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Building an interdisciplinary 'virtual community of practice': Realistic aspiration or fantasy?

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THE UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND

FACULTY OF EDUCATION

Te Kura Akoranga o Tāmaki Makaurau

Incorporating the Auckland College of Education

Acknowledgments

- Research Grant, Faculty of Education, University of Auckland
- Twenty respondents from three years of the Managing and Developing Performance course, 2005 through 2007
- Summer scholar Christine Harrison-Fletcher, research assistant and co-author

Context

Three year mixed method research project

Learning styles and e-learning: Delivering knowledge and skills for health, human service and social work managers

Participants were enrolled from 2005 to 2007 in a 'flexi' course blending online and F2F block.

The course ('Managing and Developing Performance') was an elective in a graduate professional supervision programme designed for human service, social work and allied health managers and supervisors responsible for frontline staff.

Participant Demographics

- 20 students (52% of potential respondents) completed questionnaires

- 16 students (42%) were interviewed

- Gender breakdown: 90% women, 10% men

- Ethnicities represented
  - European 13 of 20 (65%)
  - Māori 2 of 20 (10%)
  - Pasifika 2 of 20 (10%)
  - Indian 2 of 20 (10%)
  - African 1 of 20 (5%)

Occupational demographics

- 17 professional supervisors/line managers/ professional leaders
- 3 frontline practitioners

Range of organisations

- 8 from the public health sector
- 4 from the non-government/private sector
- 7 from statutory social work agencies

This provided a range of occupational perspectives about online learning.

Aims of the project

1. Determine the utility of participants' learning styles for e-learning

2. Test the hypothesis that reflectors and theorists are particularly suited to e-learning (Downing & Chim, 2004; Salmon, 2004)

Theoretical framework: Learning Styles
(Honey and Mumford, 1992; Kolb, 1984)
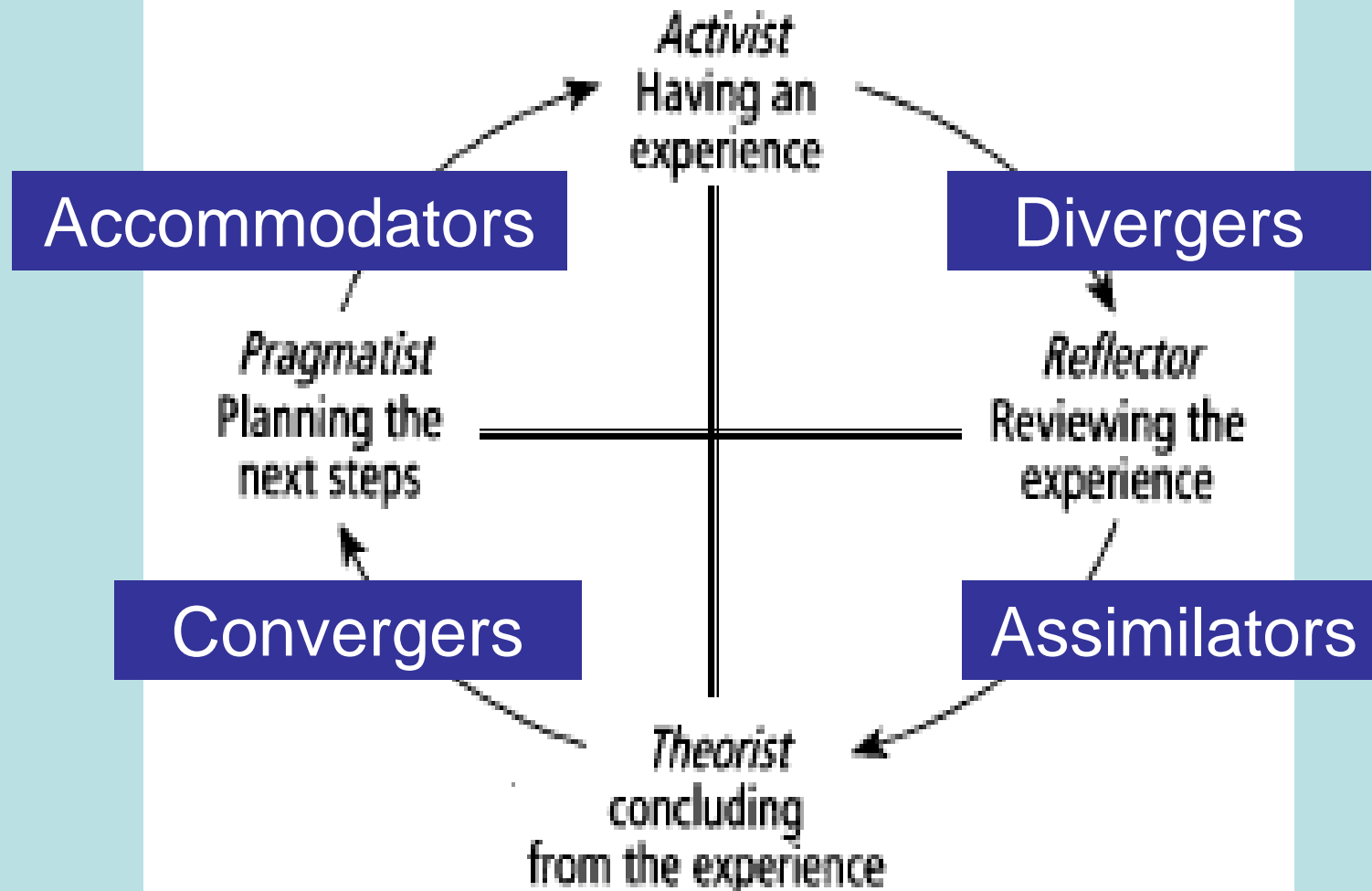
What does the literature say?

Reflectors *probably benefit most [from] online learning. They engage with the learning task with time to think deeply … and give considered responses that synchronicity and conventional classrooms rarely allow.*

Theorists *need sufficient time to explore the links between ideas and situations. As the asynchronous nature of online builds in a time delay … the exploration can occur.* (Salmon, 2004, p.111)

What does the literature say? (cont)

'[We would expect] <u>Reflectors</u> and <u>Theorists</u> to be most suited to online learning, and therefore to produce the highest satisfaction levels.

<u>Activists</u> and <u>Pragmatists</u> might be expected to produce the highest satisfaction levels in the traditional mode of learning.' (Downing & Chim, 2004, p.266)
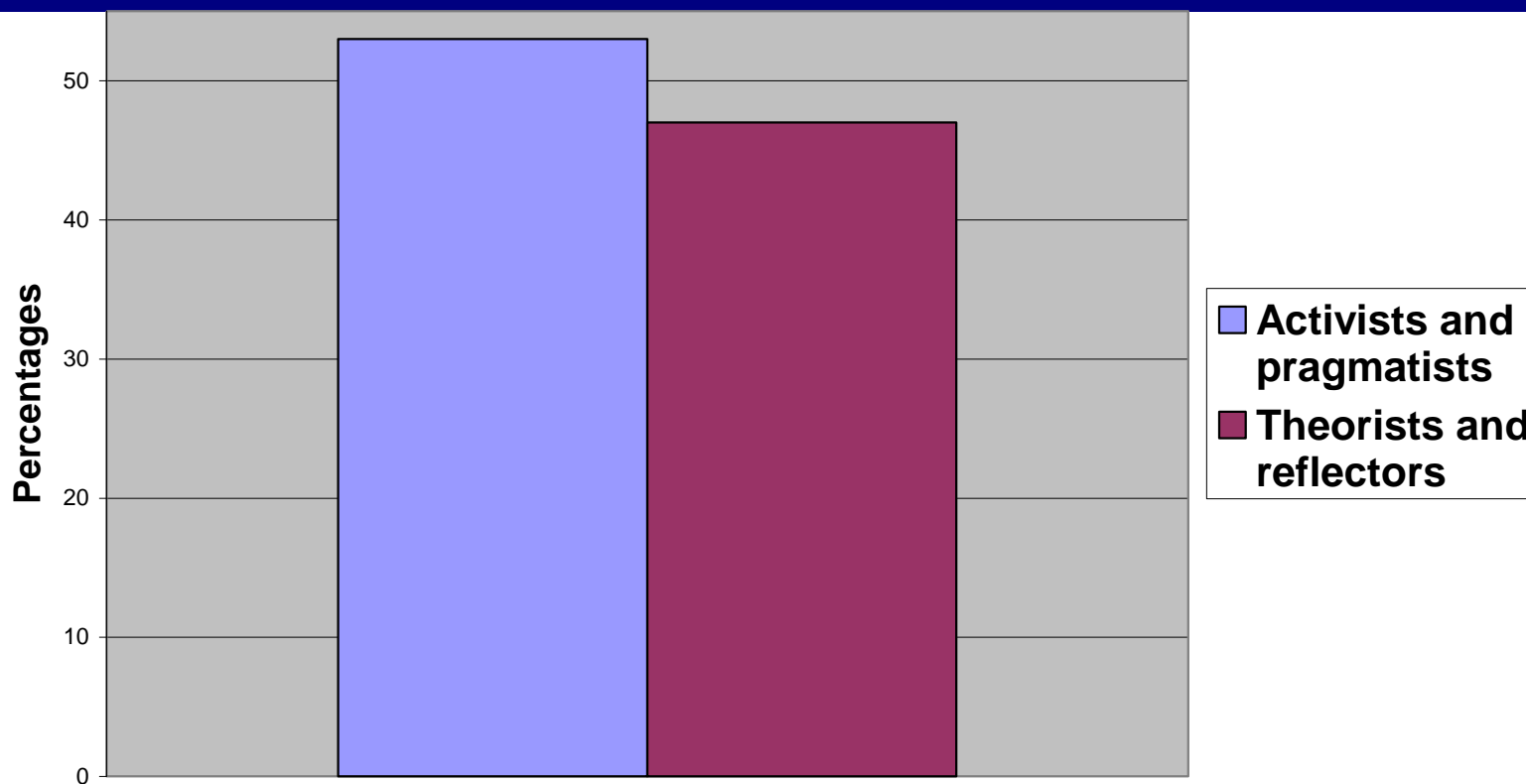
Research aims

1. Determine the utility of participants' learning styles for e-learning

2. Test the hypothesis that reflectors and theorists are particularly suited to e-learning (Downing & Chim, 2004; Salmon, 2004)
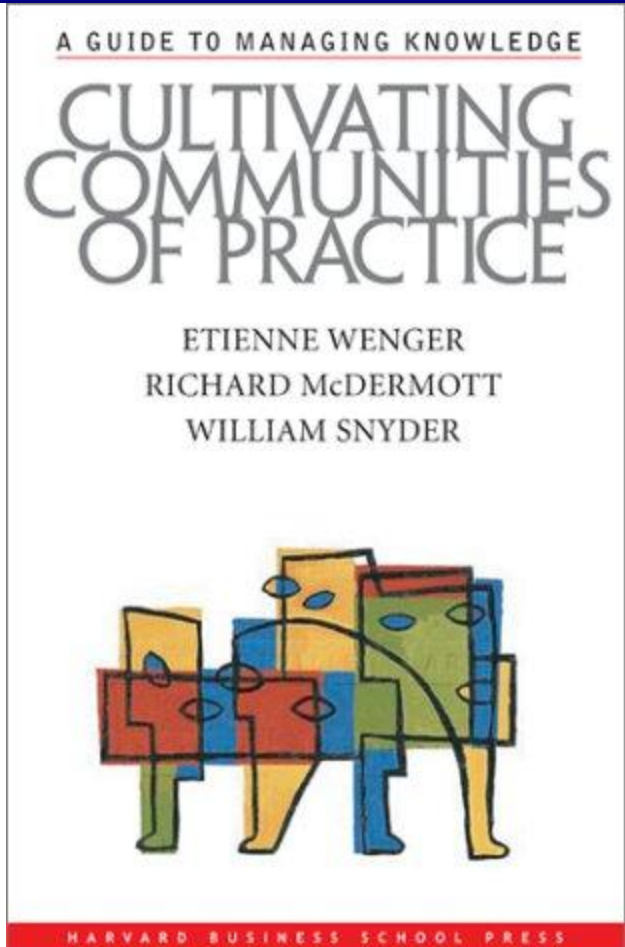
Findings:

1. No clear linkage between learning styles and suitability for e-learning was found

2. The hypothesis that reflectors and theorists are particularly suited to e-learning is not sustained in this research

Embryonic participant attitudes to the 'virtual community of practice'

Development of 'Virtual Communities of Practice' ('VCoP')

(Moore, 2008; Wenger, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002)

A GUIDE TO MANAGING KNOWLEDGE

CULTIVATING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

ETIENNE WENGER
RICHARD McDERMOTT
WILLIAM SNYDER

HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PRESS

CoP: Wenger & Snyder (2000)

'What are communities of practice? In brief, they're groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise [e.g.] front-line managers. Some … are connected primarily by e-mail networks. Inevitably, however, people in communities of practice share their experiences and knowledge in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems.'

Associated terms

'Community of enquiry'
(Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000 as cited in LaMendola, Ballantyne and Daly, 2009)

'Knowledge communities'
(Comerford, 2005; Contu and Willmot, 2003 as cited in Bozalek and Matthews, 2009).

'Online learning communities'
(Moore, 2008)

'Virtual learning communities' ('VLCs')
(Lewis and Allan, 2005)

Characteristics of 'VCoPs' (Moore, 2008)

- Informal membership

- Emerge from existing networks, cross organizational boundaries

- Set own agenda on membership needs

- Member-identified problem solving using formal and informal activities

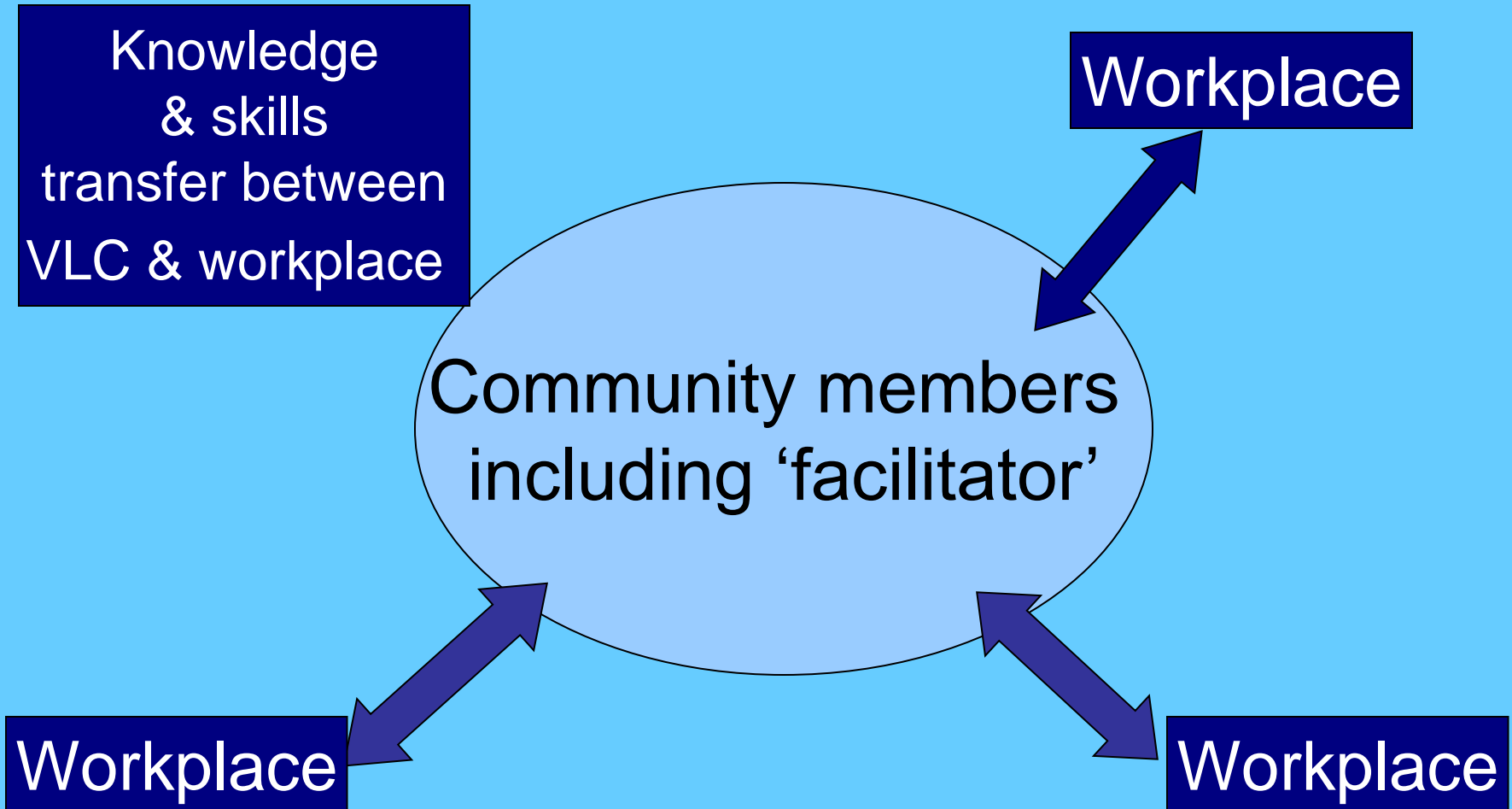- Use interpersonal relationships to develop and build knowledge

CoP 'organizational elements'

Moore (2008) cites Brown and Duguid's (1991) description of three 'organizational elements':

- **'Narration':** 'creating and exchanging stories related to work or practice'

- **'Collaboration':** 'Learning is inseparable from working and individual learning cannot be considered separate from collective learning.'

- **'Social construction'** is integrated with the first two: shared stories express individual views and in turn contribute to the construction and development of the member's own identity

Simple VLC (Lewis and Allan, 2005, p.24)

Knowledge & skills transfer between VLC & workplace

Workplace

Community members including 'facilitator'

Workplace

Workplace

Workplace case study: Performance Management: 2 weeks asynchronous discussion

Purpose:

To raise and discuss a range of issues related to performance management.

Tasks:

1. Create a discussion with your staff: Ask
   - Their expectations of you as their frontline manager
   - What motivates them as individuals to perform well.
2. Complete the section on Performance Management in your Study Guide.
3. In the discussion forum, share the expectations and motivators of the staff in your workplace. How do these compare with the materials in your study guide and readings?

Responses: Semi-structured interviews

A spectrum of comments from diverse:

➢ Occupational roles (including case worker/social worker/allied health practitioner)

➢ Agencies

➢ Learning styles

➢ Ethnicities

What evidence do they give of an interdisciplinary 'virtual community of practice?'

These comments from a NGO health manager with a theorist preference illustrate interaction with other participants as part of a reflective process

'… Being able to talk through with other students … was real life, real time learning for me … I had to make sure I was really clear about what I was saying so that I could get useful information back from them and to hear that they were also facing things that were either new to me or very similar to me and getting more answers was useful …'

The same student substantiated Andrews and Haythornthwaite's (2007) articulation of the need of a 'search for comprehension that issues in transformed knowledge':

'I remember a couple of people who were really diligent in responding to other people's postings and I learned a lot from reading them and then thinking … how can I contribute in a way that adds anything [sic] *rather than just putting in a comment for the sake of it.'*

Need for trust is reflected in these comments by a practitioner with an unusual theorist/reflector/ pragmatist preference:

'…The online interaction didn't really work for me, you lose a bit of motivation and energy.'

Q. What's better about [F2F] than online?

'…You don't just get written information, you … get the person's … body language … whereas online … you're not really sure … if that's their real view … you can't really judge how that person is really going to take it when you can't see them. You get to know them a little bit better and you test the waters a little bit and … you're a little bit more comfortable to … disagree with some of their opinions.'

Issues of trust (Casaló, Flavián & Guinalíu, 2008) and online immediacy are found in these comments by a social work professional supervisor with pragmatist preference :

'I'm an energiser and pragmatist so I need to be in a group environment … A couple of ways … to address the e-learning environment is for … course participants to meet at the very beginning … so you know who your online peers … are going to be. I think for me what would improve it is if there was a certain time where everyone was on line and there was an immediate response to the postings … there is immediacy.'

A NGO social service manager with a pragmatist preference did not engage with the VCoP because of slow typing speed and philosophical perceptions of its irrelevance:

'I don't like … online … by the time you spend time chatting … online it takes hours … If you're a slow typer [sic] *… it can take hours … I didn't like having to … answer someone else's posting … a bit of a waste of time.*

I think the postings [have] very little relevance to the course apart from the student themselves actually researching their answer. Someone else's research you haven't really got time to go through all of those postings.'

The same respondent continued:

Q. How would you compare classroom [with] online interaction?

'Totally different ... I prefer F2F .. What I would value in an online course is that I'm required to put postings in about various objectives in the course .. that would have accountability … sewn into it.'

Q. Accountability to who or what?

'To the course .. the lecturer. To other students, no relevance.'

Q. So the community of learning concept to you was not really relevant?

'Not at all.'

This NGO manager with a reflector/theorist preference clearly engaged with the VCoP:

'It was more positive than … anticipated. Having got past the nervousness of the technology and having met the people in that block course I … enjoyed the learning … In a classroom … I … come up with the first thought that comes in my mind whereas … [in online asynchronous postings] *there's time to …read … reflect … look at it again … come back …with a more informed and reflective … response.*

'I actually missed the interactions with the other students when the web CT closed down. I felt a … sense of loss.'

An activist/pragmatist public sector social work manager also engaged in the VCoP.

Q. 'Did the course stretch you?'

'Oh absolutely … it really did … it really challenged me … it required a lot of input … more so than classroom work, it did challenge me.'

Q. You're talking about the online postings?

'Yes I am. I'd be doing an assignment and then just seeing how other people saw things, just brought so much more into my learning, it really did. I guess it opened me up to other perspectives.'

The facilitator's 'e-presence' was important for this activist/reflector allied health practitioner :

Q. To what extent did frequency of facilitator feedback impact on the course for you?

'I thought where is [the facilitator], are we doing alright? Are we on target? I definitely had anxieties around that … I knew [the facilitator] was there … but I would have been more reassured had there been a little bit of feedback … hey troops how are you doing, any difficulties get in touch with me, am busy but I'm still here.'

Schön's (1983) 'inquiry and feedback' is represented in comments by an activist public sector social work supervisor:

'I got intensely interested in some of the dialogue and I became quite excited that I could log on … to see if someone had replied to something I had posted … I guess it might be with an unexpected pleasure and intellectual engagement for me around the online content … I didn't expect the online conversations to … capture me.

I was totally fascinated ... I thought this is fantastic … people … willingly shared. … I got … information that I may not have been able to access in a classroom … it was much more interesting than I imagined, online.'

Two respondents (one with activist/theorist/ pragmatist preference, the second a reflector) found the virtual community 'off putting:'

'Some people were incredibly academic … I wanted some fast track discussion … I wondered actually with some of the people that were doing this really academic content what am I meant to be doing. It was totally off putting.'

'It left me thinking … how important is my two cents worth … when you read some of that stuff that people wrote. In all honesty the online stuff I just filled it in to fill the requirements of having done it.'

Meaningful participation in a VCoP requires computer skills by students (Waugh & O'Hara, 2008) and navigational ease (Bates, 2005).
The same two respondents (one with activist/theorist/ pragmatist preference, the second a reflector) responded to a clarifying question:
Q. Do I read you right, both of you are saying in part that actually navigating round the Web CT site was quite a disincentive?

'Most definitely.'

A social work professional supervisor with an activist preference had previously participated in a leadership VCoP where members knew each other. Collaborative learning now appeared to be less significant for her:

'What people contribute is … where you connect and spark off each other or disagree … but it's not so important actually to have to know … that person.

… It is also quite good to just see who the lecturer is and meet the other students but … equally in that aspect I think probably doing the whole thing online … would be fine for me.'

A comparable comment was made by this social work professional leader in public health, with pragmatist/activist preferences, suggesting that commitment to the task at hand appeared to override learning style incompatibility with course environment, perhaps reflecting mental toughness:

'… At this [graduate] level you have a responsibility … my expectation was that it is very self-motivated and that if you don't know you ask.'

Preliminary findings

- Engagement or non-engagement in a VCoP runs across learning style preferences

- No evidence emerges to suggest that occupational roles, agency location or ethnicity are determinants of engagement in an interdisciplinary VCoP

- Successful engagement for some respondents required facilitator 'e-presence' and 'immediacy'

Preliminary findings

- For others, trust in fellow participants was a prerequisite for engagement

- Engagement for some respondents was less important than individual achievement in learning

- There is some evidence of Brown and Duguid's (1991) 'narration, collaboration and social construction'

- Technical competence or lack of it can make or break meaningful engagement

Further research suggested

- What is the value of a 'temporary virtual learning community'? ('TVLC') (Lewis and Allan, 2005)

- To what extent is a TVLC able to traverse Wenger *et al's* (2002) 'stages of community development'?

- How can facilitators better connect the educational and workplace components of a VCoP?

- How is trust developed?

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