Finding and mending potholes in the Laneways

... connecting higher education institutions with their part-time e-tutors: Virtual learning communities fostering organisational learning .

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Metaphor: Laneways and Potholes

○ Potholes and laneways are metaphors to highlight the fragility of linkages when institutions rely on those outside their core staff for the success of new enterprises.

○ Dual foci of a problem-orientated study:
- e-tutors – 'adjunct', 'sessional', 'part-time' in a institutional-designed Learning Community
- Institution – its structure, policies and processes

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Background: The Dilemma of Part-time Academic Staff in Higher Education

○ A critical resource for HEd institutions (Gadberry & Burnstad, 2005; Park, 2004)
- respond to dynamic conditions?
- foster currency with professional disciplines?
- manage teaching of large, lower-level undergraduate classes?
- staff off-campus courses?

○ … but struggle to develop a satisfactory relationship with their "contingency" staff
- problematic relationship reported in North America, the United Kingdom and Australia (Bryson, 2004; Watters, Christensen, Ryan, Weeks, & Arcodia, 1996; Whitecross & Mills, 2003)

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What is Being Investigated?

- Evolution of a learning community (called *WebEase*) developed for staff teaching the first fully online program at an Australian regional university (called *Banksia*)
- Organisational intention was to address issues as they arise
  - Anticipated chaffing of systems NOT fit-for-purpose
  - Determined NOT to loose organisational lessons in the part-time black-hole

Frameworks Applied

- … to focus on e-tutors' concerns and tease out solutions by working to better align institution, innovation, part-time staff
  - Educational change (Fullan, 2001; Hall & Hord, 2001; Hall 2001) - directional
  - Innovation diffusion models (Rogers, 2003) - passive
- From an organisational perspective, this relatively simple requirement could be easily scuttled by any number of well-documented challenges to effective support of part-time employees (Gappa & Leslie, 1993; Rajagopal, 2002; Wallin, 2004).
  - Principally, a lack of familiarity with the university structures, policies, services/systems
  - Secondarily, e-tutors had little experience of online learning, and needed to develop strategies to deploy a broader pedagogical repertoire

Data Collection Framework

- a responsive-constructivist evaluation approach to determine multiple stakeholder needs (Abma, 2005; Foster, Bowskill, Lally, & McConnell, 2002)
- Case study methodology – capturing disturbances rather than descriptive
- Purposeful actions in contexts: Activity Theory. Artifacts; surveys; focus groups; interviews; meeting transcripts.

Models & Frameworks: Activity Theory

- Community of Practice – develop around purposeful **action**, and are not naturally occurring 'learning units' (Wenger 2000; Yamagata-Lynch 2003)
- CHAT – activity theory to examine 'fit', 'discord', 'harmony' through interlaced activity systems recognising roles played by culture and history within an **activity system**.
  - **Instruments** / tools / resources
  - **Rules** / protocols and Division of Labour within a Community
  - **Subject** – the focus of the group for the activity
  - **Object** - Purpose, motivation for and focus of activities.
  - **Roles** – manner in which community members share responsibility for achieving the object
  - **Community** – groups or individuals with whom the subjects interact to achieve the object-

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A Violation of both E-tutor and Student Expectations.

- *MGS' fast-tracking late enrolees into the course! Students are in the course before receiving the introductory course materials and well before they have access to the library. We are the ones that make it work - spending lots of time one-on-one and e-mailing readings. [D] .*
- *Students need structure – common times for completing tasks. An acknowledgment that most students work full-time. They cannot give priority to study when there isn't a due date. The "any time" part of the "any where any time" doesn't seem to work. [I]*

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E-tutors - working in isolation, with fragmented classes

- *… the public holidays are different in different countries. It seems that someone is always on holidays [D]*
- *I schedule chats around assessment tasks. Many cannot make the session but don't use the forums to catch up, instead a lot of phone and e-mail work results. [the course site] is like a graveyard – there is enough for students to do without "chatting"… [I]*

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Sustaining engagement and community building

○ *I'm aiming for a low drop-out rate, I know all my students. I ring and e-mail. While it is inordinately time-consuming, the strategy is working. Seminar leaders are now responsible for stimulating discussion. The class is starting to settle… We are a lively bunch with weekly seminars. Lots of work for me, but the students are starting to work with each other [G]*

○ *I draw students back into the course, aiming to create an intimate learning environment. I set the tone by being deliberately "up close and personal". We celebrate significant events: births, family visits, promotions… We work in groups around projects and case studies. Students have to be able to function in this environment... As most work happens on the weekends, I've told my students that I won't be in the course site on Monday and Tuesday. These are my study days [A]*

Significantly Different Expectations of Engagement

○ *… which had a profound effect on implementing implicit and explicit roles*

○ *David* [MGS Marketer] *makes announcements in the course without consulting They are lengthy, unrelated to the course…I am careful in my tone, how I present myself through friendly, relaxed, brief, focussed announcements. [A]*

○ *The MGS does not respect the privacy of the learning environment nor consider the impact of their intrusion. Everyone (students and staff) is now careful about what they say - they don't know who is "listening". [G]*

The Learning Community Working

○ More than half a semester passed before the e-tutors realised potential benefits
  ● *When things go wrong, you go round in circles trying to find someone in Banksia who can help [I]*
  ● *We should pool ideas to acknowledge that the first time e-tutoring is challenging, and that we would do things differently second time around. [D]*

○ One e-tutor (I) had been overwhelmed
  ● *the workload is excessive and no real recognition – I make this decision [not to participate] reluctantly as I believe the AMan has great potential [I]*

Conclusions?

- Seeds of a learning community took root despite 'top-down' creation of *WebEase*.
- The activity that focuses attention needs to be sufficiently complex that collaboration is required. Benefits to participants should be
  - micro – it is easier for participants to do their designated job, and
  - meso - the problems are sufficiently ill-defined that they can be best addressed through collaboration
- Diversity of membership relates to the activity or problem rather than existing organisational structures
- Some flux of membership with replacement of [I], and extension with second online program… and changing roles (e.g. [G] assumed the role of academic mentor in the second offer of courses based on success)
- System breakdowns between organisational units informed policy and procedural changes (consistent with theoretical frameworks of CoP, a form of learning community, and CHAT)

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