PEN-I-BEN: AN ONLINE COMMUNITY OF NEWLY APPOINTED HEAD TEACHERS AND THEIR MENTORS IN WALES, UK

Geraint Lang
University of Chester
United Kingdom.

Abstract

Online technology has enhanced anytime anywhere learning, enabling users to pursue their learning away from the more familiar constraints of one physical location, usually confined to a pre-determined time and date. For education professionals it has opened up new possibilities of developing facilitated online communities of practice, where members can share their knowledge and contribute valuable learning to their peers. This paper recounts how one such facilitated online educational community of practice, Pen-i-Ben, which supported newly appointed head teachers and their mentors across Wales for two years, assisted in the reduction of professional isolation and made possible the sharing of good practice.

Introduction

Drawing upon lessons learned from the initial United Kingdom Department for Education-sponsored online pilot project 'Talking Heads' [Guardian] (2000), and its metamorphosis into a resource for all head teachers throughout England, this paper will outline the life history of the development of a unique online community of practice, Pen-i-Ben, supported by the Welsh Assembly Government [WAG] (2002). The paper will remind the reader of Etienne Wenger's (Wenger, 1998) theory relating to communities of practice, which underpinned the development of both Talking Heads and Pen-i-Ben. Reference will also be made to the collaborative work undertaken between the Oracle Corporation and Ultralab [NAEC] (2011) to develop the online software infrastructure (a blend of a VLE and a social media site), and significantly the way in which the Pen-i-Ben project was launched and implemented.

The paper will look at the three most significant outcomes generated from the Pen-i-Ben project [WAG] (2002). These were in the first instance the development of collaborative, participative sub-communities supporting local head teacher development groups, secondly the significant role played by the mentor head teachers in guiding their newly appointed colleagues, and finally the part played by the experienced, specialist facilitators in steering the project. Lastly, the paper will aim to show how both the Pen-i-Ben and Talking Heads projects directly influenced the way subsequent online projects were developed, and facilitated. These included two short initiatives with Scottish Gaelic Educators, the wholly online work-based degree programme

'Ultraversity' [ARU] (2012), and a future project with a group of regionally based UK academies.

Background

By the end of 1999, the work of a team of education advisers, (drawn from senior teachers, school inspectors and education advisers) in introducing school students throughout the United Kingdom to utilising dedicated web space on the Internet, in order to share those students' life reflections and observations at that point in time for all to see, was nearing its conclusion. This ambitious project was known as Tesco Schoolnet 2000 [TSN2K] (2007). Sponsored by the supermarket chain Tesco, IntuitiveMedia and supported by Anglia Ruskin University's Learning Technology Research Department, Ultralab [NAEC] (2007), the project provided the a team of 40 advisers, distributed across the UK, to support schools that had signed up to participate in this project. Each individual student's online contribution, once approved by an adviser, was uploaded to the TSN2K website. The project was showcased within the Millennium Dome, and was simultaneously accessible via the Internet [TSN2K] (2007).

Therefore at the beginning of 2000, and upon completion of the TSN2K project, 12 of the advisory team were recruited by Ultralab on behalf of the Department of Education to develop a unique online resource, known as 'Talking Heads' [Guardian] (2000), for newly appointed head teachers in England. Ultralab reasoned that the now experienced team of TSN2K advisers had built up individual networks of schools in their own regions, and in so doing had not only introduced those schools, their students and staff to using the Internet , but had also brought about an increased familiarity in the specific educational use of this technology amongst school staff (Lang, 2010).

Talking Heads-A Community Of Practice

Initially, Talking Heads was conceived as a 12-month pilot project. It was a password-protected, community of practice (abbreviated to CoP). It took forward Etienne Wenger's theory of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and developed it online for a pilot group of newly appointed head teacher professionals. Talking Heads was an early virtual learning environment and social media website, developed jointly between the Oracle Corporation and Ultralab. The 'content' of Talking Heads was developed by the facilitation team, in conjunction with the head teachers, to provide an online resource of advice, summaries of discussions and dates of events to enhance the complex role of headship and school leadership. The 1200 newly appointed head teachers drawn from across England were enrolled into the pilot project. Its specific aim was to help reduce the isolation often felt by newly appointed school leaders. Each head teacher was supplied with a new laptop, providing them with the flexibility to connect to the Talking Heads website from wherever there was a phone line. Each of the twelve advisers, now known has facilitators, worked with a group of 100 head teachers, inviting each head teacher into the online community. The head teachers were grouped alphabetically, and thus allocated to their specific facilitator. It was reasoned that a head teacher's geographical location in England wasn't important, as all

interactions were to occur either mainly online with others supplemented by telephone. Later findings derived from the Talking Heads project (Lang, 2010) as it evolved from its pilot project phase to become an England-wide resource, revealed that grouping heads by location in the initial stages of their introduction to the online community was more advantageous, a factor that was introduced during the lifespan of Pen-i-Ben, and will be discussed later in this paper.

The Talking Heads pilot project made use of the facilitators' experience working across the different types of schools and age phases, including primary, secondary and special schools, in both rural and urban settings, along with their tacit knowledge of the specific issues associated with those different educational establishments. The facilitation team had also significantly advanced their technical skills whilst working on the TSN2K project, and these skills were fully utilised by the Talking Heads project as the team were able to provide telephone support for the project head teachers. In addition to providing guidance and advice to the head teachers as to how to access the Talking Heads online resource, the facilitation team were able to offer specific and credible professional support to their head teacher colleagues, as each member of the team was an experienced educator. (ibid)

Structurally, Talking Heads was developed jointly between the Oracle Corporation and Ultralab, and was based upon the thin-client based Think.com online environment. It provided the following features:

- A facilitated main discussion area, similar to many current text-based online forums

- Sub-discussion areas

- An electronic post-it note feature which enabled private messages to be sent to individual members.

- Web-based email

- An anonymous posting feature

- Members' personal pages, which included their biographies, including private spaces, the forerunners of online storage space.

- A 'Hotseat' tool-a dedicated, topic-based discussion area for stimulating debate and interaction around a specific professional issue, such as school inspections (ibid).

The facilitation team made much use of the sub-discussion areas, where issues relating to similar types of educational establishments, such as special schools for example, could be more precisely focused upon by head teachers of those schools. Another popular discussion area was the 'Inspection Area', facilitated by two school inspectors from amongst the facilitation team, which provided advice on the necessary preparations needing to be undertaken in advance of an imminent school inspection. Meanwhile the main discussion area served as a forum for all 1200 registered head teachers, where community

announcements were made, links were posted to important events and current popular discussions were highlighted by the facilitation team (ibid).

The significant role played by the facilitator in initially inviting head teachers into the Talking Heads community, ensuring that it was a professionally-enriching and welcoming online space, cannot be overstated. The role has been likened to that of a party host responsible for staging a social event (Lang, 2011), and fundamental in the case of the Talking Heads community of head teachers to maintain their engagement with the online community, drawing them back in regularly such that the online community became a natural stopping off point during their online excursions, recharging them professionally by providing knowledge, resources and fellowship from like-minded professionals (ibid). The Department of Education were sufficiently impressed by the relative success of the Talking Head pilot project that by July 2000, due to above average participation rates for an online community (20-22% per month, Lang, 2010), that they took the decision to expand the pilot into a fully fledged service to be provided to all 24000 head teachers in England. This would coincide with the launch of the National College for School Leadership, a physical and online resource to be located in Nottingham, England, where the Talking Heads online community would form a significant part of the National College's online presence, complementing many of its future activities and events. (Head teachers in the other three countries of the United Kingdom, namely Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales were not included in Talking Heads, as the online resource was funded specifically for head teachers in England only. Russell and Thompson (2002) provided information on the transfer of the Talking Heads model to Scotland and Wales).

Russell (2006) reported retrospectively on the outcomes from staging online events that later occurred within Talking Heads, following its launch as an online resource and facilitated discussion area for all head teachers in England. He compared two online events during the third year of Talking Heads, during 2002 (Russell, 2006). Both events employed lessons learned during the life of Talking Heads by the facilitation team, particularly about drawing in and maintaining participant engagement, which can be summarised as follows:
- Plan at least twice termly focused online discussion events;

- Run a recruitment campaign in order to draw community membership into the discussion;

- Ensure timely event reminders and discussion summaries are posted by the facilitation team to community members, via e-mail and community announcements;

- Acknowledge all contributions, and ensure all queries are answered (ibid).

The Talking Heads facilitation team, as experienced education practitioners, realised that head teachers could not be expected to participate on a daily basis within the online community, due to their daily work commitments. However, targeted online events, specifically focused on topical items or particular challenges common to all in that profession, such as staff retention (Russell,

2006) would provide sufficient interest and stimulate discussion amongst the head teachers to such an extent as to draw them back into the online community. The facilitation team also knew that there were certain times during the school year when head teachers were fully committed to fulfilling in-school events, and that they would have even less time to devote to online community engagement. Russell's (ibid) research confirmed that this particular strategy of staging scheduled online vents increased engagement within Talking Heads.

Russell's research was stimulated by the original use of the 'hotseat' tool listed earlier (Lang, 2010, 2011). This was essentially a dedicated forum that permitted a 200-300 statement to be posted by a guest speaker, along with 2-3 questions directed at their audience. The audience, (the online community of head teachers within Talking Heads) were then able to direct responses and queries to the guest speaker within a strictly limited timeframe (usually two weeks). The facilitation team would ensure that all contributions were acknowledged by the guest speaker, and answered. One of the very first hotseat guests was a particularly popular and well-respected Director of Education for Birmingham, Sir Tim Brighouse, himself an ex-deputy head teacher (Wikipedia, 2012). Throughout the life of Talking Heads, and in its reincarnation as the National College's 'talk2learn' resource for head teachers (NCSL 2010), the hotseat continued to be a popular feature of the online community,

> Talk2learn has provided a powerful way for leaders working in the wider education and children's services system to debate and learn together in online communities. Talk2learn pioneered professional practice in leadership thinking and sharing, enabling all leaders to network and learn from each other. [NCSL] (2010*).*

In response to being asked to comment on the usefulness of Talking Heads, one head teacher stated that the online community's value lay in *"the ability to share problems with colleagues from different parts of the country rather than merely within one's own LEA. It's good to talk - and this can be a very isolating job!"*(Heppell, 2002)

Virtual Heads
In 2002 following an OFSTED report into the provision of head teacher training and their continuous professional development (Ofsted 2002) it was decided to transfer some of the training provision online. This fell within the remit of the Talking Heads facilitation team, who were now fulfilling the role of the online arm for the NCSL. As a direct result of the Ofsted report, the Talking Heads facilitation team based at Ultralab became responsible for developing another professional online community known as 'Virtual Heads' (Chapman, Ramondt & Smiley, 2005). This new online community became the foundation for the new National Professional Qualification for Headship or NP QH. It soon became apparent that the aspiring head teachers who enrolled on the NP QH programme, within the Virtual Heads online community were demonstrating collaborative working and were taking online learning to new levels. Members of the facilitation team were soon involved in expanding the

provision of NP QH online and working within their regions across England to introduce local NPQH providers and aspiring head teachers to the Virtual Heads online community. (ibid)

Pen-i-Ben

Interest in the progress of the Talking Heads online community was being generated in both Wales and Scotland. The author being a Welsh speaker was seconded to the Welsh Assembly Government in order to work alongside an experienced mentor head teacher to develop a bespoke professional online community, specifically for newly appointed head teachers and their mentors across Wales. The online community was called 'Pen-i-Ben', (Welsh for 'head to head'), where the community's name clearly stated the main objective of that community, namely to enable online communication to occur between head teachers across Wales. (WAG, 2000, Russell & Thompson, 2002, Lang, 2010,)

Pen-i-Ben would utilise the same online platform as Talking Heads, but would differ in its purpose in the following ways:

- A fundamental priority of the Pen-i-Ben online community was to provide bilingual provision on behalf of a section of its head teacher members who ran Welsh-medium schools, where Welsh was the language through which learning and teaching took place. In this respect, both facilitators had not only to be natives of Wales, but also had to be fluent in Welsh, and establish Welsh language-only sections within Pen-i-Ben.

- In addition to providing the community membership with illustrated bilingual guides to the software, both facilitators ran a nationwide training programme for the community members. This involved staging daylong courses across Wales held in both English and Welsh to introduce the newly appointed head teachers and their mentors to the online community. By the end of each course, each head teacher had made several contributions to the discussions within the online community.

- Unlike the commencement of Talking Heads, experienced mentor head teachers were invited to join Pen-i-Ben. This provided a distinct boost to the community: not only were the mentors able to contribute valuable insights within the community discussions, but they brought with them an established professional network, which reduced the induction/start-up phase within Pen-i-Ben, compared to the initial start –up phases witnessed by the author when facilitating preliminary discussions in Talking Heads. Those start-up phases were often slow to develop, as the members needed one of their number to initiate the discussion. This was not the case in Pen-i-Ben. (Lang, 2010)

Pen-i-Ben was launched at the inaugural new head teachers' conference in Llandudno in March 2002. The initial face-to-face training courses mentioned began shortly afterwards, and were invaluable for both the facilitators on the one hand, and the head teachers and their mentors on the other hand, not only

in providing valuable introductions to the online software, but in establishing working relationships between the facilitators and the head teachers. Although Pen-i-Ben and Talking Heads were aimed at eliminating the need for head teachers to travel to various locations in order to receive training and support, the author found that making initial contact with Pen-i-Ben community members established an initial and lasting bond between all parties. That bond was also strengthened when training was staged within the area of a local cluster of schools, within a defined local authority district in Wales. Earlier in this paper it was mentioned that during the early stages of Talking Heads head teachers were grouped alphabetically and not by region or locality. During the Pen-i-Ben project distinct regional and local subgroups were formed online to support the initial face-to-face training. This practice mirrored the direction being taken at the time with some head teacher development groups in Talking Heads. This development was known as 'Local Working Groups' (ibid).

Local Working Groups In Pen-I-Ben
A successful mechanism in maintaining regular online engagement within Talking Heads and simultaneously establishing the online community as a valuable resource for the head teachers, (thus enticing the head teachers to return to the community regularly), was to exploit existing established face-to-face networks that were already in existence within local working groups or head teacher development groups within local authority districts (Heppell, 2002). Within Talking Heads, this was mainly developed by one of the author's co-facilitators in South-East England, and later by the author in the West Midlands of England. Essentially local working groups of head teachers existed to support collaboration between their membership, and as with the main stated aim of Talking Heads, assist in reducing professional isolation. Providing there were no obstacles to meeting face-to face at pre-determined times and dates, head teachers from local working groups would come together to discuss particular issues as laid out within an agreed agenda.

Not infrequently there were circumstances when certain members of a local working group could not attend a meeting. Equally time constraints often meant that not all agenda items could be discussed during a designated meeting, sometimes leaving important matters unresolved. Through the local working group online community facility within Talking Heads, and later developed within Pen-i-Ben, such issues could be continued online, at a time suited to the individual, from either their own office or from the comfort of their home. Within Pen-i-Ben, three local working groups became well established, where physical meetings were pre-planned in advance online, and agenda items not addressed during a face-to-face meeting were later continued within a private discussion area of Pen-i-Ben. Two of those online working groups were located in south Wales, and the other in north-east Wales. Interestingly none of the three local working groups represented Welsh medium schools, despite both language groups receiving equal introductory training in their future use of Pen-i-Ben. This lack of engagement with technology seems to be evident in other newer, less familiar media introduced to the Welsh language culture: for example there is a distinct lack of posting to BBC Radio Cymru's news Twitter site, #Post Cyntaf [BBC Cymru] (2012). However, whereas the newly appointed head teachers received free laptops to

support their use of Pen-i-Ben, mysteriously their mentors did not. Within the circle of Welsh-medium schools, the lack of mentor encouragement seemed to influence the overall low participation levels of the Welsh-speaking head teachers generally. The author speculates that this omission by the Welsh Assembly Government was frequently cited by the mentor head teachers as the main reason for their non-participation within Pen-i-Ben.

A small group of Welsh-medium head teachers however did make an initial contribution to the policy development of Gaelic education in Scotland. Their experiences in using the Welsh language sections of Pen-i-Ben, to support their particular professional development needs, alongside the development of the teaching of Welsh in their schools, resulted in two developments. The Pen-i-Ben facilitation team were asked to present their findings at a Gaelic educators' conference in Inverness, which was followed up by a short-term online hotseat involving both Welsh head teachers and Scottish head teachers who ran Gaelic-medium schools [Ultralab] (2005).

One of the outstanding outcomes from establishing an online local working group to support the daily work of one of the south Wales head teacher groups was their openness and willingness to share all their individual school development policy documents within the privacy of the Pen-i-Ben online community. This immediately became a valuable, shared, collaborative resource, regularly updated during the two-year life of the project. Their online community also became an extension of their face-to-face meetings, where the more experienced mentor head teachers selflessly supported their less experienced colleagues, particularly in the lead-up to an official visit from the Welsh inspection service, Estyn [Estyn] (2012).

Conclusion

The Welsh Assembly Government regarded Pen-i-Ben as a pilot project. The scale of direct UK Government funding available for the establishment of the NCSL, which incorporated Talking Heads, including the construction of a bespoke establishment in Nottingham, was not made available within the Welsh Government's devolved budget. At the end of 2003, despite vociferous representations made to the Welsh Government by the head teacher membership of Pen-i-Ben, the project came to an end. No public record exists of an evaluation of Pen-i-Ben, however an English head teacher summarised the value of a professional online community, and the relevance to strategic leadership in education, referring to the ability to access online support and information:

> I have really enjoyed using this site and have found it v. helpful both for information and making contact with other like-minded heads all over the country. It was great to get help with policies and proformas before our OFSTED from such diverse places as Northampton and Sheffield. (Heppell, 2002).

10 years on, one former head teacher member of Pen-i-Ben recalled the value of the community:

The forum allowed newly qualified heads to share experiences and problem-solving strategies, and though it was considered a valuable support, the forum is no longer running. [NAHT] (2010).

Thus two of the three significant outcomes from the Pen-i-Ben project, namely to provide professional support, along with advice from experienced practitioners are confirmed independently, by a representative of the head teachers' organisation, in the above statement. As to the impact of professional facilitators within an online community of practice, the reader must be the judge of that.

Elsewhere in the United Kingdom, the online equivalent service for head teachers continues to support those professionals in England and Scotland, despite the current financial cutbacks. It remains the opinion of the author that the Welsh Government could afford to resurrect Pen-i-Ben, and that the model could also be replicated for other professional groups outside Wales. Now more than ever, there is a need to share knowledge and expertise amongst educators and those in the public services. That sharing can now be undertaken more quickly and conveniently than 10 years ago, thanks to advancements in mobile technology, and the availability of affordable social media.

The combined experiences derived from Talking Heads, Virtual Heads and Pen-i-Ben significantly influenced the later development of Ultralab's online university, known as Ultraversity. The concept of collaborative, constructivist learning which shone through the communities of practice in those professional communities helped shape the work-based online undergraduate degree that is now provided by Anglia Ruskin University. That same collaborative learning concept has stimulated interest amongst newly formed clusters of academies sponsored directly by the University of Chester, and amongst some of the public services that university works with.

The reduction in government spending, brought about by the economic recession, and evidenced by the UK Coalition Government directly funding schools granted academy status has led to the establishment of private, regional education trusts specialising in assisting in the management of some academies.   The experience of supporting locally-grouped head teachers in an online environment such as Pen-i-Ben, where policies and practice, reflective of a particular geo-political area that were originally developed and more importantly shared amongst the community membership, can now be extended by private providers to include a wider range of professional online communities, supporting teaching and learning across the curriculum amongst groups of academies. In this respect, the privately run Parthenon model for 'Next Generation Learning', is an emerging model that claims to harness technology in a way not dissimilar to that referred to in this paper, but specifically targets the K-12 stage of state schooling. [Parthenon] (2011). It remains to be seen to what extent private providers assume the roles and responsibilities that were once the sole domain of local authorities in the UK.

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