PROJECT TITLE:

Research Learning Circle: Online Learning and Teaching

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PROJECT SUMMARY

The goal of this research project is to explore the use of a collaboration structure –Learning Circles—to structure the exchanges among researchers engaged in a range of research activities related to teaching and learning online. Learning Circles have been used for over 15 years to successfully mediate student learning across classrooms with different curriculum by having each group sponsor a project around a common theme. This seed grant investigates the use of this structure and process to encourage and enhance interaction among researchers engaged in distinct but related research by having each researcher sponsor a project for whole circle participation.

The second goal of the circle was content related with a focus on furthering the knowledge and skills of the group on issues related to online teaching and learning. However the diversity of the research interests of the group necessitated a very wide characterization of the topic.

The circle interaction is structured by phases.
- Phase 1: Getting Ready involves finding the partners, selecting and setting up the electronic structure, and setting the stage for interaction.
- Phase 2: Opening the Circle focuses on group formation and cohesion. The goal is to create a level of trust and a norm of reciprocity.
- Phase 3: Planning Project requires each participant to describe the project or task they sponsor for the group.
- Phase 4: Exchanging work on projects constitutes the major part of the process.
- Phase 5: Organizing the Publication is time for organizing results of work on projects
- Phase 6: Closing the Circle provides time for final reflections on the process.

RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

While the Learning Circle model has been very successful in organizing work within the more structured context of classrooms, it was less successful in the more varied context of researchers working in different areas with no common timeline. It did, however, result in thoughtful, sustained discussions around a number of topics that was very helpful to a subset of the members of the circle.

But overall, the consensus of the group is that the circle was not successful in creating the knowledge building community that group members had envisioned. We have identified a number of factors that inhibited collaborative knowledge building. These include the technical considerations, participation structures, and perhaps most significantly the conceptual plans for collaboration. Before we detail these, we describe the positive outcomes from the perspective of a the participants

Positive Outcomes:

Despite problems, a number of participants described positive outcomes in the development of their thinking about how to assess online learning and teaching.

> **1) Strategies for Research**
> While the exploration of method research online learning was the theme of the circle, the group varied from those that an interest in the how design issues influenced learning and those who sought strategies to measure student learning. It was not clear how to create projects that mobilized the intersection of interests. Early on there was a discussion of research design prompted by proposal writing. A number of participants shared the frameworks that they use to evaluate online discussions. These included a phase analysis of dialog from initial presenting ideas, to linking or referring to the ideas of others, to a convergence on a new understanding. It is still possible that this initial discussion may lead to a cross-institutional research proposal. Regardless, it is clear that the engaged discussion around research articles and strategies analyzing online discourse were valued by at the least a subgroup of the circle.

> **2) Evaluation Practice in Online Teaching**
> From a research perspective we discussed how to analyze the activities and the process of building knowledge through dialogue. However, for a subset of participants who taught online there is the related problem of how teachers assess the quality of student work that includes online dialogue.   Exploring the function of grades and practices for assessing student work, as a professor rather than a research stimulated the exchange and experimentation of assessment strategies that were very productive. The strategy involved having students analyzes the discussion and their role in it. This strategy was tried by a number of participants with positive results reported back to the circle.

> **3) Professional Development** Fostering professional dialogue across researchers at different places in their professional careers, and with very different experiences working online was the strongest benefit. Extended discussions of issues related to activity theory, discourse analyses, and grounded theory as well as assumptions about learning, dialogue and understanding provided valued forms of professional development. Books, articles and ideas were exchanged that helped shape the work of a number of the participants. The sentiment in this quote was common across most of the feedback from participants: "the CILT forum created an ideal intellectual commune at a distance. It allowed for ongoing interaction, with a high signal to noise ratio. The formation of a learning circle was a great boon to continued deeper discussion of issues underlying my work."

> **4)Facilitation and Moderation Skills** A number of the members of this circle have extensive online teaching experiences. The strategies they use in working in this forum, at a metalevel, helped some participants think about what supports or inhibits online dialogue. Explicit discussion of strategies, as well as mindful reflections on the strategies displayed, provided a context to rethink online teaching strategies.

The interaction was sustained through the early stage but because of dificultly in conceptualization of projects, and the uneven level of participation, it did not meet the

expectations that many of the participants had for the circle. The following chart describes the level of interactions by phase of the interaction.

Participation levels of the 9 members of the circle across the phases:

Phase	Total Messages[1]	Number of threads	Post by N persons	Average Read Messages[2]	Average Written messages[3]
Getting Ready	6	5	3	5 80%	
Opening Circle	56	16	9	50 89%	6 (range 3-12)
Planning Projects	61	17	8	48 78%	7.7 (range 0-15)
Exchanging Work	115	22	9	54 (47%)	9.9 (range 2-29
Organizing Publication	1	1	1	.2 (20%)	
Closing Circle	6	6	3	1.5 25%	
Totals	255	57			

[1] Messages were also sent through email and these are not included.
[2] Some methods of reading the messages as a set or offline does not result in a having them marked as read. This could, therefore underrepresent this form of participation. Also a number of messages (including 5 of the last 7 messages) were also sent through email and therefore likely to be read by all
[3] Online computed when most of the participants participated

Participation was initially strong and everyone participated though the exchange of work on projects. While the number of messages increased during the exchange of work period, the number of people reading dropped. The interaction centered on online research strategies and took place among about half of the circle participants. However, the projects were not well defined which was one of the problems of the circle.

LESSONS LEARNED: COLLABORATION

We describe the lessons learned in three categories, issues of conceptual design, participation structures and technical considerations.

Conceptual Challenges

> **1) Definition of Projects:** This proved to be the most difficult for the participants. It was not clear what was the common interests of the group and each of the participants are engaged in a range of activities some of which may or may not overlap with others. The size of "a project," the expected frequency of participation, and the expectations for feedback were conceived differently by participants. While participant could provide some background to their project, the participants did not (and perhaps could not in the technology environment) share enough context and content of a project to receive the feedback that would be most useful to them.

> **2) Nature Of Feedback:** Where a project was well described and there was an effort of the group to provide feedback to the person who framed it, the assessment by the person who request this help was that the feedback was not that helpful. The people in the circle had different concerns that were central to the design issues that were presented. The dialog did not substantially contribute to the proposal development of the person who

brought the design issues to the circle. However, this same dialogue was mentioned in the reflection of two other participants as valuable and one said the value came because the respondents were not all "like-minded."

3) Timing, Trust, And Translations One participant, who had promised results to the circle as a part of a project, described in her reflections why these were never shared. Problems were found with the data. While not explicitly stated, it is possible that viewing the data from the perspective of the others in the circle helped in the process of making this assessment. However the observation that "problems with the data reduced the merit of working with them," was not shared with the circle. This may index an issue of trust. It is difficult to think openly, share ideas as they are formed with a group that one does not know well.

Another person reported a struggle to present data in a shareable format, and to conceptualize a project which would frame widely enough to interest all members of the circle. It took time to frame issues in a way that translated to the contexts that others are working in.

Others mentioned that the timing at the beginning of year was not as effective as it might have been if it had matched something like AERA, or a project review timeline where everyone was working with similar deadlines. Time is always a limiting factor in the formation of a community, however, it is possible that people will make time if factors such as concurrent work flow, incentives, personal value, rewards or other organizational factors are aligned.

Participation Structures

1) Group Membership: Participation evolved out of a group of people who came together around the topic of research in online learning and methods of assessment at a CILT workshop. Other members were invited to join. This unusual formation of the group did have the benefit of bringing people together at different stages in their career that might not have happened if the group was formed by a single person.

Early research on participant structures in online networks (Riel & Levin, 198X) suggest that either the group needs to know each other well or a there needs to be a very well-structure task for the group to be productive. In this activity, about half of the group knew each other and the task was only partially structured which resulted in what most describe as a partially successful experience.

2) Timeline And Phase Structure: There was no common timeline that research members were working towards that would have created a sense of pace for the group. While dates were set with the phase structure they were arbitrary with respect to the work patterns of the individual participants. There was no match between these time periods and the work that any one was doing. It would make more sense, for example of all of the participants shared common timeline such a report on a grant of the need to present at a conference. Without common deadlines the time of the circle were too arbitrary to be meaningful.

3) Pace Of Interaction: With no common timeline or deadlines, the pace of the interaction was very difficult to sustain. While there was a good deal of enthusiasm at first, this was interrupted by the immediacy of projects or travel of each of the participants. Participant discouraged by a lack of no new dialog, were not encouraged to compose messages causing the talk to stall. When a participant did re-engage there might be the opposite problem of too many messages making it hard to participate. We need additional tools: some ways to ease re-engagement of participants that have been

pulled away. We need to facilitate re-entry. And also or especially, to maintain an easily accessible, common view of a shared image of the project. This might include:

a) Regular summaries of 'where we are at now', and suggestions on how to get back on board;
b) Some project management tools, such as timelines, lists of deliverables, lists of responsibilities, easily accessible collaborative calendars, etc;
c) A compass or a mental visualization/geography to assist in our project navigation (i.e., wmi? Where am I?];

A series of synchronous meetings [phone conferences, real-time meetings] with deadlines to help move the project forward in a more clear way.

4) Moderation And Leadership: Collective team leadership was dependent on a stronger definitions of the projects. Each participant was to structure the group of the group on their project. The lack of specificity of the projects made this form of leadership less effective. In schools, the projects are drawn from the curriculum and while each school has different curriculum, the structure of schooling provides for a ready supply of possible projects and it is not too difficult for these projects to serve multiple learning objectives at different sites. The work of researchers at different institutions is extremely varied making it difficult to find projects that would work across the range of participants.

At the midpoint, a small team of 3 was established to increase moderation role. The result of this was a more active discussion by a smaller number of people. The limited resources allocated for this activity made it difficult to find time for active participation. However if the problem of framing common projects had been resolved, then time might have been found.

Technical Considerations

1) Threaded Conference Discussion And Email: A threaded conference is only effective when participants are in the practice of checking the conference at least weekly. The advantage of computer conferencing is that messages are organized according to topic, sender, and date sent and can be flexible rearranged. The disadvantage is that participants have to log on to the web to access the conferencing system. Almost all of the participants mentioned the conference structure as a limitation to participation. The practice of checking a conference is more time consuming, and if there are no new messages, the motivation to check diminishes. While other issues are more critical, the medium of communication can have a strong effect on the dialog. When the discussion moved to email a few times, the pace and interest in the topics increased.

It might be interesting to note that in school use of learning circles, teacher have resisted the move to use conferences instead of email. About 90% of the teachers elect to have their conference mail forwarded to their email accounts. Ideally, the use of conferencing should include a conference-to-email option that makes it possible for each person to shape the environment in the way that best suits their actions.

2) V-Group Conferencing- This group of researchers includes many experts in online instruction who spend a great deal of their day in threaded discussions. Each person works in environments with different features and structure. There was no common space that everyone was familiar with so it was necessary for us to choose an conferencing system. No one environment had all of the features that we listed. While we discussed the lack of a link to email, other positive features made V-groups a good choice. The ability to format messages in html make it possible to use charts, color or links to the web in our messages. However, working in a new environment creates a level of frustration, even for those with experience in other contexts. And this frustration was another barrier for participation.

4) Tech Tools For Knowledge Building Once you beginning working with others, you want to be to share artifacts (e.g. whole courses, videos, survey instruments, manuscripts, data sets, transcripts, etc.), annotate them and track the collaboration and knowledge building. When participants shared documents via email, it often led to continued use of email and a reluctance to return to the online community. Ideally, online collaborative environments need to provide tools for document attachments, collaborative editing, calendaring, announcements, web links library. The evolution of new collaborative environments such as Wikki and Weblogs are the tools that are helping to design these online spaces.

NEXT STEPS

The Structure and Use of Learning Circles

A few members of the group will continue to experiment with the learning circle structure to facilitate collaborative learning in different contexts.

For example, Riel initiated a concurrent experiment to explore the use of the learning circles structure to organize 20 students in a course where teachers had to develop a blueprint for learning and generate a theory of learning. She is experimenting with the use this collaboration strategy with teachers engaged in a year long action research. It has been found to be more successful in this context because all of the participants are in a program taking the same courses at the same time. The "project" is the action research and each member of the team is a critical friend helping to plan the action research, sharing in the analysis of data and helping in the writing process. The dates and structure of the learning circles matches the structure of the overall academic calendar. The conference structure works fine in this context as all of the participants check it at least daily and the traffic is continuous. Next year other faculty members at Pepperdine have expressed interest in experimenting with this structure.

The differences in the factors shaping learning circles for students in cross-classroom participation, for teachers in university programs organized action research, and researchers who share overlapping research interests but no common timeline may provide some useful direction to those weighing the value of this structure in different contexts.

One outcomes of this project will be a short paper describing how these different experiences with learning circle help understand its relative value as a form of collaboration in different contexts.

Professional Community of Researchers

There are also a number of professional relationships that have developed as an outcome of this activity and these connections may lead to collaborative research in the area of online discourse analysis. We plan to open a group room in the newly developed Tapped In which has many of the features that were lacking in threaded conference. While there is no guarantee this well lead to more dialog or work by the participants, it is possible that the informal ties may develop into formal plans for collaborative work in the future.

RELATED RESOURCES

Currently we have collected the related resources of the learning community on the InterLearn site (www.interlearn.org). More information is available about learning circles as they are using

with students, including the Learning Circle Teachers' Guide can be found at (www.iearn.org/circles).