

Συνέδρια της Ελληνικής Επιστημονικής Ένωσης Τεχνολογιών Πληροφορίας & Επικοινωνιών στην Εκπαίδευση

Τόμ. 1 (2010)

7ο Πανελλήνιο Συνέδριο ΕΤΠΕ «Οι ΤΠΕ στην Εκπαίδευση»



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Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Preston, C. (2023). ‘Unconferences’: from practice to praxis in informal professional learning contexts. *Συνέδρια της Ελληνικής Επιστημονικής Ένωσης Τεχνολογιών Πληροφορίας & Επικοινωνιών στην Εκπαίδευση*, 1, 005–011. ανακτήθηκε από <https://eproceedings.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/cetpe/article/view/5079>

‘Unconferences’: from practice to praxis in informal professional learning contexts

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Abstract

This paper presents a developmental project focusing on the ‘unconference’, a generic term for informal virtual meetings used in Continuing Professional Development (CPD) events. In an ‘unconference’ the learning agenda is decided at the grassroots of the education profession: the power relationships in traditional conferences between expert speakers and learners are destabilised. Teachers in England have led the development of two kinds of ‘unconference’: the TeachMeet that concentrates on the craft of the practitioner and the international MirandaMod, a themed unconference that encourages a focus on ‘praxis’ - the melding of learning theory, pedagogy and practice. This paper investigates the MirandaMod model that reflects the complex, social, intellectual and practical process of professional learning and facilitates this under three headings: the opportunities for teachers to record changes in their beliefs and understandings in relation to changing practice and developing skills; the variety of locations and modes that reflect different cultural contexts for learning; and, the potential for professionals to re-evaluate their identity in relationship to their role and their pedagogical observations. MirandaMods also enriches social learning over time when face-to-face meetings are limited because of economic restraints.

Keywords: unconference, professional learning, social interaction

Introduction

This paper describes a developmental project that concentrates on observing an informal mode of professional learning called the ‘unconference’. The term ‘unconference’, the subject of this development project, is a generic term for virtual meetings between professionals: in this case, educators. The term refers to the design of an online forum that challenges the power relationships in a conventional conference. These unconferences often take place simultaneously face-to-face and online. This approach has recently been adopted by professional educators in TeachMeet form (wiki.scotedublogs.org.uk) designed in order to promote a focus on the teachers’ knowledge and craft rather than on theory and abstraction. MirandaMods (www.mirandamods.ac.uk) are a complementary form of themed unconference that creates the conditions for new thinking to take place. Freire (1970-2000) described this change as ‘praxis’: the moment when the professional sees the relationship between theory and practice for themselves. Praxis is a high-level mode of professional operation where the practitioner possesses not only skills but also deep knowledge and understanding of the theories that underpin practice. This can lead to a profound change in the professional’s sense of identity - that is the aim of the best professional development.

Pedagogical models underpinning CPD

The underlying pedagogical mode of the traditional professional conference is 'information transmission'. This popular phrase is used to denote the communication of expert knowledge that is one way only. Chandler (1994) complains that the information transmission model assumes communicators are isolated individuals. No allowance is made for differing purposes, differing interpretations, unequal power relations and situational contexts. The traditional role of expert educators around the world is to pass on their expertise to students who learn this information and reproduce it for examinations and tests without necessarily processing it to change their practice.

The 'unconference' model eschews this approach to learning in favour of demanding that all the participants are actively engaged in generating knowledge and knowledge exchange. In this innovative mode of professional learning the traditional power relationships between the expert and the learner are unbalanced. The underlying pedagogical approaches 'social interaction' promoted by Lave and Wenger (1991; 1998; 1999; 2002; 2004) in the development of the *Community of Practice (CoP)* concept over nearly two decades. These are groups of professionals who chose to learn together informally. Thus two related theories expand Wenger's vision about CoP practices: Communal Constructivism and Braided Learning. Communal Constructivism emphasises teachers' knowledge building role as they work together often across national boundaries (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Holmes, Tangney et al., 2001; Leask & Younie, 2001; Wenger et al., 2002; Leask & Younie, 2002). This 'social interaction' approach to learning picks up on Freire's notion of the wider value of collaborative learning in social and cultural contexts for professionals who want to take charge of their own agenda. One of the approaches to ICT CPD recommended by the Landscape Review is a greater concentration on the role of groups of professionals who meet informally to exchange the theories and practices (Daly et al., 2009).

As CoPs become e-mature, an interesting form of social learning emerges that is underpinned by the use of technologies. Salmon (2002) has analysed the five steps of learning that take place when a course is run online: access and motivation; online socialisation; information exchange; knowledge construction; and development. Salmon complains that the knowledge construction stage tends not to happen because students write their essays in isolation. It would be fruitful in the development stage, the fifth step, if they came back to the classroom and shared collaboratively what has been learnt in their individual studies in order to gain new insights into learning together. This rarely happens because students begin new modules at this stage in new groupings.

Braided Learning theory (Haythornthwaite, 2007; Preston, 2008) picks up on the individual learning in Salmon's step four and then considers how the development step, five, might be an activity like an unconference that is collaborative, community-focused and voluntary. This contrasts with the activity of a group of individual learners moving towards accreditation on a formal course. Braided learning is an emergent theory that is tracing how this kind of informal dynamic knowledge creation works in a collaborative online context. Braided learning refers to a meaning-making process that is emerging from the observation of online communication. Cuthell has traced the development of students' collaborative knowledge sharing in detail in a MirandaNet online course on e-facilitation in a virtual learning environment (2005). The second braided learning study looked at the productive use of email texts and e-facilitation processes (Preston, 2007). In this third study, undertaken as communities of professionals mature in digital competence, the 'unconference' has become a crucible where social learning can find expression using virtual meeting software

transcripts, i-chat, remote multi-authored digital concept mapping, microblogging and video streaming. The resource can be found here: www.mirandanet.ac.uk/mirandamods.

Originally MirandaNet members have been engaged in observing the email discussions taking place in professional CoPs, ITTE (www.itte.org.uk), Naace (www.naace.org.uk) and MirandaNet (www.mirandanet.ac.uk). Members' uses of email have indicated how online professional learning is orchestrated by the members of the CoP in accordance with their own agenda (Preston, 2007; Preston & Cuthell, 2009a; 2009b). In this paper, the second in the series, the MirandaMod is the focus. The MirandaMod, extends the opportunities for collaborative learning practised in a Community of Practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

MirandaMod format

In brief, a themed *MirandaMod* is an occasion when like-minded educators aim to explore an emerging professional issue and create new knowledge collaboratively. This knowledge is then disseminated through the website in order to inspire new grassroots practice.

MirandaNet members define the MirandaMod on their website as an informal, loosely structured unconference of like-minded educators sharing ideas about the use of technology to inspire others. Historically the word 'Mod' that was offered by a Scottish member comes from the Gaelic word for a gathering, assembly or parliament. MirandaMod is usually (but not always) a fringe event following or attached to a formal MirandaNet seminar/workshop or meeting. The wiki-based format, together with streamed webcasts, chat facilities and linked Twitter streams, means that there is an international dimension to these events. Like wikis, blogs, chat and email, this online multimodal communication is unlike previous modes of knowledge construction because remote participation reduces time and cost commitments. In these unstructured activities software such as Flash Meeting linked to microblogging and instant communication streams empowers digital visitors to engage remotely with those at the terrestrial meetings, even to the point of placing a convivial pint of beer next to their terminal like those who are meeting face to face. The virtual world, Second Life, is also being considered as a welcoming MirandaMod location.

These creators of the MirandaMod programme, as well as the participants, value the mix of perspectives at the meetings. Some of them are also members of Naace, or ITTE, or TeachMeet, or all three; many are enthusiastic Twitterers. They have engaged in a variety of experiments with 'unconference' models in relationship to the topic, the location and the technology available. The MirandaMod format is constantly being adjusted according to the topic.

Typically a conventional seminar might take place from 14:00 to 17:00 hours at the 'home' of MirandaNet, the WLE Institute of Education, University of London. Some well-known experts are given thirty minutes to talk about their subject at length followed by questions. The MirandaMod about educational games covered different perspectives on games in education by researchers, teachers, teacher educators and games developers.

The room is organised without a speakers' platform in a Miranda seminar. Speakers and participants sit round a table facing each other so that the barriers between speakers and their listeners are broken down and the participants can look each other in the eye and see reactions. All participants are also invited to introduce themselves, whereas speakers in conferences often do not ask their audience who they are: sometimes because the audience is too big, sometimes because they are keener to talk than to learn. The MirandaNet seminar will be filmed and hosted on the MirandaNet website provided there are funds to do this. In this way international and national members who could not be in London can still learn from the topics.

In planning the programme complex decisions by the team have to be made that take account of what is topical, who is available to lead the sessions and what technology is appropriate. 'Low cost and no frills' is the norm; speakers are asked to give their time free. So this early seminar and the MirandaMod are free to anyone who has an interest. Supper follows; it is sponsored by companies and by government agency supporters and the WLE Centre where the London MirandaMods are held and continues from 17:00 – 18:30. During the supper some of the audience leave and others stay; some go shopping for books and return. More participants appear for the MirandaMod who could not attend the afternoon session; these are members of MirandaNet as well as staff and students at the host university, members of ITTE, Nacce and attendees at TeachMeet. Where possible MirandaMods are held in school holidays or on a Friday evening so practising teachers have a chance of attending. Obtaining support cover for teachers in classrooms is increasingly difficult. The 'expert' seminar speakers are expected to stay on as well to contribute to the more relaxed MirandaMod. Speakers are invited to see this as an opportunity to learn from the participants as well as contribute.

MirandaMods, lasting from about 18:30–21:00, are open to all students and teachers from the Institute of Education, University of London, MirandaNet and other appropriate professional groups. The full programme for 2009/2010 and the full resources can be accessed on www.mirandanet.ac.uk/mirandamods. Speakers and participants are asked to make their materials freely available and the collaborative maps prove to be a good place for useful but less obvious resources to be posted.

All the iChat text, video stream and Twitter feeds are then posted in the MirandaNet Third Space so that those who could not participate have a record of proceedings. Currently this material is also being used for research in order to develop the Braided Learning framework more comprehensively.

In specific terms, participants elect to present for 2 minutes or 7 minutes on the theme of the session. The use of standard presentation software like Powerpoint is discouraged in order to minimise the possibility of didactic presentations, and to empower engagement with colleagues. On the evening the order of speakers is random. Time factors may prevent some from speaking depending on the incidental discussions that evolve about the presentations. The international dimension is made possible by the use of wikis, FlashMeeting, real time video streams, iChat and a Twitter stream– all of which are embedded in a Second Life seminar space. The last half hour of the MirandaMod and time afterwards will be taken up by the collaborative creation of an online multi-authored concept map that will outline the group judgments that have been made on the topic under debate. These maps will form the basis of the professional distribution of knowledge and the reports.

The findings: achieving praxis

The evidence for changes in praxis was divided under the key characteristics of an effective ICT CPD programme design described in the Landscape review (Daly, Pachler & Pelletier, 2009) that reflects the complex, social, intellectual and practical process of professional learning. The conclusions have been grouped under three headings.

Under the first heading *'the opportunities for teachers to record changes in their beliefs and understandings in relation to changing practice and developing skills'*, there are several observations:

- The MirandaMod is proving valuable in the creation of professional knowledge as opposed to socialising online. This instant communication between work-based experts is a valuable mode for professional learning, where all the participants define the agenda before and during the event.
- In particular, a MirandaMod programme addresses some of the issues raised in the Becta reports on the UK ICT landscape. Firstly the emphasis on intellectual debate about digital technologies emphasises a deep understanding and application of skills to developing learning and teaching rather than just a discussion of skills. Additionally teachers' knowledge and craft are recognised instead of relying on a crude estimate of their skills.
- Teachers at any level are sharing in a MirandaMod the development of an appropriate 'vision' focused on pedagogy. Even if their own focus is skills, other participants can open minds to other perspectives. The teacher development aspect is a given in the information experience that they have.

Under the second heading '*a variety of locations and modes that reflect different cultural contexts for learning*' are these observations:

- Because PowerPoint is discouraged each participant has to think hard about less linear ways of presenting information and greater use of multimodal forms of presentation. Persuasion simply through eye contact with the audience is also seen to be powerful in terms of performance.
- The way in which a MirandaMod can be set up means that the costs and time required for conventional CPD do not apply. The teachers are, in effect, teaching themselves. They do not need to meet face-to-face in order to keep up their knowledge. The MirandaMod can help to dissipate the 'policy tensions' that prevent coherent and consistent development of pedagogy using technologies, and that create conflicts over how time and resources are used to embed technologies within schools.
- This knowledge creation activity is important because the technology is sufficiently transparent to empower all members to set the agenda at the grassroots. This mirrors young peoples' mobile learning activity outside school in easy to use virtual environments like ThinkQuest, Beebo and Facebook that allow them to follow their interests and exploits their existing talents.
- Teachers can utilise the attendant resources in any way or time they wish. They can use these resources for self study or to share with peers and pupils. They can also author resources for others which change their perception of their role.

Under the third heading '*potential for professionals to re-evaluate their identity in relationship to their role and their pedagogical observations*' MirandaMods can:

- Encourage democratic debate rather than just promote socialisation.
- Challenge the usual model of conferences for teachers where there is limited interaction, if any, between 'experts' on stage and the experts in the audience. This mix helps teachers to see themselves in the wider professional context and, perhaps, open up interests that they were not aware that they had.
- Challenge the usual model of conferences for teachers where there is limited interaction, if any, between 'experts' on stage and the experts in the audience. In the MirandaMod, professionals have equal input regardless of their differing status in the world of education which challenges their understanding of their identity.
- In questions about revaluating their identity the practitioner participants particularly valued the research input which is not normally available to teachers in classrooms.

They also found contact with researchers and the chance to question them particularly revealing and mind changing.

Conclusions

The MirandaMod is a new mode of professional learning that employs digital technologies in innovative ways to enrich collaborative knowledge creation processes. The main message is that it is the knowledge gathering agenda that should take precedence over the demands of digital technologies.

Five ways have been identified overall that show how MirandaMods have the potential to promote changes in professional praxis through:

- reflection;
- collaboration;
- access to collaborative resources;
- publishing new professional knowledge based on collaboration;
- changing existing frames of thought and patterns of behaviour.

What is probably most important for the future is the extra dimension MirandaMods add to learning by social interaction, especially when the opportunities for professionals to meet face-to-face meetings are reduced because of economic restraints. Costs are not high and investment in this form of ICT CPD may be the only way that many educators have access to professional learning in the years to come.

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