

Heutagogy and Social Communities of Practice: Will self-determined learning re-write the script for educators?

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Biography: David Price is a Senior Associate at the Innovation Unit, a not-for-profit enterprise committed to solving social challenges, in London. For the past 10 years, David has led numerous international education projects, helping schools gear themselves up to meet the challenges of the 21st century. In 2009 he was awarded the O.B.E. By Her Majesty the Queen for services to education.

Summary

In recent years the concept of professional development is being radically reframed by the rapid growth of self-determined communities of practice. This chapter examines the ways that educators are incorporating informal and social learning approaches, in order to de-privatise their professional practice, and take control of their personal learning.

The characteristics of self-organised informal, fluid, learning networks help explain their power and diffusion. The way that educators are self-organising their professional development is highlighted here but such networks are appearing in every professional sector.

The emergence of these communities of practice present a number of challenges to conventional models of professional learning: first, they are flattening and democratising notions of expertise and sources of authority; second, they present a conundrum to those charged with 'managing' knowledge; third, they threaten to render obsolete our conventional models of 'scaling-up' or diffusing innovation; fourth (and most significant) they offer the opportunity for educators to shed the mantle of compliance, and reclaim some lost professional autonomy.

Teachers Are Doing It For Themselves

On March 2nd, 2012, over 350 teachers hurry after school to attend a 'TeachMeet' event in a technology park in Sydney. I'm one of dozens of presenters who sign-up to share, in either seven or two minute slots, what works for them in their classroom practice. Presentations are interspersed with light-hearted group activities, and lots of cake.

On a Saturday morning two years later, I'm taking part in a Twitter hashtag meeting for educators. Like TV coverage of New Years Eve fireworks, #satchat is staggered three times around the world - first in Australia, then the East and finally West coasts of America - some dedicated people take part in all three events, all of which end up 'trending' in their respective nations.

Meanwhile, in the first week in September, returning teachers in English schools begin the academic year by wearily attending compulsory training events, still known as 'Baker Days', even though 25 years have passed since the then Secretary of State for Education, Kenneth Baker, mandated five school training days per year. Bored staff surreptitiously check emails on their mobiles while health and safety requirements are subjected to death by powerpoint.

These sharply contrasting manifestations of self-determined and 'delivered' professional learning point to the fundamental shift in how we view knowledge, and the institutional challenge to formal learning which social learning presents. Education is just one sector in which traditional models of professional learning are fast becoming redundant. All areas of work-based learning are being disrupted, leaving learning professionals excited and perplexed in equal measure. The reasons are not hard to find.

The cascade model of knowledge transfer, in which knowledge trickles down the hierarchical chain, seems increasingly out of place in a world where knowledge is spread laterally, informally and democratically. Additionally, while the economic value of knowledge failed to match predicted claims, the advent of web 2.0 meant that the *social* value of knowledge has soared. The commercial necessity to re-align values, communications and operations has been profound. The demise of intellectual 'property' has led businesses to seek to find other ways to make money, not from the knowledge, but from the *implementation* of that knowledge. Almost overnight it seems, businesses have had to reach out - to crowdsource innovation, and become social organisations.

At the same time, employees become frustrated that the open, borderless learning they engage in when not at work, is shunned in many offices. It's hard to see the logic (other than lack of trust) in preventing staff from using Twitter and other social media tools while at work when they've become the primary tools of the trade for many socially connected employees - but the majority still do. And how do corporations manage and support organisational learning when an employee's closest collaborator may be on the other side of the globe, let alone the other side of the building?

The Self-Determined Learner

The past three decades have seen a precipitous drop in employee autonomy. In 1986, 72% of professionals felt they had a 'great deal' of independence in their work. By 2006 that proportion had fallen to 38%. In education, this period has been defined by the steady ratcheting-up of high-stakes accountability, with an accompanying pressure upon teachers to plan lessons according to a formula, and to teach according to a 'script'. Professional learning has become the tool to reinforce those constrictions. Little wonder then, that the average length of service to new entrants to teaching has fallen to around five years. In many schools in the US, UK and Australia experienced teachers point to a 'culture of compliance' throughout the system: all but the bravest of leaders comply with government edicts; teachers are required to comply with the need to improve test scores; and students comply with the demands of what they increasingly view as the 'exam factory'.

In spite of - or perhaps as a result of - this erosion of professional capability, a growing number of educators have taken matters into their own hands. The first TeachMeet was hosted in a pub, in Edinburgh, by Ewan McIntosh in 2006. Since then, they have mushroomed in popularity, with hundreds of events taking place in over a dozen countries. Their common features give a clue to their success: short, fast-paced presentations; anyone can sign-up to present; short break-out discussions facilitated by volunteers; randomness (TeachMeets are rarely themed); a Twitter 'back-channel' to allow non-attendees to take part. 'Newbies' are strongly encouraged to present - a two-minute description of a successful teaching strategy is unlikely to intimidate even the most reticent of practitioners. Teachmeets are organised entirely by volunteers, refreshingly non-proprietary and they're reinforcing virtual networks of teachers, nationally and internationally.

Similarly, the growing phenomenon of Twitter hashtag meet-ups and on-line ‘unconferences’ indicate a desire from teachers to be more in control of their own professional learning. There are regular hashtag meetings in almost every subject discipline, involving a global community of teachers from around the world. Meetings usually last an hour and are moderated by volunteers. Online conferences have also sprung up through the improvement of webcast technologies. The Global Education Conference is one such example. Involving over 10,000 participants, sessions are held around the clock for 5 days. Anyone can present, and people with no previous experience of presenting are encouraged to make their debut. For some, even these kinds of events are too structured. ‘Unconferences’ (either online or virtual) increasingly adopt ‘open space technology’ where no programme, or agenda is created in advance. Instead, participants determine the priorities for themselves and then self-organise the best ways to explore issues and present their findings. Throughout unconferences, the ‘law of two feet applies’: if participants become bored, they are free to leave, join - or start - another discussion group.

These examples of teachers self-determining their professional needs and interests have profound implications for policy makers and senior leaders when considering issues of professional development. But they also confound our perceived notions of how professional practices best spread.

Musical Futures: A Case Study

Musical Futures is ‘a movement to reshape music education, driven by teachers for teachers’. It began life in 2003 as a small-scale action research project working in around 40 high schools in England. I was the original project leader, and now function as an adviser. Musical Futures’ original mission was to find radical and innovative ways to re-shape teaching in order to enhance engagement in music. I know that it sounds faintly ridiculous to have to find ways to make young people engaged in their most popular cultural activity during adolescence, but one only has to say the words ‘recorder’ or ‘All Cows Eat Grass’ to trigger a pavlovian response in most adults. The way music is taught in many schools hasn’t changed much in decades and remains disconnected from young people’s musical lives outside school. Built around the creation of teaching and learning strategies which would allow young people to play music they identify with, in friendship groups, teachers began to see the power of enabling learners to shape their own learning. At the time of writing, the Musical Futures programmes is operational in 10 countries and the original 40 English schools have grown to 1700.

In 2013, we decided to run a pilot programme for teachers, offering training in voice and music technology. Our strategy for getting new professional practices to spread was fairly conventional: set up a small pilot; equip practitioners with new skills; refine and repeat; create materials and resources; publish then promote.....and hope it gathers momentum.

Faced with an overwhelming demand from teachers for inclusion in the pilot, however, we set-up a parallel ‘co-pilot’, to be delivered through social media. Our expectations were low - how would teachers feel the same sense of engagement that those receiving face-to-face training and regular follow-up support?

Within two days, 200 schools from around the world had signed up to ‘Find Your Voice’, agreeing to follow our project protocol: ‘Take. Use. Innovate. Share.’ We set up a blog, and a ‘sharing wall’ (where documents and audio/video files could be up/downloaded, and arranged for an experimental Twitter conversation. What happened next amazed us.

Before we'd given them anything to 'take' - video footage from the first training event - co-pilot teachers were already sharing their challenges, techniques and fixes, online. When the first videos *did* appear, teachers tried out the techniques, filmed themselves in the classroom, then posted their efforts to the public sharing wall. The natural tendency might have been to share only their 'best practice'. However, teachers seemed more than willing to share the lessons which *didn't* go according to plan, and then have peers critique and collectively problem-solve. This seems counter-intuitive: why would a profession that practices 'the secret business of teaching', and resists being observed in the classroom, appear more than happy to post videos of themselves struggling to master new approaches?

The de-privatising of their practices had two further unintended consequences. As the co-pilot continued, the open nature led to one of the world's best exponents of beat-boxing, Shlomo, becoming aware of it and subsequently offering to provide video tutorials, record workshops with students and teachers, and take part in the now weekly Twitter chats. Further, the students being filmed became aware of each other's efforts and spurred each other into sharing, too.

“We share who we are, we learn what we do”

In researching my book *OPEN: How We'll Work, Live & Learn In The Future*, I identified 6 powerful motivations behind the rise of social learning: autonomy, immediacy; collegiality; playfulness; generosity; high-visibility. The success of the Musical Futures co-pilot reinforces some of these motivations:

Autonomy - when the online group began to determine the course of the co-pilot, our position shifted from project leaders to moderators. When we attempted a complete withdrawal from steering the project, however, it became clear that some learning stimulation was needed - someone needed to brief the trainers, or organise the agenda for the Twitter conversations, and although some delegation was possible, it was evident that busy practitioners welcomed some light-touch steering.

Immediacy - because of time differences, an evening Twitter chat in the UK was the following morning in Australia. On one notable occasion a video posted by a teacher and discussed by the group, was immediately taken into school by an Australian teacher, to show to his students. A subsequent video response by the same students was able to be uploaded to the sharing wall, and analysed by the group, before that evening chat had ended. It was moments like this which prompted one contributor to declare “this is the best staff-room EVER!”. What Lillian Katz has termed 'horizontal relevance' - being able to apply learning immediately to problems in hand, is commonplace in self-determined and social learning alike.

Generosity - the kindness of strangers was evidenced throughout the initiative (“when that didn't work for me, I tried x...”). This generosity and trust - the willingness to take time to help those who were struggling - seemed to elevate 'reputational capital' above subject expertise.

High-Visibility - while sharing each other's work became the driving force of the initiative, it could have been carried out in a secure, private, space. Making almost everything highly visible (a private Facebook group was created, so that teachers could discuss school and profession-related problems without fear of censure) not only motivated students and teachers alike, it also attracted others to the

programme. Shlomo was a high-profile case in point, but many others, not signed-up to the pilot, came to 'lurk' in Twitter conversations.

Whilst the co-pilot ended the lessons learned in the experiment will inform the future direction of Musical Futures for the foreseeable future. Not only will all training be scaffolded with less direction and more 'crowdsourcing', the route to scaling-up new professional practices has irrevocably shifted away from 'refine and release' with a small initial pilot cohort, to engaging all practitioners who are willing to adopt Google's philosophy: 'fail fast and iterate'.

Lessons Learned

When, in 1948, 3M instigated its much-copied 15% 'free time' for employees to pursue their own interests, it made the entitlement available to all staff, not just its lead scientists. Similarly, the social learning seen in TeachMeets and through a plethora of social media platforms offers a glimpse of more democratic, less hierarchical, professional learning. Though not by any means widespread, this flattening of learning has the potential to reverse decades of increasing employee disengagement and loss of autonomy. It also presents a paradox to company learning officers. Some of the most innovative companies in the world are dispensing with formal training programmes, and adopting strategies which allow employees the 'right to roam' in their professional learning. How can knowledge be managed in such an environment? How can the intellectual capital of an organisation be sustained when workers are collaborating with potential competitors?

The overwhelming message of the web 2.0 era is that knowledge cannot be constrained, so adopting open source principles and freeing intellectual 'property' is an act of pragmatism, as much as altruism. The advantage gained in keeping a secret isn't worth the effort any more, because commercial value no longer resides in knowledge - it's in the application of that knowledge, which is only fully realised through sharing.

This opening of professional knowledge demands that practitioners (in both commercial and public sectors) become responsible for their own learning and are required to chart their own course. It could be argued that educators are uniquely positioned to benefit from these autonomous learning opportunities. They are, after all, supposed to know how learning works, and should be at the vanguard of applying heutagogic principles to maximum effect to their own professional practice.

They are also constrained, as never before, by their political masters. The impact of high-stakes accountability, in recent years, has imposed compliance over creativity. It may be that a globally and socially connected network of peer learners, enthused by, and committed to, sharing all that they know, may have sufficient power to reduce the voices of policy makers into little more than 'noises off'. In this way, teachers practising self-determined peer learning may be viewed, not only as an effective alternative to conventional predetermined staff development, and more as an act of professional emancipation.

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