with the skills they need to design and implement the use of learning technology in their own teaching and learning contexts. Thus far, the cohorts who have taken the module have been comprised of academic staff drawn from several disciplines as well as Learning Technology and Information Professionals. The interaction between these groups and individuals, each of which is able to contribute a specific domain expertise to the class, has been one of the unanticipated benefits of the development of a learning community, and networks and contacts have been developed between the students which extend beyond the lifetime of the module. Information exchange, whether on appropriate pedagogic models, assessment types, affordances of learning technologies and instructional design principles, is fundamental to the development of a Community of Inquiry, and the module has rich examples on each of these areas. Some of this is captured in the end-of-module evaluation which is collected and analysed in order to inform the design of the next iteration of the module.

On the end-of-module evaluation students were asked to indicate one thing they will use or implement in their practice as a result of this module. Among the comments received the following illustrate some of the benefits which students have identified as a result of completing the module:
Use of Moodle in academic practice which will entail use of discussion forums, wikis, quizzes etc.

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I will continue to use my project in my workplace. Provided new insight into the use of technology in education.

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My Project which incorporated a new method to related/link online content.

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I have learned a lot about VLEs and in particular I have learned how to use delicious, Pebblepad (a personal learning environment), learned about avatars, and set up and run with help a virtual action learning set.

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I have learned a lot and moved my technical ability forward in giant steps.

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I will be encouraging a social bookmarking tool.

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I think I would like to try to use most of the technologies in my practice that I have learned on TEAP

The students' reflections on their development are captured in their reflective blogs and provide rich information on how they intend on applying their learning to their professional context. One of the students has given permission for a sample of the reflective blog to be shared:

I am very pleased with how I have engaged with this module and believe that I have managed to integrate all of the knowledge and learning that I have gained into the design of the project and this depth of thinking and knowledge has influenced the outcome. Undertaking this module has certainly helped to raise my confidence in my own ability to incorporate more technology into my teaching approach and to create more technology-oriented teaching aids. It definitely helped me to get ideas both online teaching and sometimes class environment as well and I have already started adopting / adapting these new ideas in my practice and I will continue to do so as well. I have just undertaken a brief 'interim' evaluation of the MSc module I used as a vehicle for my project and the students were very positive about the approach. I still find it hard to believe that I have managed to run a module using a blended learning approach when in January I had not heard of most of the technology enabled approaches used. I hope to stay engaged with the new community of educationalists and co-learners I have developed whilst on the module. The knowledge I have gained in respect of blended learning is going to be a fundamental tool for taking forward my professional practice and developing a form of course delivery that meets the needs of busy students whose learning forms part of their own professional practice.
However, the feedback for the first iteration of TEAP was not uniformly positive; one common criticism of the initial course design and assessment is that students felt overworked and over assessed. This in itself is a useful learning point for staff intending to introduce blended learning in their own contexts and has led to a change in the balance of activity and assessment in the second iteration of this module in 2011. One significant change in the assessment is the awarding of marks for participation in topic activities. This is in recognition of the amount of time and effort students spend in researching and writing their posts to the discussion forums. This was a difficult decision to make. As Garrison and Vaughan (2008) note, grading of online discussions “...provides incentives to participate. . .The downside is that you are providing extrinsic reinforcement to what should be an intrinsic academically reinforcing activity” (p. 101). The grading of online discussions also risks changing the nature of the discussion as students may just do what is required in order to pass (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). We have used this dilemma of grading as a question for the students to debate when they are discussing motivations for building online communities.

It is widely recognised that in order to meet the growing demands of students for more flexible learning opportunities Higher Education Institutions must engage with learning technologies and as a recent report produced for the Higher Education Funding Council states: “Training and development should be realigned to enable the academic community to play a leading role in online learning” (Recommendation 5. Collaborate to Compete, Report to HEFCE by the Online Learning Taskforce, January 2011). This realignment represents a significant challenge for staff development where the goal is to achieve organisational and cultural change in order to transform learning and teaching practice. The work undertaken on the TEAP module described above, which brings together academic staff and learning technologists in a programme of study, is one way City University London is responding to the challenge. Although this is only one part of the initiatives undertaken at City to achieve this, it is an important one because it affects student learning, models innovative practice, keeps abreast of current theory and practice, and helps to establish, develop and sustain a Community of Inquiry.

Further research on TEAP will develop instruments and methodologies to cover aspects such as balance between the three types of presence (social, cognitive, and teaching), the role of the online tutor in facilitating engagement with learning technologies by academic and professional staff, the impact on academic identity of staff engagement with learning technology in the ways they conceptualise learning and design curricula and its impact on their students. The enthusiasm which staff have demonstrated in their feedback on this module, as well as the projects which they have produced and implemented in their own contexts, suggest that staff can readily see the benefits of engaging with a wide range of educational technologies.

References


Neal Sumner has worked in the area of technology enabled teaching and learning since 1999. His current post is Senior Lecturer in Educational Development at City University London, specializing in staff development, the impact of learning technologies on organisations and changing academic identities. He has published research on organisational change and technology, online communities, e-portfolios and the personalisation of learning. He also works as an Associate Lecturer in the Arts Faculty of the Open University.