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Cycle Three Summary Report – Draft

Overall Research Question: How can virtual collaboration tools provide a foundation for cultivating a community of practice among groups of itinerant staff members?

Cycle Three Question: If I provide a virtual location for members of the Special Interest Group-Technology Coordinators (SIGTC) to gather and collaborate, will they utilize the opportunity to develop into a community of practice?

Introduction

This cycle was developed to address concerns that I had related to finding value among group members who have a common interest but no common means of sharing that interest. When working with my workplace colleagues to cultivate a community of practice, I encountered difficulty encouraging and sustaining their participation both virtually and face-to-face. As noted in earlier cycles, the staff at my workplace expressed an interest in and a desire to collaborate and cultivate a community of practice. However, the reality after 4 months was that the community itself was barely limping along. I determined that there were several possible causes for the lack of cultivation: it seemed as if I was the “value” for the group rather than access to membership itself; technical skills and inexperience with technology provided a barrier, yet the group wanted to learn new technologies; the division had many “mini” communities working within it; and, a major new initiative for the reading and math remediation limited many staff members from participating thereby limiting the membership. In an effort to better understand the process of cultivating a community of practice, I decided to look outside my workplace.

SIGTC is the Special Interest Group for Technology Coordinators of the International Society of Technology Educators (ISTE). Throughout the years, this Special Interest Group has struggled to find ways to service its membership in valuable ways. Throughout the years, the only means of connecting the members to each other were through a listserv and through meeting forums at the national convention. When first becoming part of the leadership team, it became apparent that SIGTC was not providing service or value to its membership. Interestingly enough, ISTE did very little to provide guidance or opportunities for any of its Special Interest Groups to provide value service to the membership. While contemplating the difficulty that I was experiencing in cultivating a community of practice within my workplace, I decided to attempt to cultivate a community of practice with the SIGTC membership. This group of professionals was dispersed world-wide, rarely had an opportunity to meet face-to-face, and shared the common practice of promoting technology in education as a means to enrich the learning environment.

This cycle consisted of creating a group room in Tapped In for the purpose of providing a virtual office for SIGTC, a place for discussion to occur, a location to create a shared library, and presence that provided accessibility for educators world-wide to technology professionals. One of the possible problems that SIGTC was experiencing in trying to provide value and service to its members was the fact that all of its activities frequently was “closed off” to the public. Using a room in Tapped In allowed SIGTC to make its practice public. The tools available in Tapped In provided a variety of ways for members and non-members to interact with each other. It was hoped that the combination of interactive tools, the hosting of events, and the accessibility by both members and non-members would provide just the right “mix” of value to make SIGTC a dynamic community of practice.

My Action

My third set of actions was to provide a virtual location for members to interact. Since its inception, SIGTC's only on-going avenue for interacting with members was through a listserv. While this was suitable for many years, the advent of new interactive tools quickly outdated the suitability of a listserv for today's members as a means to interact and collaborate. Additionally, our parent organization, ISTE, did not have the means to provide us with tools for increased interactivity. A major obstacle that SIGTC encountered was that ISTE members must subscribe to join our listserv, however, ISTE does not provide us with a list of members who have joined SIGTC. Consequently, many members who have joined SIGTC never become members of the listserv. In effect, we may have a large group of members that are isolated. It must be noted that ISTE has added interactive tools for use by SIGs just recently. This will be discussed in my reflection.

I started my actions by meeting with the SIGTC president in late February and presented the possibility of using Tapped In as a means to reach our membership. The idea was embraced with enthusiasm as all members of the leadership team wanted a means to provide service and value to our membership. With the approval of the leadership team, I set about designing a plan of action for cultivating a community of practice that would be centered around the Tapped In community. A SIGTC group room was created within the community that was open to the public. I designed a series of events in conjunction with the leadership team of SIGTC. These events were to be held monthly. Our first series of events were facilitated by members from the leadership team. It was hoped that as we developed our community over time, members would volunteer to share their areas expertise for events. I used the listserv to advertise our events and I placed the SIGTC events in the Tapped In calendar. As noted earlier, I felt that it was important that SIGTC move its practice from "behind closed doors" to the public domain. Monthly events were therefore held in the public rooms on Tapped In rather than in our individual group room. Additionally, Tapped In publicizes its monthly calendar on several world-wide listservs providing SIGTC with the potential to attract new participants and possibly recruit new members.

Prior to each event, I created a discussion thread for the event for discussion of the current topic. I also provided links and files that would be of interest to the current topic. At the conclusion of each event, I placed the transcripts from the session in the SIGTC group room for later referral. In later months, I added publicity announcements for the National Educational Computer Conference (NECC), and SIGTCs own session and forum conducted at NECC.

Evidence and Evaluation

Evaluation of the results of my action suggested that the SIGTC membership found the "live" chat events valuable and useful. A total of 40 educators have chosen to join the SIGTC room in Tapped In. Additionally, a total of 18 non-members have attended at least one of the three events. More than one half of the members that have joined the SIGTC room are active. At the date of this writing, 15 members are inactive. In addition to attendance data, several participants commented via email and chat messages stating that the events were quite valuable (see table 3.1 in appendix). Membership activity analysis indicates that at least 2 members are core members, 8 are active members, and 14 are semi-active (see table 3.1 in appendix). The remaining 17 are periphery participants. This is in keeping with the research of Lave and Wenger who noted changing forms of participants in a community of practice will develop and evolve over time: "from entrance as a newcomer, through becoming an old-timer with respect to a new newcomers, to a point when these newcomers themselves become old-timers" (Lave et. al. p 56). Additionally Lave and Wenger also note that, "...this points to a richly diverse field of essential actions and, with it, other forms of relationships of participation" (Lave et. al. p 56).

Three initial events were held: Podcasting in Education, Blogging, and Handhelds in Education. Discussion threads were created prior to each event for all except the Handhelds in Education event. The beginning emergence of a community among the members and non-members is evidenced by the knowledge-sharing and group interaction. Chat responses were grouped according to type of comments including those that were knowledge-sharing in nature, those that were resource-sharing, those that were community/culture building in nature, and those that were evidence of interaction among members rather than solely with the facilitator (**see figure 3.2 below**). Three SIGTC room members initiated new discussion threads and six members shared specific links through the discussion threads. In all a total of 70 messages were generated in just under two months indicating an active community. Of particular interest is that two members participated only through discussion threads. These two members are located in different time zones—one in Alaska and one in Honduras. One non-member (from Israel) attended the Handheld event which took place at 2 am in her time zone. This illustrates the importance of providing a variety of ways for individuals to participate.

Podcasting Chat			
Interaction	Number	Color-code	
Shared Links	1	orange	
Knowledge Sharing	38	purple	
Community Building	24	green	
Group Interaction	11	blue	
Blogging Chat			
Interaction	Number	Color-code	
Shared links	9	orange	
Knowledge sharing	215	purple	
Community	13	green	
Group Interaction	61	blue	
Handheld Chat			
Interaction	Number	Color-Code	
Shared links	13	orange	
Knowledge sharing	94	purple	
Community Building	4	green	
Group Interaction	24	blue	
Key			
Orange	Discussion interactions where specific links and other resources were shared		
Purple	Discussion interactions where participants shared experiences and specific knowledge		
Green	Discussion interactions that supported community-building and culture		
Blue	Discussion interactions that occurred specifically among individuals or groups of individuals		

Figure 3.2

A comparison of community-building evidence among the three events indicates that these educators are in the beginning stages of community building. In all four areas of comparison (see figure 3.2 above), growth can be seen. Of particular interest is the increase in the interaction among the members themselves. This grew from thirteen (13) to a high of sixty-one (61) during the Blogging event. While Podcasting showed the least amount of interaction among the participants this could be due to the newness of the technology itself rather than a disinterest by the members to interacting with each other. Total attrition for the SIGTC room is one (1) indicating that membership and participation is valued. The event attendance numbers and the number of responses indicate that

participants find value both in the topics and in the opportunity to interact. The lowest event attendance was for the Handhelds in Education event, although it generated the largest number of resource sharing. This could be due to the fact that handheld computers are more common place and therefore members have more experience with the tool. It also may explain the lower attendance numbers for this event as members may feel comfortable with the technology and are not seeking continued interaction on the topic.

Reflection

This particular cycle demonstrated several information concepts. A community of practice is a group processes, not an individual endeavor. The group as a whole provides the value that binds the community together. As I look back at the previous two cycles, I realize that both of those endeavors are still individual endeavors rather than a group endeavor. The value is in the interaction and sharing of the members rather than just one single individual. This cycle illustrated that I was capable of cultivating a community of practice, but that I may have to look beyond the volunteer group to do so. What ingredients contributed to make these events successful? Educators are interested in emerging technology and providing this venue allows them an opportunity to explore with other educators and gain knowledge through that sharing. Technology personnel are able to provide a service to the educational community worldwide. This cycle helped SIGTC meet its mission; it helped validate our existence, it allowed the technology personnel an opportunity to interact with a variety of educators who are in very diverse environments, thereby creating a stimulating interactive experience; and it furthered the knowledge of all participants. People really are looking for ways to feel connected, ways to gather around the campfire. This cycle demonstrated that to me that people really are looking for ways to gather around the campfire and if provided with the opportunity, they will do just that and in the process begin building relationships and knowledge networks that can sustain professional and personal growth. The question remains...How can I help the staff at my workplace gather around the campfire? I think the answer to this particular question will provide me with the means to find the value that must be present in my workplace.

Next Steps

My next cycle will continue to focus on finding the value that will be necessary for the staff members of my workplace to join together. Through a lot of reflection on the idea of finding the value that will be necessary to sustain a community, I am going to take a more of "community-building" approach. I have designed an activity called Sun 'n Fun Tech Friday. Designed as an opportunity for staff members to gather together for a Friday afternoon for collaboration on technology-based project, it will provide a fun "beach" theme with beach snacks, beach scenes, and Beach Boys music. Each participant will work in project-alike groups of their choosing. I will collect data such as time on task, comments made, biology breaks, interruptions, etc. At the end of the event, each participant will share their project with the group. As a way to build participation for future Fun Tech days, each participant will have their picture taken in front of a beach scene. These will be made into postcards that say, "Wish You Were Here." These postcards will be given (electronically) to each participant and they will be asked to email the postcard to two colleagues that they would like to invite to attend the next event. These Fun Tech days will occur three times per year during the next year. Each will be themed: October—Howling Fun Tech Friday; January—Skiing Fun Tech Friday; June—Sun 'n Fun Tech Friday. I am hopeful that each year we can expand and keep growing these activities so that eventually they occur once per month. Other themes that may evolve: Bingo Fun Tech Friday and Movie Fun Tech Friday—these could include small trivia contests related to movies and possibility a bingo game of some time.

Appendix

**Figure 3.1
SIGTC Room Member List**

Member List	Joined TI	Joined SIGTC Room in TI	Role	Location	Podcasting Participation*	Blogging Participant*	Handhelds Participation*
Participant 1	2/15/2005	2/23/2005	ITS	VA		Attended	Facilitator
Participant 2	1/12/2005	2/23/2005	TC	WA			
Participant 3	6/7/2005	2/22/2005	ITS	PA	Facilitator	Facilitator	Facilitator
Participant 4	2/28/2005	2/28/2003	TC	NY		Facilitator	
Participant 5	3/1/2005	3/1/2005	Ed	NC			
Participant 6	3/1/2005	3/1/2005	ITS	MD			
Participant 7	2/14/2005	3/6/2005	TS	AL	5 times		
Participant 8	3/10/2005	3/10/2005	TC	MS	12 times		
Participant 9	2/17/2005	3/15/2005	Elem	TX			
Participant 10	9/23/2004	3/16/2005	Admin	PA	5 times	23 times	8 times
Participant 11	3/22/2005	3/22/2005	TC	Honduras			
Participant 12	1/21/2003	3/28/2005	HST	CA			
Participant 13	3/30/2005	3/30/2005	MST	PA		attended	13 times
Participant 14	3/6/2003	3/31/2005	Elem	Canada	4 times	6 times	
Participant 15	6/5/2003	3/31/2005	Museum	VA	7 times		
Participant 16	3/12/2005	3/31/2005	ITS	NY	attended	12 times	
Participant 17	3/10/2005	3/31/2005	TC	NY	15 times	65 times	21 times
Participant 18	2/1/2005	3/31/2005	Pre-Service	TX			
Participant 19	2/28/2005	3/31/2005	Elem	Canada	4 times		
Participant 20	5/7/2004	3/31/2005	HST	MA	1 time	3 times	
Participant 21	1/30/2005	3/31/2005	TC	Bangladesh	7 times		
Participant 22	3/6/2003	3/31/2005	HST	Canada	attended	attended	
Participant 23	2/19/2004	3/31/2005	TS	VA	14 times	18 times	
Participant 24	3/30/2005	3/31/2005	Researcher	NC	5 times		
Participant 25	3/28/2005	3/31/2005	INS	VA	Facilitator		
Participant 26	3/31/2005	3/31/2005	Elem	PA	attended		
Participant 27	5/5/2003	4/1/2005	TeacherEd	Taiwan			
Participant 28	2/29/2004	4/1/2005	Admin	MD	7 times		
Participant 29	5/5/2005	4/5/2005	TC	TX			
Participant 30	2/24/2005	4/6/2005	TeacherEd	AL			
Participant 31	2/11/2004	4/11/2005	TC	MI			
Participant 32	2/1/2005	4/11/2005	Pre-Service	TX	30 times	attended	
Participant 33	1/30/2005	4/11/2005	Other	TX	9 times		
Participant 34	4/5/2005	4/13/2005	TC	WA			
Participant 35	6/14/2004	4/19/2005	Elem	MD	11 times	12 times	
Participant 36	3/31/2005	5/2/2005	Admin	MT			
Participant 37	5/3/2005	5/3/2005	TC	TX			
Participant 38	5/3/2005	5/3/2005	TeacherEd	TX			
Participant 39	6/19/2003	5/16/2005	Elem	CA		25 times	
Participant 40	10/8/2002	5/16/2005	TC	CA			
Participant 41	5/17/2005	5/17/2005	TC	PA			
Participant 42	6/4/2004	5/23/2005	TC	IA	3 times		

Non-Member SIGTC List

Chat Participants	Joined TI	Join SIGTC Room in TI	Role	Location	Podcasting Participation*	Blogging Participation*	Handheld Participation*
NM-Participant 1	Guest		Unknown	Unknown	attended		
NM-Participant 2	2/6/2005		Pre-Serv	TX	4 times		
NM-Participant 3	4/26/2003		TeacherEd	Israel			12 times
NM-Participant 4	12/7/2004		Elem	Va		attended	
NM-Participant 5	2/12/2005		Pre-Serv	TX		24 times	
NM-Participant 6	Guest		Unknown	Unknown		attended	
NM-Participant 7	2/12/2005		Other	TX		30 times	
NM-Participant 8	4/7/2005		MST	NY		attended	
NM-Participant 9	12/7/2004		Elem	VA		24 times	
NM-Participant 10	1/1/2005		MST	TX		21 times	
NM-Participant 11	2/12/2005		Other	TX		41 times	
NM-Participant 12	9/13/2004		TC	MI		20 times	
NM-Participant 13	10/5/2004		Elem	OH		attended	
NM-Participant 14	Guest		Unknown	Unknown		attended	
NM-Participant 15	3/25/2005		Librarian	MO		41 times	
NM-Participant 16	5/2/2005		Elem	CA			1 time
NM-Participant 17	6/18/2003		MST	NJ			4 times
NM-Participant 18	5/23/2005		Researcher	PA			attended

Key to Roles	
Admin	Administrator
Elem	Elementary Teacher
ITS	Instructional Technology Specialist
MST	Middle School Teacher
HST	High School Teacher
Librarian	Librarian
Museum	Museum
Other	Other
Pre-Serv	Pre-Service
Researcher	Researcher
TC	Technology Coordinator
TeacherEd	Teacher Educator
TS	Tech Support

Figure 3.1

Reference:

Lave, Jean, and Etienne Wenger. Situated Learning Legitimate Peripheral Participation. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

MLA Citation

Bibliographic Reference

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Parenthetical Within Text

(Lave et al. 138)