

Mentoring in a Digital World: What are the Issues?

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the results of the evaluation of the first pilot of an e-mentoring unit designed by the Hands-On ICT consortium, funded by the EU LLL programme. The overall aim of this two-year activity is to investigate the value for professional learning of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and Community Online Open Courses (COOCs) in the context of a 'community of practice'. Three units in the first pilot covered aspects of using digital technologies to develop creative thinking skills. The findings in this paper relate to the fourth unit about e-mentoring, a skill that was important to delivering the course content in the other three units. Findings about the e-mentoring unit included: the students' request for detailed profiles so that participants can get to know each other; and, the need to reconcile the different interpretations of e-mentoring held by the participants when the course begins. The evaluators concluded that the major issues were that: not all professional learners would self-organise and network; and few would wish to mentor their colleagues voluntarily. Therefore, the e-mentoring issues will need careful consideration in pilots two and three to identify how e-mentoring will be organised.

Keywords: MOOCs, e-mentoring, professional development, ICT skills, user-centred

1 The Context for the Handson ICT MOOC

The EU LLL programme funded Hands-On ICT¹ to explore the value of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) and Community Online Open Courses (COOCs) in professional learning. In essence, Hands-On is a holistic environment that provides teachers from higher education, vocational education and schools with everything they need to learn about making the right choice of ICT tools for a given pedagogical activity. The Hands-On ICT team from England, Greece, Slovenia, Spain and the Netherlands based the design of the MOOC on the contexts and practices that were identified in a report about existing e-learning projects already underway in Europe (Riviou, Barrera, Domingo 2014). The need was clear: the *Survey of Schools: ICT and Education (2013)* found that no reliable progress had been made in teachers' access, use and attitudes towards ICT in since the previous survey in 2006.

The design of the e-mentoring unit was based on the knowledge and experience of The MirandaNet Fellowship² in the context of professional e-learning in 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). In particular MirandaNet concentrates on the collaborative and interactive potential of e-learning in terms of building and publishing new knowledge called Braided Learning (Leask and Younie, 2001; Haythornthwaite, 2007; Preston, 2007; Cuthell, 2012).

1.1 The Pilot Course design

The evaluation was designed to provide ideas for a design in progress. Nearly thirty teachers in schools, VE and HE volunteered to pilot the four unit. The first three self-contained units exploring creativity techniques lasted one week each: '**concept mapping**', '**the six hats**' and '**triggering questions**'. The average number of participants in each unit was eight, a 25 % drop out rate (Florjani and Lesjak, 2014)

1.2 The e-mentoring unit

This paper focuses on the fourth unit, e-mentoring that was two-weeks long to allow for interactions to build up. Six modules: **Mentoring in a Digital World**, looked at the how and the why of e-mentoring and served as an introduction to the activities; **Activity One**, Access, Motivation, Socialisation was

1 Hands-On ICT Project handsonict.eu.

2 MirandaNet Fellowship www.mirandanet.ac.uk.

linked to the discussion forum Working Online – your virtual classroom. **Activity Two** looked at Information Exchange and Knowledge Construction, and the focus of that forum is on Knowledge Building. Knowledge Development and Braided Learning were the subjects of **Activity Three**, with work in the forum dealing with Collaborative Knowledge Construction. The final course component, **Activity Four**, focused on using digital technologies to enhance learning and teaching opportunities, with Improving the Learning Experience as the subject of the forum. In the **Conclusion** participants examined Tools for Personal Development. **The forums** focused on ways of moving on.

2 Findings

2.1 The cohort for e-mentoring

Only two teachers of the thirty who signed up for the first three units elected to do this final two-week course. As a result the MirandaNet Fellows drew on their MOOC research group of thirty-two members who had volunteered interest specifically in e-mentoring. Six registered to join two participants from the first three units: eight for the final two-week unit. All except one were expert members of communities of practice with a strong online element: one school teacher was already teaching 86 pupils that year online; four had a Masters in online learning; one had a Ph.D.; six were over forty five: three were looking for retirement opportunities in online teaching.

The evidence of their sophisticated knowledge and experience emerged in advice given to others in the pre-course questionnaire. Overarching factors they considered important in online course design included simplicity; clear structure; alignment to learning objectives; structured introductory activities; a variety of learning tasks introduced slowly. They were all clear about the value of facilitation to engender a community spirit, maintain interest and building learning.

2.2 The technical adjustments

In the beginning the software team who were committed to a user-centred approach to development made several adjustments to the design as the participants expressed their difficulties. The most important changes were to the registration obstacles, to the visibility of the units to all registrants and the cancelling of different keys for each course. The immediate attention given to these problems ensured that the eight registered participants stayed in the

course. In fact, one participant, here called Roger, also intervened on the technical front because another participant, Andrew, had significant problems that he was blaming on the course design. His outspoken frustration was threatening to disrupt the course. Roger, an experienced user of Moodle realised Andrew's interface was corrupted and phoned him in order to explain the cause of his frustration. This action by an expert participant exonerated the software design team from blame.

Three changes to the general design of the environment were recommended by participants: A guide to using the software to include: a series of 'How do I?' screenshots linked to FAQ; an introductory section linked to Step One, Access & Motivation; addition of a profile box because the participants wanted to get to know each other at the start; and an initial activity unit on using Moodle, with screen shots to guide participants through a range of competences, from understanding the difference between replying to a thread in a forum to uploading files. Combining these skills with socialisation activities would be a good way for participants to introduce themselves.

2.3 E-mentoring activity

The course tutors started two discussions in order to develop collaborative thinking: *hosting a discussion in the dark*; and, *Marriage between Mentoring and Moodle: can it work?* One contributor felt that the participants had not had sufficient opportunity to introduce themselves to each other and set up a discussion called: *Online Learners. Getting Started*. Another forum was *Do MOOCs change our expectations?* Forums were a rich, lively and expert source of information.

Both tutors and participants suggested at the start of the e-mentoring unit that the profiles should be more visible and should perhaps pop up with the photos when comments were made. The tutors' forum, '*Hosting a party in the dark*' attracted twenty-five replies that mostly concentrated on the positives of online learning: for example: "In my experience, working online I get to know my guests in more depth more quickly than I can working with them face to face. The online environment potentially affords a level of intimacy which is a privilege to work with". Another participant said, "We should share our expectations, worries and concerns about starting this course together". He then set up a forum, *Online Learners. Getting Started*: all the students participated in this. Overall there were two forums started by the tutors and four by the students. Generally the quality of the forum discussions was high, although the students tended to lose collaborative focus. Students suggested that the interac-

tion of more students will help in the next pilot and the tutors need to be more active in steering the discussion towards collaboration. Humour was seen to be important in keeping the forum learning lively.

The interactive forums proved to be more popular than the learning activity modules: two students did activity one; two different students did activity two; only one did activity three; only one did activity four. However, it seemed that three out of eight of the participants who were active in the forums did not see the units and thought that the forums were the only activity. This design fault will be remedied.

2.4 Discussion

It must be emphasized that participants for all these four pilot activities were a-typical because they volunteered for a pilot in the first place. This is an important factor in considering how this course should be altered because the majority of these teachers were already e-mentoring and were motivated by their professional interest in the design of the software and the practice of others. The evidence from the discussions in the e-mentoring unit shows clearly that the participants already had an understanding of concepts and performative competence that may not necessarily be applicable to subsequent participants.

In addition, further discussion need to be held about whether an e-mentoring unit should be academic, or practical, or both. The plan and rationale behind this e-mentoring module was to develop mentoring skills in the participants – all professionals – and let them be peer mentors. The pedagogical assumptions are therefore subtly different from those that would underlie a course purporting to teach people how to be mentors. Participants perceived a need for greater scaffolding of concepts, skills and activities before the final versions of the HandsOn ICT courses are launched if the more academic learning activities were still to be offered as well as the interactive forums.

3 Conclusion

The participants questioned the underpinning e-mentoring principle of the course as well as perceiving a lack of clarity about the role of an e-mentor because each student had different views. Also the mentoring role implies responsibility for other students and a generosity with time that cannot always be relied on. Questions were raised about whether there should be tangible rewards for mentoring effort other than personal satisfaction like accreditation. Since no payment would be involved qualifications in e-mentoring were

mooted. But how would success in mentoring be judged: test scores; ICT competence; the quality of responses in a forum or whether the teachers have implemented these ideas in the classroom? Tests can validate knowledge as evidence: however, there should also be a way to validate performative evidence. One way is for the participant to upload an ICT artefact used to support learning and teaching, together with a commentary and evaluation. In this context the Hands-On team is exploring partnerships with Learning Designer³ and Ingots⁴. Global publication could be another route that would motivate the teachers to develop artefacts to share more widely with others like the Mapping Educational Specialist knowhow (MESH)⁵ initiative.

The major conclusion from the participants was that the designers of the second pilot need to engage in some significant rethinking because the underlying theory of Hands-On ICT, that all students are the drivers in their education and will self-organise and network, is not necessarily the case. Some will only want an academic course. Should the Hands-On ICT team cater for both kinds of professional learner?

In her article, *Hits and Myths: MOOCs may be a wonderful idea but they're not viable* (2014) Laurillard raises several good points about the problems of sustaining the free MOOC offers that are emerging globally from major universities and multinational companies. Judging on the results of the HandsOn ICT evaluation a point that the team has to tackle in the design of the second and third pilot is Laurillard's assertion that it is a myth that students will support each other's learning. The next evaluations of the second and third pilot will need to address the challenges of e-mentoring in a MOOC in some depth in order to design a sustainable model.

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3 Learning Designer <https://sites.google.com/a/lkl.ac.uk/ldse/>.

4 INGOTS <http://theingots.org/community/about>.

5 MESH <http://www.meshguides.org/>.

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Biographies



Christina Preston, Professor of Education Innovation, Bedfordshire University, publishes internationally about the use of digital technologies as a catalyst for enriching teaching and learning. She founded the MirandaNet Fellowship in 1992 that now has nearly 1,000 members in 80 countries. Christina has won five international awards for the design of innovative professional programmes promoting collaboration across national boundaries.



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