ELEARNING COACHES AS BROKERS OF PRACTICE WITHIN AND ACROSS SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Brokers play an important function in the spread of practices between Communities of Practice (CoP). They are necessarily members of multiple CoPs and are participative agents, influencing mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Consequently, brokering eLearning practices within and between schools is complex, and cannot be easily managed or assumed. Critically, the process of brokering is not one of simple transfer, but rather one of negotiation of participation by the brokers and in the case of this study, the classroom teachers. This paper explores the brokering of eLearning practices, within a multi-tiered professional development structure, across seven secondary schools in Victoria. This paper discusses examples selected from interviews with 14 teachers and 14 eLearning coaches, of brokering eLearning strategies across Communities of Practice (CoP) and the way the brokers were a source of support to each other.

Introduction and Background

This paper explores brokering of eLearning practices, within and across seven secondary schools in Victoria, that were part of a government funded project. The funding provided major infrastructure upgrades, laptops and a learning management system. More importantly, the project allowed for the equivalent of 14 full time staff to assist teachers in using the new technologies in ways that benefit student learning. The project staff consisted of a Project Coordinator, four Development Managers and eleven eLearning Coaches (eight full-time, while three schools chose to offer these as fractional appointments to teachers who continued teaching part time while being a coach). The Project Coordinator and Development Managers worked across all the schools (the Project Coordinator kept an office at one of the schools and the Development Managers had a desk at a different school each year) while the eLearning Coaches were based in one school for the three years of the project.

Many of the eLearning Coaches were teachers in the school prior to their appointment as a Coach. The Coaches were appointed to support changes in pedagogical practices, for example, a collaborative model for use of laptops where there was one laptop per two students at Year 7 and 8 levels in all seven schools. In addition to the group teacher professional development sessions in this project, teachers were offered individual sessions and in classroom support because of the availability of the Coaches and Development Managers. The project approached professional learning in a multi-tiered way as outlined in Table 1.
Table 1. Structure of the Project Professional Development (Carmona-Vickery, 2007)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Formal Professional Development</th>
<th>Informal Professional Development</th>
<th>Just-in-time Professional Development</th>
<th>Social Network Professional Development</th>
<th>Online Professional Development Network</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>by Development Managers</td>
<td>by Learning Technology Coaches aimed at School Level Interest</td>
<td>by Development Managers and Learning Technology Coaches</td>
<td>by Teachers</td>
<td>by the whole team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2005 – Involved 280 Teachers</td>
<td>• Needs varied from school to school</td>
<td>• Team Teaching</td>
<td>• ‘Chain-Mail PD’ - An expectation that teachers take the time to show at least one other teacher or group of teachers something they have learnt</td>
<td>• Email Distribution Lists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2006 – Involved 250 Teachers</td>
<td>• Staff PDs on particular technologies that capture local interests</td>
<td>• 1-to-1 support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 2007 – Involved 280 Teachers</td>
<td>• For immediate use in the classroom</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</table>

The authors suggest that the multi-tiered professional learning support structure was a refreshing approach to professional learning which has been dominated by ineffectual and under-resourced initiatives (Lowden, 2005). However, while the success of the project could be measured by various indicators such as the number of hours participant teachers engaged in professional learning sessions, or their reports of new or improved eLearning strategies, it was also felt that a deeper understanding of the processes of professional learning within this context were critically important if future initiatives were to also succeed. In preparing for this research a socio-cultural theory of Community of Practice was adopted, as it offered some ideas about how professionals with embedded practices and beliefs negotiate or reject new ways of doing things. This paper particularly focuses on the CoP concept of brokers and their impact in schools and educational settings.

Brokers work with CoP members, influencing mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Brokers ‘introduce elements of one practice into another’ (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 105). Brokers are necessarily members of multiple communities of practice (Davies, 2005) however this multi-membership does not guarantee the brokering of practices (Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) noted that brokers generally remain at the periphery of a CoP since they cannot engage in core practices while at the same time forming bridges between communities. However, brokering ‘requires
enough legitimacy to influence the development of a practice, mobilise attention, and address conflicting interests’ (Wenger, 1998, p.109). One problem encountered by brokers remaining at the periphery is that they can feel displaced or isolated. As a consequence, it has been observed that brokers often seek each other out for knowledge and support as a way of dealing with this displacement, and in doing so may potentially form their own CoP (Wenger, 1998).

In the context of the professional learning initiative in this study, the eLearning Coach roles were created to facilitate the sharing of ideas between teachers in and across schools. Consequently, the role of the eLearning Coach, at least on paper, was similar to that of brokers. Research on other professional learning contexts confirms that both informal and formal professional learning structures can result in community members adopting the role of brokering practices from one community to another. For instance, in Hartnell-Young’s (2006) study teachers, principals, researcher, and students were identified as brokers because they were able to make connections across communities of practice and open new possibilities for meaning. In Henderson’s (2006) study the broker (in this case, the professional learning facilitator) was seen as an important influence in the professional learning of teachers to participate in the central practices in order to be able to ‘engage with other members in mutual, accountable and negotiable ways’ (p.163). However, brokering is not simply the transfer of ideas from one context to another, it involves the negotiation of how these new ideas can or should fit into current practice (participation and identity) resulting in subtle variations from that of the originating community.

**Research Design**

A qualitative case study methodology was used for the research design. The case under investigation was a three-year government funded project that included seven schools collaborating with the goal of creating an e-rich learning environment. In total 28 people were interviewed; 14 project staff (Project Coordinator, Development Managers and eLearning Coaches) and 14 teachers. The eLearning Coaches were asked to invite two teachers from their school to participate. Of the 14 teachers interviewed, there were two each from five of the schools, however, three were interviewed in one school and only one teacher in another.

One of the authors, was a Development Manager in the project working across all of the schools for the three years of the project. The interviews were conducted a year after the project which allowed some distance for the researcher between her role as a Development Manager and researcher. It also allowed for participants to reveal the impact of the project support such as which practices had become embedded and which practices had ceased. The data has been analysed through thematic coding in NVivo software. This paper focuses on the data relevant to the theme of brokering. The researcher was part of the project under study, and because of this has been mindful to ensure care was taken to capture and interpret data ethically and honestly especially where it may not support the researcher’s assumptions and lenses with which she views the data.

**Findings**

This paper particularly focuses on the role of brokering in this professional learning context. The analysis of data revealed four key findings; the first was that within the context of the multi-tiered
professional development approach, coaches were able to shape mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire with the teachers they worked with; the brokering process contributed to higher confidence and competence of teachers in implementing eLearning strategies; brokers not only transfer existing knowledge but can contribute to the development of new knowledge and that the brokers formed their own CoP as a way of fulfilling their roles as coaches.

The eLearning Coaches brokered new eLearning strategies within and across the seven schools through a variety of formal and informal ways including group sessions on a topic, individual sessions and in-classroom support and/or a combination of the above. For instance, the project offered formal group sessions that teachers from all seven schools could attend at no cost, through an invitation to register, distributed by Principals to their staff. The Project Coordinator claimed the project was a success largely due to a ‘collaborative approach’ between all of the professional learning staff across the schools. The Project Coordinator also explained that;

‘...the individual teachers, if they went to let’s just say a [formal] professional development on something like creating WebQuest, they then when they went back to the school the next day or the next week, there was someone there at the school who could actually help them with it.’

The impact of this collaborative approach was confirmed by the teachers. For example, a teacher reported long term changes to her pedagogy as a result of attending an inter-school formal group session and then working with a Development Manger in her own school including taking up the offer of in-classroom support. The teacher said:

*I collaborated with [a Development Manager] ... I did an Olympic WebQuest ... it has broadened ... the way I assess and made it more interesting, I’ve also used rubrics more as a result of it, so yeah it’s having a long term effect.*

The teacher indicated a change in his pedagogical approach to teaching in using collaborative projects and rubrics for assessment after engaging in this multi-tiered professional learning. In this example, WebQuests were shown to be valued at all levels of the professional learning project. The project staff across the tiers had adopted the language and placed value on the ability to design WebQuests consequently when the teachers mutually engaged with the project staff they were presented with a consistent set of beliefs about what is important (enterprise) as well as the language, skills, and tools to create and implement the WebQuests in class (repertoire). It is apparent from the interviews that the consistency across schools, and between tiers of the project helped to influence the teachers’ in aligning their enterprise (joint enterprise) and adopting strategies (shared repertoire). Therefore, an conclusion of this research is that a multi-tiered, coordinated professional learning initiative has the potential to successfully influence teachers’ joint enterprise (what they value) and shared repertoire (what they do).

As mentioned in the above example a notable feature of the professional learning initiative was that the coaches and teachers could work alongside one another in the classroom. The 14 teachers who were interviewed agreed that this was a significant influence in shaping their practices. They valued the fact that the coach was able to engage with not only the teacher, but also the curriculum and the students:

*It was really great having [the Coach] to work with, because she’s so easy to work with ... She came into the classroom, and she worked with a number of different things with me as the classroom teacher, with projects with the kids using ... a whole range of eLearning...*
coach. There was an affinity between coach and teacher, founded on a common CoP of teaching, strengthened by interpersonal skills (“she’s so easy to work with”) and a recognition of the larger joint enterprise, that is, the need to enact the curriculum and engage the students (“projects with the kids”). This strong sense of working together and developing new practices is a mutual engagement of the teacher and the coach as they develop a shared repertoire. However, despite the sense of mutuality as reported by the teachers, it was also evident that the coaches were considered to be something other than typical or full members of the CoP. In the above example, the teacher set the boundary by describing herself as “the classroom teacher” despite the fact that the coach was an experienced classroom teacher, in the classroom and teaching students. The literature clearly highlights the difficult role of brokers, in which they cannot easily broker practices across CoPs while also maintain full membership in both.

New practices such as teachers incorporating digital story telling by students in to the curriculum were successfully brokered with teachers working with the Coaches and Development Managers. One teacher discussed how their professional learning in this area was supported by working with a Development Manager in an individual session and then by taking up the offer of in-classroom support:

...one of the best things ... was when I collaborated with [a Development Manager] with my year seven class ... we developed a ... get to know the person autobiography [unit of work] ... I wouldn’t have had the confidence to do it without there being a coach there, or even the knowledge of what Photostory was.

The teacher describes this working together as ‘we’, meaning they worked together as team members rather than as individual participants. This collaboration and way of working together is mutual engagement. The teacher describes how working with the coach gave them the confidence and knowledge to make the change and have competence in implementing an eLearning unit of work. The way the 14 teachers described the working relationship with the coaches indicates the sense of a co-teaching arrangement rather than a mentoring arrangement.

The individual coaching and in-classroom support whether following a group session or not was considered as the most valuable by the teachers and as the most effective way to embed a new practice. Teachers were more willing to take risks if they had support when trying new things. One teacher reflected, ‘I have changed the way that I teach because I use more ICT. Probably the thing that made the most impact is just having the support when you’re trying to learn something new’.

However, this does not mean that all of the professional learning was reactive. A coach pointed out that it was important to understand what was needed and provide the appropriate introduction of ideas and support:

... I tend to run a lot more one-to-one PD, short, and sharp, and really well targeted. And I guess it’s meeting people where they’re at, and providing a need that’s really relevant to them. So the most powerful professional learning model has really been just in time, learning, and being there to rescue somebody when they really need something badly. And you know that once you teach that thing to them they’re actually going to go and use it, and that helps to embed it in their learning, and their teaching practice.

The success of the just-in-time learning depends on the ability of the coach to understand the need of the teacher even if they didn’t know it themselves. In this case, well targeted PD with subsequent support on a topic that is immediately applicable. While the success of this just-in-time approach to professional learning has already been well established in the literature, we argue that the success in choosing the means and time of engagement (ie. how the PD is conducted) and the supportive trusting
relationship required to engage at times of high risk (ie. when things go wrong) is facilitated by the broker’s sensitivity to the practices of the community.

The sensitivity to the repertoire of the CoP is exemplified by a coach who had come from industry and who found that she necessarily needed to shift in her approach when working with teachers: ‘I have changed the way I coach. I stopped being very “what you should do” to “let’s look at the best way”, more supportive rather than telling’. Successful brokering required the coach to engage with the community members using the commonly valued repertoire of collegial support. Another coach reflected;

> Well I guess as coach my role has been to support other teachers. And that’s been a two-way thing. I’ve certainly helped other teachers in lots of different ways, and sometimes that’s in eLearning, and sometimes just pedagogy. But also I’ve been able to learn from the teachers that I coach, and I think it’s a two-way street. So there are a lot of great things that teachers are doing, and just little things that you pick up along the way. That sort of collaboration with teachers has been really good for me, and hopefully for them too.

This attitude to the opportunity as a shared learning experience developed a culture of mutual respect. The teachers learned from the broker and together they negotiated this knowledge into new practices and new knowledge. There was mutuality in the exchange and both benefited from the new brokered knowledge as discussed in Meyer’s (2010) study.

A teacher who had worked with the coaches on new practices then passed on their learning to other teachers stated:

> It’s just terrific having you know the eLearning coaches and sort of being able to get them to show you how to do it and you can pass that on to somebody else who may not of sort of heard about it, I think that’s been good.

This teacher is sharing the learning with other teachers in the fashion described as chain-mail PD in Table 1. This inventive approach to disseminating ideas effectively uses the community members to reinforce and disseminate the new ideas. In effect they are lending the weight of their own identities as full community members to the new ideas, thus it is more likely accepted as a shared repertoire.

One challenge for people who act as brokers is managing the ‘coexistence of membership and non-membership, yielding enough distance to bring a different perspective, but also enough legitimacy to be listened to’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 110). This legitimacy was established by the positioning of the coaches as a co-learner as well as ‘the fact that we had such strong people as Development Managers and eLearning Coaches. They were people that the rest of the staff respected and wanted to work with’ (Project Co-ordinator). One way brokers can counteract the unsettling nature of this is for brokers to ‘recognize one another, seek companionship, and perhaps develop shared practices around the enterprise of brokering’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 110). There was evidence to suggest this was the case in this study. An eLearning Coach who had been a teacher in her school prior to the project said the ‘meetings where we got together and talked about things were... really useful because you saw what other people were doing in different schools and how different schools were handling things’. Another coach also reflected this sentiment in finding benefit to the project group that spanned the schools;

> ‘being part of the ... team gave me the opportunity to meet with people who have had a wide variety of experience. So meeting with other coaches, and development managers ... there’s a wealth of experience and knowledge that we were able to share there, and it was always good to be able to meet together and just share the things that were going on, and new projects we were working on, and difficulties that we faced. So that collaboration was most important, and I think that’s one of the things that really brought about the success of
The project staff began to develop their own community of practice, through mutually engaging in a joint enterprise (that of brokering) and ultimately sharing repertoire about not only effective uses of technology but more importantly how to most effectively identify and respond to the needs of the teachers in their schools.

One Development Manager explained the sustained relationships and networks beyond the official end of the project:

*I think having the role in the ... [project] you still get emails from people from schools you were at asking for support, or running a question past you, or showing you or sending you a great link, or something that someone’s done. Those things are still happening, but within the schools because we had those roles and I’m still in one of the schools, staff are still very comfortable to say ‘Hey, I’ve done this. Do you want to have a look?’ or ‘Would you help me with something I’m trying to do please, I’m really stuck.’ so I think definitely it’s created an ethos.*

This quote demonstrates that the relationship between the teachers and former coaches has continued beyond the official project and that a culture of collaboration has been well embedded. The coaches were so valued in one school that the Learning Technology coordinator explained, ‘We still actually have one of our learning coaches working with us now, so we’ve kept them on because we’ve seen the role is so useful.’ The continuation of the coach model in this school shows that value placed on the situated learning that is possible with a coach.

**Conclusion**

The Project Coaches and Development Managers brokered eLearning practices with teachers in a multi-tiered professional development model, shaping the mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. A shift in attitude and confidence of teachers towards technology was a noticeable outcome of the project, attributable to the way the brokers were competent members of the CoP and consequently could effectively judge when and how it was best to engage with the members. The Coaches also became their own CoP as a source of support and learning, increasing their own confidence and knowledge, thereby adding to the impact they made in the schools.

Consequently there are three recommendations of this research. First, schools engaging a professional learning strategy should include a multi-tiered approach of group sessions, individual sessions and in class support. The coordinated approach across these tiers is more likely to influence teachers’ joint enterprise (what they value) and shared repertoire (what they do). Second, the brokers should be located within a school and recognized as a legitimate, if peripheral, member of that community, such as being an experienced classroom teacher. Third, brokers should be encouraged to work with brokers in other schools, which will not only increase their repertoire of ideas to share with teachers, but also to discover ways in which the problems of brokering those ideas can be overcome.
References


