

Weaving Together Online and Face-To-Face Learning: A Design From A Communities Of Practice Perspective

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Abstract: Weaving together online and face-to-face learning improves the quality of working in both media. Based on the observations of nine different experiments that went through a similar process of weaving together these two media we share our observations of outcomes and an evolving design framework from a community of practice perspective. Arguing that weaving participation using different media in succession is different from blended or hybrid learning, we suggest that careful design of an online ramp-up can make a face-to-face event more potent, and the subsequent online collaboration more productive. Key elements of this design process are inclusion, interaction, and social structure designed for the negotiation of meaning. We offer heuristics that help trace the threads from first online contact to the development of productive relationships at later phases in an emerging community of practice.

Introduction and background

"If we can stop focusing on who learns more or less of particular, culturally well-defined fragments of knowledge, and ask questions instead about what is around to be learned, in what circumstances, and to what end, learning achievements would become statements about the points of contact available to persons in various social settings (Lave, 1988a, b)." – McDermott (1993).

In the age of easy access to online information the focus of learning needs to include bringing people together across time and distance so that they share and create information and knowledge, not just acquire it. What is more, in bringing people together it is not only the contact points between them that are important. The transitions between those contact points play a crucial role.

In collaboration with a number of people in and around CPsquare¹ we have designed, led and participated in many distributed events² that have used a similar sequence of interactions: they have started online, moved to a face-to-face meeting and returned to further online interactions³. During these events we have developed certain practices and observed certain behaviors and “phase changes” that are part of a process of relating to other members in a community and of changing points of contact using the different social structures and media (particularly the technology) at a group’s disposal. Although, in practice, events such as these are more likely to be part of a more complex iterative cycle with people using many types of media (including, for example, the telephone) we present a simplified table of online preparation for a face-to-face-meeting followed by an online follow-on in order to suggest a design for online learning that can be used to generate other designs using more than one medium. We think that by identifying the different phases of the media cycle and in being aware of what people do and how they feel doing during these phases we can improve our designs for learning when weaving together online and face-to-face media.

Our context, perspectives and experience

Most of our experiences have taken place with adults participating in workshops or courses aimed at improving participants’ knowledge and skills in the areas of technology use, facilitation and communities of practice. Participants are often leaders or early adopters who come from the corporate world, higher

education, government and non-governmental training organizations. The courses or events have had a workshop feel where participants are expected to take leadership roles and where a communities of practice perspective frames the outcomes to include stimulation of relationships between participants (*community*), exploration of a body of knowledge in which participants share an interest (*domain*) and development of practices that support further learning (*practice*).

Taking a communities of practice perspective is also to use a discourse about learning that foregrounds the building of social relationships and of bringing people together in self-organizing, productive ways. Learning and knowing come about through somewhat informal, often improvised, engagement with other people; interaction is aimed at negotiating the meaning of our experiences in the world that we share and are jointly constructing. In our case content and technology are community resources to be *negotiated* and *created* and are not seen as materials or tools that can be *given* or *taught*. A community of practice perspective also suggests that measures of desired outcomes are expressed as something more than quantitative measures that represent the acquisition of knowledge fragments. Rather, they include the quality and depth of conversations, dialogue and the negotiation of meaning. The development of relationships that are capable of supporting learning in the future is an important design goal and outcome measure. Although our context, perspectives and experience may be somewhat unique we think that some of what we describe will be recognizable and our practices helpful.

Description of our practice: some heuristics

We summarize the observations of our experience in the form of a table divided into the media cycles referred to as the online ramp-up, face-to-face meeting and online follow-on. The left-hand column refers to a series of phases that move from the beginning of the online ramp-up, through the face-to-face meeting and to the online follow-on. The right hand column presents a heuristic based on the observations we have made in these different phases. The heuristics apply both to participants and facilitators. The center column gives an indication of the balance between technology and community as experienced by participants during the different phases.

For each heuristic presented in the table there will also be a number of people to whom it does *not* apply (as we sometimes indicate). However, as it begins to apply to more people during the progression of the phases then those people for whom it does not apply usually start to feel some discomfort.

The term “heuristic” highlights the descriptive function of the events in the table and also intends to emphasize an ongoing tension and contradiction between our interpretation of the feelings and the practices we observed.

Phase	Balance ⁴	Heuristics – what people experience during the cycle
Online ramp-up		
<i>Getting into the online space</i>	Technology Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Preparing the time, space, computer, and Internet connection (from home or work or both). ▪ Supplying or uploading a photo, email address, contact information, payment or other credentials. ▪ Receiving an account and password to enter the discussion space or getting access to a new area on a website and logging in. ▪ Using technology to connect and communicate with organizers and facilitators. ▪ Navigating and learning how to find things. Finding other people “there”. ▪ Feelings of familiarity or frustration, even despair.
<i>Finding your way: participating in</i>	Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Discovering how to change password or profile page. ▪ Overcoming social or technical obstacles (getting help or helping others). ▪ Making a first posting, replying to someone else’s post, seeing a

Phase	Balance ⁴	Heuristics – what people experience during the cycle
<i>asynchronous discussions</i>	Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ reply to your post, participating in a discussion. ▪ Feeling worried, frustrated or understanding that some people are reading even if they aren't posting. ▪ Noticing the lack of online activity or technical mastery for some people and taking some initiative (or not) as a result. ▪ Getting to know (or not) how to use different pathways or facilities to participate in an online discussion.
<i>Experiencing a new kind of community</i>	Technology Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Feeling recognized, ignored or (mis-)understood by other participants or by the facilitators. ▪ Noticing relationships, affinities, alliances and conflicts between people in the group. ▪ Recognizing others and starting to understand the existence of diverse views or “language” (discoursal) differences. ▪ Becoming more self-conscious of online social conventions. ▪ Recognizing different roles (e.g. leader, supporter, interlocutor, etc.) and assuming one (even without knowing it). ▪ Feeling comfortable with tensions and ambiguities—and realizing that there may be social resources for handling them.
<i>Engaging in exchanges outside the group space</i>	Technology Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Discovering how to contact other participants via telephone, email, IM or other means. ▪ Having meaningful, informal interactions that suit a specific purpose and lead to further interactions.
Face-to-Face meeting		
<i>Making the transition from online to face-to-face</i>	Technology Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Negotiating the face-to-face agendas and making commitments to participate and collaborate. ▪ Making online logistical arrangements for a face-to-face encounter. ▪ Going on a journey (traveling to a physical meeting place). ▪ Finding that traveling may disrupt being together online. ▪ Negotiating living arrangements (sharing transportation or physical space with other participants).
<i>Meeting individuals face-to-face</i>	Technology Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Recognizing people that you've already met online and comparing face-to-face and online personas. ▪ Greeting people and resuming online conversations. ▪ Observing or feeling other people's reactions and responses to you. ▪ Feeling comfortable or exhilarated, uncomfortable or defensive with your face-to-face role compared to online. ▪ Gaining confidence and enjoying differences. ▪ Appreciating the learning potential in differences, tensions and newfound partnerships. ▪ Identifying and connecting with prospective collaborative partners. ▪ Being excited or disappointed (and figuring how to show or mask it).

Phase	Balance ⁴	Heuristics – what people experience during the cycle
<i>Participating in groups face-to-face</i>	<p>Technology</p> <p> </p> <p>.....</p> <p>Community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Making a first comment or telling your first story. ▪ Feeling like you have (or haven't) got something to contribute. ▪ Negotiating (or not) special roles of leadership, support, etc. in a face-to-face setting. ▪ Feeling left out or included and recognizing “liminal moments” (e.g. walking into a room of people who you feel are already part of an existing community with defined practices). ▪ Taking the initiative (or not) to do something on behalf of the group (provide leadership, support, peace-making, taking a stand, proposing an agenda, etc.) ▪ Creating group artifacts or records of the encounter (or not), such as notes, photographs, diagrams etc. ▪ Managing tensions (or not). ▪ Turning tensions into group learning.
<i>Phase-change: framing one's experience in a new context provided by the group</i>	<p>Technology</p> <p> </p> <p>.....</p> <p>Community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Feeling more committed to “the group”. ▪ Developing a clear sense of helpful and unhelpful skills in a learning community, online or face-to-face. ▪ Tuning in to other people's phases and supporting them appropriately. ▪ Having a sense of “what isn't known” or is “off limits”. ▪ Feeling responsible for fellow members' learning. ▪ Feeling accountable in one's actions to fellow members.
Online Follow-on		
<i>Diaspora: Moving back to the online space</i>	<p>Technology</p> <p> </p> <p>.....</p> <p>Community</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Posting the artifacts produced in face-to-face interaction in the online setting. ▪ Understanding the meaning or feeling more empathy because of hearing someone's tone of voice in their written messages. ▪ Imagining how the sense of togetherness that took place in a face-to-face setting can translate into other settings. ▪ Making contributions or following-up on issues or questions from the face-to-face (whether promised or not). ▪ Meeting previously unknown community members online. ▪ Realizing that certain questions remain unanswered or even unacknowledged. ▪ Feeling that the group shapes one's identity over time, beyond a single event or venue.

Phase	Balance ⁴	Heuristics – what people experience during the cycle
<i>Online Closing or transition</i>	Technology Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Feeling more skillful in the practices necessary for a productive learning community (which may be different in different venues: email, online, phone, face-to-face) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Recognizing conflict and agreement; ○ Knowing how to present or generate new ideas; ○ Making decisions, choosing from alternatives; ▪ Interpreting silence, absence or lack of awareness. ▪ Sadness. ▪ Excitement. ▪ Carrying the experience with you to another community, meeting or setting. ▪ Possibly appreciating the effort and skill involved in “behind the scenes” design and leadership. ▪ Using the proceedings or a collection of group resources (e.g., online discussions, documents, audio or video recordings, photos, etc.) as a reference.

Discussion: some implications of “what worked”

For this brief discussion we highlight five facets of what we think worked in the events organized using the media cycle we have described.

1. Spending time on social processes. When *creating new points of contact* is a design goal, spending enough time on social processes is essential, as “information about” or abstract knowledge about points of contact are no substitute for “the real thing”. The four-day “Setúbal Dialog” we organized in June 2002 took almost a year to plan. The planning and preparation was ultimately about the processes that we would use during the dialogue, with very few conversations about content or activities. These discussions were an important learning experience that revealed essential social and intellectual context about most participants and they played a crucial role in setting up a powerful face-to-face dialog. Several participants describe the combination of an online and face-to-face experience as a formative experience in their talks and papers; many continue to collaborate on all sorts of projects three years later. Our assessment is that careful consideration of social structures and processes that encourage improvisation are essential for a sustainable learning community using the media cycles.

2. Using different media to negotiate language as part of a larger process. When discussions about how general principles or technical terms apply to specific situations are important, the negotiation of meaning becomes a fundamental goal. Disciplined building on earlier conversations becomes a key element during online and face-to-face conversations, leading a shared understanding that is constructed in complementary ways. “The Tech-Muck” in January 2004 was aimed at bridging between the points of view of technologists and community developers. The online discussions established boundaries for the conversation and revealed many of the different positions that people held on the subjects under discussion. However, fundamental differences and views did not emerge until after a veneer of politeness and formality were peeled away at the three-day face-to-face meeting. Subsequent collaboration on a Wiki after the face-to-face conversation clarified the differences over a three week period of reflection. We find that looking at specific heuristics in this larger context of a media cycle helps make sense of the conversational development.

3. Creating new possibilities: subgroups and outside experts as resources. When re-drawing social boundaries and enriching the social fabric around learning and inquiry are important, the online, face-to-face, online cycle also affords new possibilities. During the face-to-face cycle of the October 2004 workshop on “Facilitating Learning Events” in Lisbon, working groups were formed and group leaders were designated. During the online follow-up, as those same groups met online to continue working on their projects, experts from five different countries joined their conversations to give them feedback

and encouragement. Those cohesive groups that had formed in a face-to-face setting were skillful in welcoming and leveraging what the experts had to offer.

4. Demonstrating leadership roles in different media. When a workshop aims to model skills and methods of inquiry, participants are able to form a more complete understanding and have a fuller experience of the issues involved if this modeling occurs in different media. As in the other workshops, during the Nahcotta Muckabout in November 2003 workshop facilitators acted as interlocutors and co-inquirers online. This was then repeated, but in a different way, during the face-to-face cycle. It made the experience of collaborative inquiry more vivid and then easier for participants to copy and adapt in the subsequent online follow-on.

5. Provoking shifts in “comfort zones.” While switching media is unsettling, it also opens up possibilities for collaboration and resourcefulness. A striking observation about changing media is that it changes people’s assumptions about what is “normal interaction.” Laura, confident in technology and in writing in her second language (in a group with people who have different first languages) finds it easy to keep up with the pace during the online ramp-up. Mathilde, who had problems getting in to the online space and who was not so confident writing in English, rarely contributed online. However, she knew her way round the location of the face-to-face venue and was quite confident in taking a leadership role in both workshop and surrounding social events. The relationship between Laura, Mathilde and the others was quite different in the online follow-on as a result of having experienced feeling both secure and insecure in the different media and their learning patterns probably changed as a result.

Conclusions

While blended learning focuses on combining different media or delivery methods, our design framework focuses on the processes involved in using one medium as a preparation for another and in using the dynamics and tensions of one to stimulate the learning in the next. Thus, the time dimension and an improvisational approach become extremely important. Each media cycle is an opportunity for a negotiation of meaning that takes place in different circumstances and during different phases of the distributed event. In practicing this cycle ourselves we have observed certain patterns of action and feelings by both participants and facilitators which we think could be helpful in designing for similar types of learning contexts, particularly among distributed communities and with a communities of practice perspective.

References

R. P. McDermott, (1993) "The acquisition of a child by a learning disability", in Chaiklin, S.; Lave, J. (Eds.) **Understanding Practice; Perspectives on activity and context** (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

¹ CPsquare, the community of practice on communities of practice, <http://www.CPsquare.org>

² We use the expression “distributed events” to refer to courses, workshops or any events in which learning is a primary aim that take place between people who live and work at a distance from each other.

³ Notable events on which we base our reflections include the Setúbal Dialog in 2002, CPweek in 2003, the Amsterdam C&T Phase Change workshop in 2003, the Nahcotta Muckabout in 2003, the Tech-Muck in 2004, a technology planning conference at the Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education in 2004, two workshops on “Working with Social Status as Scaffolding for Learning” in 2004 and the workshop on Facilitating Learning Events for Communities of Practice held in Lisbon in 2004. These events would not have occurred without our collaboration with Nancy White and Etienne Wenger and they have contributed much to our thinking. The participants in these events also made substantive contributions in the evolution of the practices that we describe here. A very rich discussion of an earlier version in CPsquare provided many insights and raised substantial questions, many of which we will address elsewhere.

⁴ Balance – between technology and community. Sometimes gets emphasized more.