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Cycle Four Summary Report – June 11, 2005

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

Cycle Four Question: How can I use face-to-face meeting opportunities to provide opportunities for the staff members to collaborate and interact with one another as a means to encourage the cultivation of a community of practice?

Introduction

This cycle was devoted to investigating ways to bring this itinerant staff together for opportunities to collaborate, build trust, and develop culture within the division. From my last cycle experience with the SIGTC group, I learned that virtual collaboration tools can provide a means to connect groups of people together to share their practice. Through the interactions among the participants, a sense of community is forged and the group begins to move from the potential stage of community develop to the coalescing. This synergistic interaction among all members is essential to the development of the Community of practice. My goal during this cycle was to experiment with methods that would create the same interaction among the staff members at my workplace.

The success of “live” events with the SIGTC group encouraged me to find ways to develop this same experience within my workplace. The difference between the two groups was that my workplace group could literally have a “live” event rather than a “virtual live” event. With this in mind, I set out to find ways to reproduce the SIGTC experience in my workplace.

My Action

My actions for this cycle consisted of designing a series of face-to-face opportunities that would allow and encourage collaboration among the staff members. As I discovered in earlier cycles with this group, there is particular interest among the staff in learning technology applications and skills. My own particular goal was to encourage the staff to learn to tap into each other rather than rely specifically on me for technology ideas and assistance. I developed an idea called Fun Tech Friday. This was a two-hour, Friday afternoon session that provided opportunities for the staff to meet and work together. The format was open-ended, staff members could come into the Intermediate Unit to work on technology projects of their choosing knowing that assistance would be available. I created a full color flyer advertising the event and publicized the event via email and flyers place in their physical mailbox. Approximately 6 staff members choose to take advantage of this first Fun Tech Friday opportunity. A second event was held one month later. I choose to design this Fun Tech Friday as a “themed” event to add a “unique” feel to the event and spark more interest in participating. This event was called Sun ‘n Fun Tech Friday and was scheduled to be held outside with a beach theme and beach music. This event was advertised in the same manner as the previous event with one exception, the flyers and emails had a headline: Collaborators Wanted.

Refreshments were added and geared to the beach theme, Hawaiian leis, flower wrist and head garlands were provided, and a sharing component among the participants was added at the end of the event. The day of the event turned out to be rainy and cloudy so we moved the event inside, added a series of beach scenes via a PowerPoint slide show and projects, and created several large-scale paper suns to the room. As a final touch, we had each participant stand in front of one of the beach slides and took their picture as a momento. Finally, as a way to encourage sharing, I provided a series of graphic organizers, in digital form, that I created for any participants who would like to have them. The room was set up with tables in a diamond shape, and a “snack bar” section was arranged via another set of tables. Finally, Beach Boys music was played throughout the event as a means to create a festive, fun atmosphere.

Evidence and Evaluation

Evaluation of the results of my actions suggested that the staff members found these events to be valuable and useful. The first Fun Tech Friday attracted 6 staff members, while the second Sun 'n Fun Tech Friday attracted 10 staff members indicating moderate growth and interest in the event. It should be noted that the second event occurred two weeks before the end of the school and this is traditionally a very work-intensive period for the staff of this division. At each event, at least one member from the original group attended, but the events were really geared to draw in the general staff membership (see Table 4.1 below).

Fun Tech Friday						
On Task Survey	1:45	2:00	2:15	2:30	2:45	3:00
Nancy Smith	x	x	x	x	x	x
Ellie Kubicek	x	x		x	x	x
Maryanne Fisher	x	x		x	x	x
Terri Russo	x	x				
Michelle Paglia			x		x	x
Pat Kuhns	x	x	x		left early	
Drop Ins	0	0	0	0	0	0

Sun 'n Fun Tech Friday							
On Task Survey	1:30	1:45	2:00	2:15	2:30	2:45	3:00
Nancy Smith	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Lisa Lamesta				x	x	x	x
Nancy Myers	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Janet Selber				x	x	x	
Pat Kuhns	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Janie Driska	x	x	x	x	x	x	x*
Michelle Paglia	x	x	x	x		x	x
Anne Draus	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Mary Louise Hugnair	not arrived		x	x	x	x	x
Another	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Drop Ins**	4	2	1	0	0	1	0

*Stayed until 4 PM to continue working on project

**staff from NPSS division and other divisions who dropped by to see what was happening.

(Table 4.1)

During the first event, two sets of remediators worked together on projects that were similar, and one participant readily offered to help those who needed help importing graphics into their projects. It should be noted that this particular participant learned the importing technique from attending a small workshop I have given a month earlier. Attention and motivation for the participants of the first Fun Tech Friday was mid-line showing that attention and motivation was intermittent as noted in Table 4.1 above.

The second event, Sun 'n Fun Tech Friday offered the same opportunities to collaborate as the first event, but also provided a theme, refreshments, festivities, music, sharing time, and a more directed method to ensure participant engagement through the introduction of participants and their intended projects, seating based on projects, and a sharing activity as closure. Attendance for the event increased slightly, attention and motivation among participants was improved, and participant enthusiasm skyrocketed as can be seen in Table 4.2 and 4.3 below.

	Sharing and Collaboration		Closing Sharing Activity Participant
	Fun Tech Friday	Sun 'n Fun Tech Friday	
Nancy Smith	1	1	n/a
Ellie Kubichek	1, 2	n/a	n/a
Maryanne Fisher	1, 2	n/a	n/a
Terri Russo	3	n/a	n/a
Michelle Paglia		1	yes
Pat Kuhns	3	2	yes
Lisa Lamesta	n/a	3	yes
Nancy Myers	n/a	4	yes
Janet Selber	n/a	3	yes
Janie Driska	n/a	2,4	yes
Anne Draus	n/a	4	yes
Mary Lousie Hugnair	n/a	4, 5	yes
Another	n/a	5	yes

Matching numbers indicate a collaborative effort was present

Table 4.2

Comments by participants of Sun 'n Fun Tech Friday
Our co-workers will be so jealous that they didn't come to this
This is so cool
That is really good, I'd like to learn how to do that
I like being able to come and work on something of my own choosing
Look at the cute watermelon cookies
There really is Beach Boys music here
These tech days are great, will you do more?
We're really going to get to work together outside? This is huge!
I would have come to this if I had known my school schedule for this week. (comment from a drop in)

Table 4.3

Reflection

This cycle presented many opportunities to look at myself and how I can design opportunities for staff to encourage community-building and technology skill development. During my first two cycles, I really doubted my ability to guide groups and provide opportunities for them that would encourage or cultivate community. Several things that I would change in this project would be the creation of the volunteer group. This hampered me and actually closed me off from the full staff. Had I started with events that promoted collaboration first, observed the staff interaction, and then began to work in smaller groups, I may have had more success earlier. I realized during cycle three that I was limiting myself and not seeing the "big picture" that is community. A community of practice cannot be created through a "volunteer group" who "volunteer" to create a community of practice. However, it has served a purpose with a great outcome that is in keeping with communities of practice: some members of this group and have developed an interest in "helping" others learn the skills and techniques that they have been using. Several of the members of the original group will assist me in conducting a workshop this summer for staff members who want to learn about Tapped In. For me, I have developed a more focused intent on finding ways to "construct" opportunities that will encourage the staff of my workplace to make their own mark and see where it takes them. I have learned to focus on designing opportunities that encourage collaboration and practice-sharing and allow the participants to take advantage of those opportunities. I no longer try to transmit value, but rather construct for value. I find myself taking steps that may help build the capacity in their abilities to step forward and bring their own practice into the open and share their knowledge with others. As itinerant workers who are very isolated from the remainder of the division, it is important that they open their knowledge to others and that they are exposed to the knowledge of others. As members of the Intermediate Unit, we are compelled to be leaders in our fields and to provide leadership in our areas of practice for the school districts we serve.

Next Steps

My next steps with both of these groups will center on the continual cultivation of the communities.

For the workplace group I will attempt to take the original group of volunteers and build capacity in them to move forward in our practice and become teacher leaders in regards to encouraging staff to collaborate and explore technology usage within the group. One possibility that has potential would be to "morph" the small volunteer group into a technology steering committee or advisory as they originally volunteered for this research because of their interest in exploring technology. I will continue to expand and improve the Fun Tech Fridays by developing at least two more themed events that occur throughout the year. In addition to continuing the Sun 'n Fun Tech Friday, I will add "Howling Fun Tech Friday" and "Ski 'n Fun Tech Friday."

For the SIGTC group, I will explore ways to encourage the members to step forward and lead "live" events in areas where they have experience and expertise. I will also explore opportunities to invite teachers in the field into the events to share successes and challenges that they experience. Emerging technology appears to be a great catalyst for

keeping the members engaged so I will need to explore ways to stay abreast of current advances and develop ways to find the "experts" needed for our events.