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Communities of Practice and other Issues in Online Education. An interview with Seb Schmoller by Piotr Boltuc

Seb Schmoller, who combines part time employment as Chief Executive of the UK's Association for Learning Technology (ALT), with independent consulting, answers to a few questions posed by Piotr Boltuc, Professor of SGH in online learning. The conversation started over a morning coffee at Milton Keynes, the headquarters of British Open University and continued online. One of Seb's major ongoing initiatives is the CAMEL project.

What is CAMEL (and why does it matter)?

CAMEL stands for Collaborative Approaches to the Management of E-Learning. But the idea is best explained by the following quote: *'Meetings were 'calzon quitao' – 'with underpants removed'. Sometimes there emerged some truths or criticisms which were very painful, and this is what I think helped many to come to terms with reality.'* Nicholas Kent, Mercedes, Uruguay, 2006

In 1985 I visited my uncle Nicholas Kent in Mercedes, Uruguay. He showed me the "log book" from what was, in effect, a "community of practice" that he and a group of 7 other local small farmers had established. The basic approach was that participants paid each other facilitated exchange visits at which they reviewed and critiqued each other's farming practices. For some reason, what he showed me stuck in my mind.

Nearly 20 years later this simple model was built into a small scale project (with a focus on e-learning rather than agriculture) involving 2 English Universities (Greenwich and Staffordshire) and 2 English Further Education Colleges (Loughborough and Leeds College of Technology). The project, called CAMEL, was funded by the HEFCE Leadership, Governance and Management programme. It was jointly run by ALT (for which I work part time as Chief Executive) and JISCinfonet (a JISC service), with the support of JISC and the Higher Education Academy.

The CAMEL project was based on a series of facilitated exchange visits between the four partner institutions, run in such a way as to encourage participants to talk candidly about their e-learning practice.

Why does it matter?

Because in the course of the CAMEL project a method was documented that gets right to the heart of how to establish and sustain an inter-institutional collaboration, whether or not that collaboration is about e-learning.

Subsequently CAMEL has "spawned" several successor projects, all of which make some use of the approach we developed.

You can access the CAMEL documentation, including "The CAMEL Project: Collaborative Approaches to the Management of e-Learning", and "Using the CAMEL Model to Build a Community of Practice" from the JiscInfonet web site at <http://www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk/publications>.

Does it mean that the now famous communities of practice originate from CAMEL, and indirectly from your uncle, the farmer in Uruguay?

If only! Etienne Wenger is, I believe, the original main proponent of communities of practice, but like all the best ideas they are usually a refinement of something that is fairly obvious and already happening in some form or other. But, yes, CAMEL and its "spawnings" did derive from the activities of my uncle and his group of Uruguayan farmers.

How would you define a community of practice and what would its main goals and methods be?

I am with Etienne Wenger on a community of practice being "a group of practitioners", "who share similar challenges", "interact regularly, learn from and with each other", and "improve their ability to address their challenges".

I think the fourth point captures well the goal of a COP i.e. "in this COP we will jointly improve our individual and possibly collective ability to deal with the challenges we face".

As for methods, there is no clear-cut single answer to this question except in so far as the COP needs to:

1. engage in dialogue over a protracted period (whether virtual or face to face, synchronous or asynchronous);
2. have a plan of work or at least a commonly accepted process for its members to engage in it;
3. operate under some ground rules, of which one key one is that members will "put their cards on the table" and act as each others' critical friends.

Let us move from CAMEL to broader issues of online education. As someone who has been observing the world of on-line distance learning for many years, and as the Chief Executive of the Association for Learning Technology, what do you see as the main goals and challenges of online education? Is quality assurance one of those challenges?

I think there are 3 main challenges in addition to quality assurance. Firstly, to keep online learning in perspective. There are plenty of "snake-oil sellers" urging the use of this or that technology or tool, when the simplicity and reliability of plain old email, well-designed web pages, along with authentic and relevant tasks are difficult to improve upon. Secondly to ensure that teachers involved in the delivery of online education are properly trained both in teaching at a distance and in teaching online. A third challenge is to manage the transition between institutional provision of most if not all of the tools, content, and services that support an on-line course, and external provision, for example by Google or Wikipedia.

On quality assurance I am taken aback at how much this is not seen as an issue in itself. I had an involvement in the creation of British Standard "BS8426:2003 - A code of practice for e-support in e-learning systems", which outlines some simple standards to use in the quality assurance (QA) of e-learning, and a method for applying these. Of course BS8426 is now showing its age a bit; but the uptake of it has been very limited. I've used it in the QA process and I know it is effective. Perhaps "not invented here" is the reason for poor uptake.

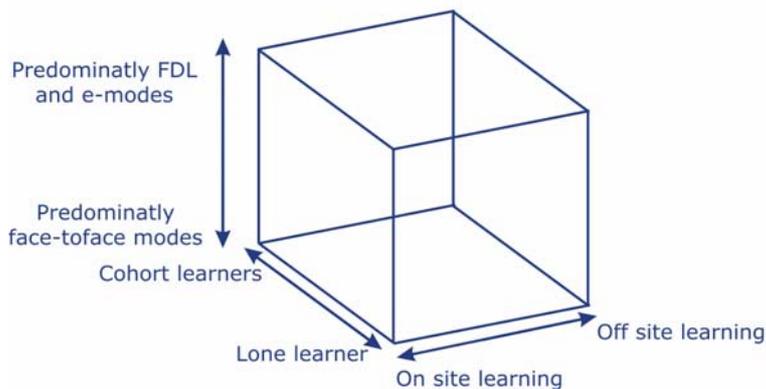
Some people claim that all technologically sophisticated education is 'blended education' and that pure on campus education and pure online education are just extreme cases. There was at least some research showing that blended learning is able to combine what classroom learning and online learning do best and thereby increase learning outcomes by up to 20%. Yet, you are known as an opponent of blended learning.

It is the *term* "blended learning" that I dislike not learning that involves a mix of face-to-face and IT-enabled methods! The reason I dislike the term is firstly that it smacks of "lowest common denominator" (think of blended whiskey!), and secondly because its use enables teachers to avoid facing up to the fact that using technology well to support learning requires them to change their practice: instead they can simply say "I'm using blended learning", make very little use of technology, and pretend that their

practice has changed. Similarly the term allows universities and colleges to avoid facing up to the changes they also need to make.

Some years ago I was a member of a Working Group that produced the UK Quality Assurance Agency's "Code of practice for the assurance of academic quality and standards in higher education - Section 2: Collaborative provision and flexible and distributed learning (including e-learning)", available here: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/codeOfPractice/section2/default.asp>

In the course of the discussions I came up with the diagram in paragraph 24 - <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/images/COP2p7.GIF>,



and I think this 3D continuum provides a much better way to view learning than simply to describe it as blended, or not.

What question would you like to address at the end of this short interview?

Oh God! I am hopeless at this kind of thing. Perhaps: "What is your own personal vision for how The Association for Learning Technology will develop?"

I believe that ALT is offering something that is both valuable and distinctive. I would certainly like to see a wider range of organisations, and not just in the UK, become active members; and I am certain that learning technologists will play an increasingly important role in the provision of (and research into) public and commercial learning and training at all levels and in all sectors. ALT is intent on providing a good home for this new breed of professional.

Thank you for the interview.