Bring out Inside Teachers:
A Social Learning Web Design Project

EDUC 893

NOTE: Passwords required properly view external links

[These have been disabled as of January 2009]

Introduction, Audience, and Problem Statement

There are forty-three correctional educators in the target region of Corrections Services (CS). These teachers span four educational levels, nine institutions, and 205 kilometres. Each individual has a unique job experience; some teach multi-levels in minimum security locations, others teach one to one through two-inch metal doors in segregation units, and others have more traditional teacher-centric classrooms with desks in rows. Although this group may seem quite disparate, the experience of teaching Federal inmates is the core of what takes place, and that is the one important commonality.

Regional Teachers' Meetings (RTMs) take place every two to three months at random locations on CS property, either within an institution or cramped community offices. As a large group, discussions can occur 4-6 times per year and all staff members are paid to attend. Generally important information traveling top down from regional headquarters is 'released' at these meetings in the morning session. The afternoon is allotted to professional development that is generally deemed irrelevant, boring, or repetitious by the majority of the staff.

Smaller, more curricular-centred, level meetings occur two to five times per year as staff availability permits. These meetings are peer to peer and generally last 1 to 1.5 hours. Most people must travel 45 minutes to 1 hour in order to attend. Staff members from far away from city centers, the most isolated employees, are rarely given the travel allowance to participate.

In addition to these geographic issues, there is also the issue of teachers being non-unionized outsiders. Currently there are only three CS teachers in the region. All others are contractors from an independent school. They do not belong to the local teacher's union, yet they must be certified to teach in the province, and they do not get the full benefits as do the CS employees. Although this does not affect basic operations in the classroom, it may affect morale and engagement. If staff feel undervalued, their sense of passion diminishes quickly.

As teachers who see a host of psychological problems, learning disabilities, language and literacy barriers, poor social skills, security concerns, ill health, and drug addiction in their classrooms, these teachers do not appear to be, or personally feel, sufficiently remunerated. Sparking engagement may be a difficult task, particularly in light of how many areas of expertise are actually required beyond teaching itself. But it is, in fact, these tangential areas beyond teaching that truly define this shared experience.

An online space to foster this community may be a first step to re-energize this group and solidify it as a community of practice. The problems of geography, lack of engagement, and too many areas of expertise are all addressed by developing an online community of practice that can bring staff together, have them share, and rely on each other's expertise. While this space is not meant to eliminate face to face meetings, it can enhance the quality of those meetings.

Analysis of the Current State of Affairs

The geography and the variety of positions within the organization make the idea of a community of practice questionable. It can be argued, however, that the specialized niche that correctional educators fill is certainly a community, with a specific domain, and unifying elements of practice.

Who?
As a group, the community is more heterogeneous than homogeneous. The only features that stand out as being similar are the facts that most are certified teachers, most have public school experience, most are over the age of fifty, and the overwhelming majority are Caucasian. This means they are well educated and experienced, but do not necessarily have lived experience of the cultures with which they work.

Looking at the community based on teaching level and institution location is very similar. When meeting a new staff member the greeting always includes your name, institution and level; these seem to define the teachers.

The three institutions which are lower security levels are Argon, Fragmont and Catalgo. Inmates do not stay in these institutions very long as it is generally the last step before release; work experience not education is the main focus. The teachers in these institutions work alone, covering basic literacy and ESL up to graduation. These schools exist in a main building along with other programs and the library. The three medium security institutions Eastside, Oakdale and Grasla have at least one teacher at each of the four levels and all have a segregation unit to provide educational services to. Education is a higher priority to inmates as they are serving longer sentences, but it always takes second priority to programs. The school is generally a stand alone building separated from administration and the library. Mamaroneck is the only institution for women and it holds all security levels. There is one teacher there who often discusses the emotional and social differences presented in her all-female classroom. The last two institutions, Terrace Brook and Valley, are maximum security. They hold a variety of populations that do not necessarily interact well with each other, such as: violent offenders, protective custody offenders, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome designated offenders, and mentally ill offenders. The 'public' spaces of the school and the library are the only areas that are shared amongst these populations. Restrictive movement means school lasts a maximum of 3 hours per day and lock downs are common place. Each of these institutions has two teachers covering two levels. Education is highly valued as programs are not common and school is paid employment.

Institutions also get individualized reputations – some official and others not. Officially, three are designated for special populations. Unofficially, some are seen as 'drug' prisons or 'sex offender' prisons and are given different status ratings by inmates. Most teachers grow to find a connection with their institutions and transfers are very rare. They become familiar with how the institution operates and that regularity shows through as attachment to the institutions identity.

The distinction of teaching levels is also of importance. The ABE 1/ESL teachers cover all of the students who struggle with spoken or written English as well as all offenders below the grade 5 level. These tend to be the most educated and patient teachers; most also have other teaching commitments in the community. The ABE 2 teachers cover material from grade 6 to grade 8. Students at this level tend to encompass all of the behaviour issues and emotional maturity of junior high school students. These teachers tend to be the newest and youngest teachers. ABE 3/GED covers up to grade 10 and the greatest variety of teachers occur in this group; some stand and deliver with a set schedule while others work one on one with the most challenging of learning disabilities. ABE 4 is the adult Dogwood graduation program. Teachers at this level have higher class numbers, but they do not have to prepare curriculum or mark materials as they are distributed by the local distance education school. Of note, there is only one female teaching at this level. These two higher levels teachers tend to be the longer term teachers who are most disengaged.

Other stakeholders in this process include a manager and the contract operator. Great autonomy is offered to the staff and this is preferred by some, but others would like greater supports. For the purposes of this online community of practice there will be a purposeful absence of management participation in order to give staff freedom to discuss openly without fear of reprisal or judgement.

How and What?
The community becomes more evident when the common domain and practice are assessed. Individually each teacher supervises their classroom, provides work material, and coordinates student pay. As well, each month they assess student performance in four areas: quality, quantity, attitude, and effort. Students are also eligible for pay evaluations every three months; teachers complete these as directed by corrections staff. Teachers in medium and maximum institutions must write passes to authorize movement of students when it is outside of the allotted 15 minute movement time. This requires liaising with other staff members in the living units, gate posts, and program officers. Communication with Institutional Parole Officers (IPO's) is also very common. Most of these discussions happen by chance meetings, so it is in the teacher's best interest to get to know who key staff members are.

Teachers also perform low level security functions. Any behaviour problems or suspicious activity must be reported in an official document. They are also responsible for securing all items that may pose a risk. Locking up scissors, recording devices, disks of protected information, population lists, and scanners is essential. The keys and personal alarm are essential tools of this trade. As well, learning the language is very important so that suspicious discussions are better understood.

This group also provides support and information to one another. The apprenticeship model of learning how to act and react is essential for new staff. Years of teaching experience is less valuable than years of correctional experience; younger, less experienced teachers can often be seen guiding 30 year teaching veterans that are new to the environment. This apprenticeship training happens after school hours, though.

Lunch breaks and after school are the key moments to ask questions. This can pose difficulties for new staff if the modeling teachers who are less passionate arrive late and leave early.

Planned meetings happen regularly. Institutions take turns hosting the major Regional Teachers' Meeting. This creates the need for in-house planning meetings and finding speakers to present free of charge. Level meetings also take place where teachers bring questions and ideas about curriculum. The teachers that cover multiple levels can either choose to attend one or all of the level meetings of which they are a part. Both types of meetings are important for the socializing aspect, but often little is accomplished. As well, the follow through is abysmal; revisiting old business is uncommon and unless a teacher champions an issue it is easily left behind. The missing link is the lack of note taking and distribution after the meeting.

Two committees also exist in which teachers take part - the computer committee and the Pro-D committee. The computer committee is meant to examine potential technology and software for use in the classroom. As well, they were meant to be laying the groundwork for paperless distance education courses. In reality the group has met only once this year. The Pro-D committee is in its infancy. At less than two months old they have yet to host a meeting, but one volunteer has already dropped out. As well, it was questioned why two staff members from the same institution were 'allowed' to be on the committee. Most groups in the organization send one representative from each institution and this mentality nearly prevent eager teachers from volunteering based on where they worked. As well, questions of management control have been raised as the manager has decided to be on this committee.

Clearly, the individual practice of teachers is generally quite autonomous. It is guided more by corrections than by school administrators. The process of using the apprenticeship model for training is sound, but without assigned mentors, the new staff members are often scrambling for expert teacher time. In matters of groups and committees, however, there is little tracking and productivity and there are issues of who is eligible to participate. Issues of engagement are also a concern for those that have been working longer and with less recognition than deserved.

Design Specifications and Prototype

Creating an online environment for this community of practice (CoP) is challenging in a variety of ways. The main focus is to try to engage the teachers in sharing both their tacit and explicit knowledge to strengthen the community and inject energy, or 'passion' as Wenger states, into online and face to face interactions (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002). The concerns and problems faced by this community are stable, but injecting this energy may refuel the teachers and alter their shared and individual practice.

Basic layout and operation

First of all, the physical layout and how the site operates must include certain features for this particular group. It must be simple, user friendly, and patterned to accommodate expert and novice computer users. The home page was designed to have minimal graphics and clearly visible navigation. As well, these features are persistent, or repeated on every page, to create consistency (Feenberg and Barney, 2004). The navigation bar itself has eight tabs and the placement of each was purposeful. The outer tabs lead to more static information that contains more acquisition *items*, whereas the center tabs lead to the more interactive and participatory activities. Having the eye focus on interaction as the centre of navigation is important.

In addition to the repeated navigation, there are also repeated features along the sidebar for accommodation and searching of the site. The accessibility feature of increasing the font size is important for visually impaired staff members. As well the page has been set up to accommodate this feature without compromising the text. Also on this sidebar a calendar for any member to add events is included. A prominent link to the question form is a regular feature as well. This is meant to encourage members to use what is potentially the most important feature, the discussion page.

When navigating to most of these link pages, particularly submission forms, it is important to not take the user to a new page and risk confusion as to where they are in the site. Instead, a new browser window opens that covers only a portion of the screen.

Security
Ensuring privacy is very important to this community of practice. The index page is a log in page so that only members can have access. The site administrator would work as the gatekeeper to ensure that only those belonging to the community have access. The intention with this online CoP is to only give access to peers and not management. This community's space is "based on collegial relationships, not reporting relationships" (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002:20). To have contributors feel free to ask embarrassing or foolish questions is important to their learning; fearing any sort of punishment or judgement would defeat the purpose of the space.

There will be no feature to track who is online. In our environment, synchronous discussion would not be possible, so tracking who is online could make people more uncomfortable. "Lurking" in this space is to be encouraged, particularly by the more peripheral participants (Feenberg and Barney, 2004:8).

Home Page
The home page is meant to be a changing space. The latest news could come from any area within the site, or it may even include information not yet presented at regional meetings. Feenberg and Barney's concept of periodicity, or creating a rhythm of dynamic material to draw in users, is central (2002). This page also intentionally repeats information from the participation pages as the user scrolls down. This is to pique the interest of those that access the site merely for the interactive crossword at the bottom of the page. In this group, there are many of the long term teachers who do the newspaper crossword daily in a short time. Giving them an interactive crossword means they must

be on the site to use it (clues don't print), and they can come back daily. This element of play is a necessary diversion for some and it may entice the disenchanted to explore more on the site.

About Page

This page is merely a text description highlighting the key elements as to how and why we are a community of practice without being theoretical.

Resources Page

The resources page has several sections which link to external pages and documents of varying interactivity. Potentially the most engaging part of this online CoP is located on this page. Under the 'new staff' title a link to stories can be found. It is fairly innocuous, but it is linked to on the home page as well. This links to a page that provides the explicit and tacit knowledge of the experienced teachers (Feenberg and Barney, 2004). It is a record of the community's experience. In response to a statement, teachers can record (audio, movie or text) their personal stories. This reflects what happens informally in lunchrooms, but it gives the longer term teachers an opportunity to give advice, wisdom, and share their mistakes. Hearing the actual voice tell the lived experience enhances the resources engagement. This alleviates a lot of the fear of the new teachers and lets them learn from the experience of others. As well, the stories are often very amusing, engaging and self-deprecating so this component may be well used by both the novice and the expert members (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002). It also gives license for "involving the heart as well as the head" (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002:29). In a community where you are dealing with offenders as students, comments of pride and appreciation are often misconstrued in print, but hearing the tone often eliminates the need to be explicit in this grey zone.

In addition a curriculum database can be found on this page which allows members to add resources that they use based on particular themes. Due to the lack of variety in the background of the staff, sections such as resources for Aboriginal offenders can be accessed by all. As well, lessons for special days can be accessed without extensive teacher effort. As teachers can add to the page themselves this is an important authoring tool (Feenberg and Barney, 2004).

Other resources include databases of audio visual materials in the region and options for spending the $500.00 allocated to each teacher for professional development money.

Discussion Page

One of the main reasons for creating this online CoP is to "encourage a willingness to share ideas, expose one's ignorance, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully" (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002:28). This is the rationale behind the discussion page. It adds the value of responsiveness to the community. Anyone can ask any question. They also have the ability to list it as urgent and place in the top of the 'Help!' section, or list it as not urgent and it will be placed at the top of the 'this month's questions' section. Either way a new message is indicated by an envelope in the top left

corner. As well, those asking questions must indicate what category the question would fall under based on the 'Archives' list on the sidebar. (Note that the sidebar is different here as it would be redundant to point to the discussion page from the discussion page.) This means that at the end of the month, or the day indicated on the form, the question will be placed in the searchable archives. In addition, the author has the ability to not have the question archived. If it is urgent, yet specific and time sensitive to only a few, it may be pointless to archive. They have complete control over the value of the site. This flexibility in preserving only what the individual participant wants allows them authoring capabilities in the community (Feenberg and Barney, 2004).

As well, unread comments in the old archived questions are indicated with a double asterisk. This means that is someone is browsing, has a new take on an old issue, it can be added to what is essentially a personalized and fluctuating FAQ section.

Groups
This page is meant to give structure, accountability and transparency to some of the groups that have lost enthusiasm. Creating boundaries and a space for groups to work is essential for a community that needs to bridge physical distance. Although Feenberg and Barney note that it is essential that online communities have group divisions in both public and private spaces, that is not followed here (Feenberg and Barney, 2004). This particular CoP has had issues with a lack of transparency; things seem to happen behind closed doors. By allowing open access to group materials for all members removes this complaint. Not only can people see the latest things ABE 2 is working on, but they can also keep updated on meetings they miss. If the groups do decide they want a private space it can certainly be linked to through their 'working space' wiki.

Each group would have a wiki or a blog attached. This serves two purposes: teachers have a space tailored to what they do and teachers will learn to use common Web 2.0 technologies. These new tools foster the linking and coordination of staff interactions. They also create accountability as they provide a minor 'tracking' system in the history section (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002). Therefore, old business can be reviewed and members can keep on task when something is delegated to them at a meeting. These technologies are also web based, so they could be accessed anywhere and would not be hampered if the teacher CoP was placed on the corrections intranet.

In order to enhance user agency and growth, there is an empty group at the bottom inviting others to create a new group.

Colleagues
The colleagues' page is basically a map showing the geographic location of our workplaces. Because these staff member associate with their locations so intently, this set up is meant to foster that identity as a group within the larger whole. The page is meant to link people and create familiarity and excitement as well as giving each individual member to contribute who they are within the CoP.

Each star represents an institution. Rolling over the star provides names and phone numbers. This is meant to be used when you are on the site, need to call a co-worker, and you can easily find that info without going to the phone list randomly located in the office. Clicking the star takes users to a page of staff profiles.

Creating your own profile with a picture shows the more isolated staff, and the new staff, just who the experts and resources are both by description and face. Including areas of interest within and outside of education can foster interaction at face to face meetings as well. The linking pages are meant to be like looking in a yearbook; novices and experts alike may enjoy these pages.

Contacts
The contacts page is basically a phone book that links directly to the email address of those individuals we contact outside of the organization on a regular basis. If forms are required, they are linked to as well.

This page was given anchors as the list is quite long. As well, alternating coloured rows makes for easier reading.

Forms
For the truly disengaged individuals, this may be the most often used page. It is meant to be a storage space for forms that are frequently used. Its role is purely administrative, but having this repository on the site prevents CoP members from rifling through filing cabinets and photocopying photocopies of outdated forms. It is exclusively to maintain the procedural methods with the domain.

The level of participation can certainly vary based on this online CoP. The ability to be a lurker or an author is equally possible. Based on the need to slowly re-engage this CoP to use their effective apprenticeship model, this site includes both acquisition and participation elements. If the elements are seen as engaging, and openness and flexibility are in the design, the community of practice will take its own shape.

Context of Use and Evolution over Time

This website is merely a tool to be used by the community of teachers practicing in institutions. The evolution is difficult to predict, but based on the current staff some general statements can be made.

Much will depend on who the early adopters are. If the teachers who work at the lower levels, who usually incorporate technology in their work, are the early adopters then it may be a very positive, upbeat site that would alienate the long term teachers but would really assist the new teachers. The new staff members will see it as a useful resource. They will likely be lurking for some time before asking questions, though. The long term teachers would be alienated because they would be reluctant to add information if the site

did not specifically welcome them to add to it first. As the experts they may expect to be treated as such.

If the new teachers are the early adopters, the site will likely die out quickly unless the questions are pointed and not easily answered in a short sentence. The longer term teachers would not see it as worth their time if the questions were not deemed up to par. If they were, however, they might engage.

If the long term teachers were first invited to populate the site with some of their experience and expertise, the site may survive. The longer term teachers, generally at the higher levels, would answer from their perspective. Lower level teachers, who are younger, would then add their experience in dealing with their student types. If the lower levels engaged first, the likelihood of the long term staff including their differing perspective is less likely. Clearly, the order of engagement might be very important with this community.

The CoP has many opportunities within it to change over time and evolve based on the authoring capabilities. Changes would likely occur more in the form of more use/less use cycles rather than adding new pages. This community is known for adjusting to their circumstances rather than adjusting their circumstances to suit them.

The balance between designer and member control may be difficult to manage. The 'webmaster' role is currently the designer, but if that role was given to another group member the balance might be fairer. There would be less difficulty in making changes. As well, the webmaster will always have ultimate control here. They are the guardians at the gate for this site which relies on its security. That balance, tipped in favour of the webmaster, would be a welcome trade-off for members, though. They want the tool, but less ultimate responsibility.

The greatest challenge in implementing this CoP would be the barriers to corrections' intranet. Currently no website that has an external forum space or email messaging can be accessed. Getting to First Class, for example, would be only at the request of the warden to national headquarters. If the wiki and blog links were removed, movable type initiated, and the voice recordings internal, it may be possible to use inside. Again, this would likely take an initiative *from* the national authority to gain approval.

It is interesting to create an 'impossible world' design, though. It feeds the creativity and re-engages one into his or her own community of practice. Analyzing how and why things work the way they do re-informs practice if only at the individual level.

Assessment and Reflections

In reviewing Wenger's Principles for Cultivating CoPs, it is clear that some areas were given more consideration in the design than others (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002).

In designing for *evolution* small design choices were made. Groups can be added and wikis can be expanded and explored. Beyond these minor additions, however, there is little opportunity for true agency of the users to take and transform the tool to suit their needs. Similarly, the only consideration in adding *value* was to allow the members to make decisions on what, in their own writing, is considered worthy of an archive. Unfortunately, most people would err on the side of discard rather than archive. As well, *rhythm* will largely be up to the users. The home page content will change, but the level of use is dependent on the members not on any other form of built in rhythm.

There are also two areas Wenger discusses that were actively avoided, but for good reason. As discussed earlier, the idea of *private spaces* should be avoided at first. Open and accessible *public sharing* is more of what this group currently needs. As for *participation from inside and outside perspectives*, the design cannot allow for it. Security is more important. Even the management would be excluded to foster a true sense of a peer to peer community.

The last two areas which the design focuses on include levels of *participation* and familiarity. Regularity and routine are mainstays of this group. As well, a tool that is consistent is more user friendly for this diverse group. Certain layout and design decisions were made, such as new browser windows, in order to not confuse the members and to make navigation clear. *Familiarity and excitement* were considered often in the design. The areas where personal bits are added will be welcomed by this group. They like to talk about themselves and be heard. Having personal profiles and pictures, listening to peer's self-deprecating stories will be considered entertaining. As well, on a more superficial level, the engagement through crosswords will draw in come users.

Works Cited

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