

## Designing and Sustaining Virtual Mentoring Communities

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**Abstract:** School districts in Colorado are required to have an induction program for new teachers that lasts at least one year. The University of Colorado at Denver (UCD) and Denver Public Schools (DPS) attempted to develop and sustain an online community of practice to support the teacher induction process. Providing a virtual space and paying for teacher participation proved to be less popular than meeting face to face.

### Introduction

A recent goal of the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD) and Denver Public Schools (DPS) was to establish an online community of practice to support teacher inductees. They used the virtual environments, Teachers Learning in Networked Communities (TLINC) and Tapped In, an existing online community of educators, to facilitate communication among inductees, mentor teachers, and university educational technology faculty.

School districts in Colorado are required to have an induction program for new teachers that lasts at least one year. Mentors in Denver Public Schools are experienced dedicated teachers and are assigned one to three mentees, usually in their same building. They are available to answer individual questions and assist inductees with district protocol, policies, and procedures. Mentors are required to meet with their assigned inductees for 20 hours during the induction process.

TLINC provided space to design the online community of practice. Tapped In was made available to facilitate the induction process. University educational technology faculty created Tapped In accounts for users and meeting rooms for individual groups of mentees and mentors. The program leaders from DPS and UCD did not suggest or prescribe a use for these sites. One technology faculty member was available for technology support; however, he did not clarify the direction or the process of building a community of practice (Metiri Group, 2005).

“Building virtual space should not be confused with building community” (Rheingold, 1998). The concept “If you build it they will come”, is only a quote from the movie *The Field of Dreams* (Frankish, B.& Robinson, P.,1989) not a reality. For DPS teachers, simply building a space for virtual mentoring and paying for teacher participation proved

to be less motivating than meeting face to face. Teachers, in the DPS school, where I worked, either never joined or dropped out of the virtual community in less than a month. Teachers were not familiar with the Tapped In environment or TLINC and failed to benefit from their account. My participation, as a mentor for DPS in this process, prompted my motivation to review the literature regarding designing and sustaining online communities of practice.

### **Literature Review**

The dynamics that motivate and sustain successful communities of practice have already been the subject of much research. The book *Cultivating Communities of Practice* (Wenger, 2006) lists the following reasons for participation in a community of practice:

- Fun with colleagues
- Meaningful work
- Personal development
- Socializing

The factors influencing participation in a community of practice include interest in the subject, a desire to learn about it, emotional support, and time for socializing (Preece, 2006). The definition of a Community of Practice given by Etienne Wenger states “Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.” This definition continues to identify three essential characteristics of communities of practice as the domain, the practice, and the community.

### **The Domain**

The first important factor Wenger mentioned is the domain. He believes the inhabitants must be oriented around a specific mission and vision that inspires commitment. If participants are not clear about what they want to get out of the process and are unable to make sense of it, they tend to miss out on the value of the collective (Reingold, 1998). The Annenberg Institute’s “critical friends” groups are an example of a community of practice with a mission. They are led by a teacher that is trained in process skills and diverse ways of looking at students work (Bransford, J.D., et al. (Eds.), 2000). These communities of practice have a focus centered on examining student work and collaboratively planning “next steps” for instruction based on student need. The Future Harvest Center’s Workbook has guidelines and suggestions for mentoring sessions. The workbook includes goals for the mentoring process. This program could be used as a structure for both a face to face or a virtual mentoring process (CGIAR, 2005). There are endless possibilities for topics. Members need a collective purpose, mission, and goals for their community.

### **The Practice**

According to Wenger, the practice is an equally important part of a group’s culture. He claims that a community of practice is not equivalent to a community of interest. Members of a community of practice participate in collective knowledge building. They are practitioners who share and continually acquire valuable knowledge. The passion for

learning about the selected topic is an important characteristic of a community of practice (Wenger, 2006).

Rheingold (1998) claims it is impossible to design or select a platform that will adequately serve a community that has not clarified its own needs and desires. The technology facilitates already established processes, and these have to be assessed and understood. It is not about the technology. It is about inspiring people to share ideas and participate in learning about a selected topic. It is a sharing culture assisting others to reach their individual and collective learning goals and objectives. A community of practice is not a site to store knowledge. It is a format to find answers to a question sooner, with the help of interested informed friends. It enables members to put a question out into the community of practice and tap into others experience and knowledge.

### **The Community Members**

The members of the community are the third essential component Wenger promotes. He states that interaction and discussion among members is vital. Individuals are not engaged in a community of practice unless they build relationships that enable them to learn from each other (Wenger 2006). Rheingold suggests that virtual communities of practice are networks of practitioners that engage in knowledge building among their members by providing opportunities for relationship building and sharing experience through the use of the Internet (Rheingold, 1998).

The mentoring process cannot be achieved by randomly grouping people and directing them to meet for twenty hours. This seldom leads to the type of relationship desired in a mentoring situation. Developing trust to sustain the relationship takes time, familiarity, and effort (Bierema & Merriam, 2002).

From reading Wenger's ideas related to Communities of Practice, a crucial aspect of building a community is defining it (Wenger, 2006). Virtual community members often design personal pages identifying themselves, their interests, their goals, and desires. Posting pictures and personal information helps build trust and develops cohesiveness within the community. A personal page allows members to identify with one another. It is like walking into someone's home and learning their personal preferences, hobbies, and interests. "Posting a short biography allows others to know whom they can turn to with specific questions" (Bierema & Merriam, 2002). It enables members to find they have more than one common interest or connection. For example, the Electronic Emissary (<http://www.tapr.org/emissary/>) project requires mentors to share personal information as a method to launch conversation with their colleagues. Other online learning communities require everyone involved to post personal biographies including their academic, professional, and personal interests as a means of introduction (Bierema & Merriam 2002). This introduction process allows for developing relationships among members. Bierema & Merriam (2002) outlined specific strategies for mentors and "protégés" including: understanding each others' hopes and fears, knowing the goals for the relationship, sharing background information, seeking a trusting relationship, and working to develop familiarity. Creating a social climate and culture is an important interpersonal

task that involves more than taking a technology and throwing it at the intended user community” (Renninger & Shumar, 2002).

## **Methods**

During the implementation and review of the partnership between Denver Public Schools and the University of Colorado Denver, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from multiple sources. Qualitative data was obtained from interviews with project participants, surveys of new teachers, and facilitators, transcripts of Tapped In online interaction, a face-to-face meeting of project leaders, and monthly reports filed by site coordinators. Quantitative data came primarily from the Tapped In system and focuses on the number of members from each site and how much these members used Tapped In. Quantitative data was also obtained from new teacher and facilitator surveys. The data was reported as inconclusive (Metiri Group, 2005).

All teachers were paid to participate in this study. In order to receive money, they were required to log in and participate using Tapped In for 20 hours. Because it appeared to be an easy way to make a buck, many teachers participated initially. In a few short weeks, all online interaction ceased and face-to-face interaction resumed. The money was not enough motivation to sustain online interaction. The school where I worked dropped out of the project during the first few weeks of implementation. The first year report said about 20 teachers participated in chats. They were mostly mentor teachers. The site director said, “Many, if not most of the group rooms, appeared to be inactive” (Metiri Group, 2005).

## **Results**

With a one-year planning grant from the AT&T Foundation and two years of pilot funding from the Microsoft Partners in Learning (PiL) MidTier Project, National Commission on Teaching and Americas Future (NCTAF) developed the Teachers Learning in Networked Communities (TLINC) project. Utilizing a common platform, Tapped In ([www.tappedin.org](http://www.tappedin.org)), to support the work of three partner sites, K-16 educators are able to develop an online learning community to enhance the progression of teacher learning through induction. A recent grant award from the Fund for Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) funded the project’s implementation in the partner sites for three years (Metiri Group, 2005).

According to the Year One Evaluation Report, all of the data related to DPS study was inconclusive. The lack of participation in the project was claimed to be due to the October implementation date. The “late start date” was reported to be the main weakness in the study (Metiri Group, 2005).

## Discussion

NCTAF's TLINC program is a significant innovation because it represents a major change from the standard practice of preparing teachers in isolation from the schools where they will serve, and then placing them as stand-alone teachers in self-contained classrooms. TLINC provides a professional learning community that expands and enhances face-to-face mentoring with online coaching and opportunities for facilitated reflection and peer collaboration to improve teaching quality and student achievement. TLINC gives teacher candidates and novice teachers the support of an interactive network composed of their preparation faculty, their peers and colleagues, and accomplished teachers who are only a click away when they need help with student learning, classroom management, or a curriculum design problem (Metiri Group, 2005).

Conducting a needs analysis prior to implementation of the online induction project could have revealed potential issues. The teachers I mentored were in shouting distance from my classroom. One occupied the classroom next door and the other resided a few steps across the hall. We often met during lunch and planning time to talk. In addition we all attended both weekly staff meetings and grade level meetings together. Further examination would have revealed that this school site housed all of the mentors and their assigned mentees. Mentees had ample access and time for face-to-face interactions with their mentor. Involving teachers while establishing a vision and mission for the platform could have initiated more buy in from them as well and developing relationships with the university educational technology faculty.

One Denver site director said, 'I have a philosophy of participation that is to bring them in and see what shakes out,' But the large number of registered TLINC users and rooms in Denver does not necessarily translate into greater TLINC activity. Indeed, many, if not most of the group rooms, appeared to be inactive. Thus far, DPS has participated very little in the TLINC project. The site directors in Denver have taken a broad approach to establishing TLINC by establishing many online "rooms" that give various groups the opportunity to establish online communities. Denver project leaders have also registered the largest number of people to the TLINC site. (Metiri Group, 2005).

Setting up virtual space with the directive to collaborate could have been too vague of an objective. "Seeing what shakes out", instead of providing information on building communities of practice may have been an ineffective approach to implementation.

Teachers felt as if their conversations were being monitored and they were being "spied on" instead of collaborating with the university educational technology faculty. I mentioned this situation to the UCD technology facilitator. "One challenge mentioned by the Denver Public School District is that of confidentiality of online discussions. Would interns and inductees be willing to share openly online if they knew others could monitor discussions at the school, district, and university level?" (Metri Group, 2005). In fact many of their conversations were used as data in the first year report. The names of teachers were kept confidential in the report but the "data" was still made public. This led

to further alienation and distaste with the concept of virtual communities of practice.

There are different types of participation in Communities of Practice. Initially, it is essential to have a leader to explore the needs of the group and facilitate and model participation. This leadership role can change as group leaders emerge; however, someone needs to set the process in motion. Seeding the communication with questions and giving positive feed back to others models a collaborative protocol. It is the interactions and partnerships among the people who gather in these places that define the community (Wenger, 1998). “Community – centered environments involve norms that encourage collaboration and learning” (Bransford, J.D., et al. (Eds.), 2000).

Another role of the community leader is to help design a community to accommodate a variety of levels of participation. Not everyone will rush out to participate. Those who do participate may not agree with the ideas of the current leader. “Disagreement is not only inevitable but fundamental to successful change” (Sergiovani, 2002). Inviting others into a conversation takes skill and knowledge of the community. Modeling a supportive environment can set the climate of the community (Wenger et. all, 2002). With any major change there are early adopters, late adopters, and lurkers (Preece, 2006). A community leader provides direction and ensures high priority is given to conversation and dialogue. Collaborative learning opportunities are provided, and an atmosphere of a caring community is emphasized (Sergiovani, 2002).

Online communities of practice involve more than using technology to facilitate communication. Social interactions and sustainability depend on the members shared interests, purpose, goals, personalities, and the establishment of group norms (Wilson, 2001). Communities of practice can influence how their community develops and sustains, by paying attention to sociability issues. Establishing social norms leads to positive online protocol, understanding, and trust among community members, and the development of social capital, the connections and relationships that permit long term reciprocity and mutual trust within the social network (Wenger, et al. 2002).

Launching an online community of practice to support the teacher induction process could have been a beneficial and supportive resource for everyone in the community. Wenger & Snyder (2000) note that communities of practice are as diverse as the situations that give rise to them and that people in communities form them for a variety of reasons. Internet-based communities of practice are becoming an increasingly used resource for overcoming teacher isolation (Bransford, J.D., et al. (Eds.) (2000). The Teacher Professional Development Institute (Tapped In) could have been a lovely environment for DPS teachers. It offers a multiuser virtual environment that integrates both synchronous and asynchronous communication opportunities.

The problem with sustaining the teacher induction community wasn't the technology. It appears to be a combination of facilitation problems. A needs assessment would have benefited the organization prior to implementation. This could have set the stage for a unique, needs based design for virtual collaboration. The book, *Identifying Essential Elements of Successful E- mentoring Program Through Needs Assessment* states that

conducting a needs assessment is an essential feature in developing an e-mentoring program. The authors claim that a needs assessment ensures that the interests and goals of the community are clearly defined (Kasprisin, A. & Boyle, S., 2005).

### **Conclusion**

After reviewing the literature, it appears identifying the roles of the members, establishing a mission and vision for the community, taking time to build relationships and trust, and modeling the use of both TLINC and Tapped In might have achieved more sustainability for the community. Building trusting relationships could have been a catalyst for the community. Wenger's concepts of having fun with colleagues, being involved in meaningful work and personal development didn't manifest in The University of Colorado at Denver and Denver Public Schools attempt to develop and sustain an online community of practice to support the teacher induction process. Providing virtual space and paying teachers to use it did not prove to be motivating enough to establish and sustain the online mentoring community.

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