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Preliminary Thoughts on Online Professional Learning:
What is the point of contact?

Connie M. Moss
Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning
Department of Foundations and Leadership
School of Education
Duquesne University
The Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) was established in 1998 in the Department of Foundations and Leadership at Duquesne University School of Education. CASTL engages in research programs dedicated to understanding, advancing and disseminating evidence-based study of the teaching-learning process.

Mission and Goals
The Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning promotes systematic and intentional inquiry into the teaching-learning process and, through careful and collegial study of learning-centered environments, seeks to advance the understanding and dissemination of evidence-based study of the teaching-learning process in service of all learners.

To promote its mission, CASTL intentionally pursues the following goals:

- Promote socially just, learning-centered environments that bring excellence and equity to all learners;
- Foster systematic and intentional inquiry into the beliefs that educators hold about educational theory and research and effective practice;
- Honor research, theory, and practice as legitimate and complementary sources of knowledge regarding the teaching-learning process;
- Elevate professional learning and educational practice to the level of scholarship;
- Advance the conceptual framework of leadership as learning;
- Develop a knowledge network fueled by researchers, theorists and practitioners who contribute to advancing the study of the teaching-learning process;
- Establish and perpetuate an international community of teacher-scholars representing a variety of teaching and learning environments;
- Promote and coordinate communication within a network of educational institutions and organizations that collaborate in the recruitment and education of teacher-scholars;
- Create a culture of professional learning based on research situated in schools and in other learning environments;
- Examine and develop methodologies by which the teaching-learning process is studied;
- Advocate for the enhancement of the teaching-learning process in service of all learners; and
- Share what is learned about the teaching-learning process.
This report is one of a series from our ongoing research effort to advance the study of teaching and learning. If you have any questions or comments on this report, or if you would like to find out more about the activities of CASTL, contact:

The Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning  
406 Canevin Hall  
School of Education  
Duquesne University  
Pittsburgh, PA  15282

(412) 396-4778  
info@castl.duq.edu  
http://www.castl.duq.edu
Abstract

In this article I argue that generating and sharing scholarship should be the outcome, the point of contact, for professionals on the cyber sea. To support this argument, I first describe the theoretical underpinnings of effective online professional learning environments through two unique lenses: relevant theory and research operating in effective practice and online learning environments as environments that learn. Through these lenses I advance the view that professional learning environments on the web can be generative and organic and as such, have the potential to help educators create the future while reinventing the here and now. I characterize my thinking process during the creation and development of an online professional learning environment known as Teaching as Intentional Learning (TIL), a learning program of the Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) at Duquesne University. I describe ways in which the communication, information, and human resources in TIL support the goal of generative scholarship among a community of teacher scholars. Finally, I reflect upon my preliminary understandings from the TIL online learning environment and the implications they present for the future of professional learning on the cyber sea.
Consider the point of contact. A raindrop splashes into the sea creating growing ripples of motion. Seconds later and centimeters apart, one more drop adds to the movement. Fueled by additional droplets, the sea pulsates as ripples converge in a liquid dance of exponential synergy: each point of contact fuels and is fueled by the energy of infinite unions across distance and time. In the natural world, at the point of contact, energy is exchanged and created. Should contact among educators engaged in an online professional learning environment result in less?

**Concerns from the Mainland**

For over a decade calls for a reinvention of professional development and teacher education (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Fenstermacher & Berliner, 1983; Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992; Huberman, 1995; Kagan 1990; Lieberman, 1995; Wade, 1985) have spread through the educational literature. One way of approaching the concern is to view efforts to reinvent professional development and teacher education as a process of cultural change. Goodman (1994) states that cultural change is best viewed as a form of discursive practice (Goodman, 1994) influenced by streams of prevailing discourse and regimes of truth. Educators use discourse framed by their interpretation of reality to distinguish truth from falsehood and to identify best practice (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983).

During its history the culture of teacher education has endured a stream of prevailing discourse and regimes of truth. Educators at all levels seem influenced by a prevailing instructional culture (see Barr & Tagg, 1995, among others) that contributes to flawed assumptions underlying professional development and teacher education practices. To illustrate the point, consider the language that prevails in descriptions of face-to-face teacher education and professional development opportunities. Of the language that prevails, perhaps “... nothing has been so destructive... as the label training—it is an inappropriate metaphor for working with practicing professionals” (Strong, et. al., 1990, p.27). The assumption of “training” teachers perpetuates professional development models and practices that are unconnected to classroom life (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Guskey & Huberman, 1995; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). Underlying beliefs and a pervasive instructional culture, preserve the pattern of “in-service training” delivered by “...outside experts...[who] often [view] teaching as technical, learning as packaged, and teachers as passive recipients of the findings of ‘objective research’” (Lieberman, 1995, p. 592). The assumptions that underlie the notion of training teachers are diametrically opposed to the view of teacher as effective learners and scholars. Teachers who are learners examine their practice, learn from their reflections, and continuously research their understandings to refine both their understanding and their practice (Brubacher, Case, & Reagan, 1994; Moss, 1996; Moss, 1999; Moss & McCown, 1999).

Recognizing that an instructional culture pervades face-to-face professional development and teacher education, it is logical to wonder how much of that culture is influencing professional learning practices on the World Wide Web. At present we are testing the waters, developing conceptual frameworks for professional learning online and examining the opportunities technology affords for meaningful collaborative discourse. Challenging the prevailing culture of professional learning as an instructional construct appears to isolate vital lines of inquiry that question not only our professional learning practices, but the assumptions we make about the roles of communication and information technologies that support those practices.
In this article I intend to discuss characteristics of effective professional online learning environments. In particular, I will examine a professional learning program of the Center for Advancing the Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL) at Duquensne University known as Teaching as Intentional Learning (TIL) (Moss, 1999). Essential to TIL is a professional online learning environment that supports and is supported by an inquiry process and a network of teacher scholars. Throughout the discussion I do not intend to judge learner-centered online environments more favorably than those that are teacher-centered. Nor do I intend to cast practice in a more favorable light than theory. I agree with Driscoll (1999) that “either-or” choices surrounding these opposing viewpoints are usually shortsighted and confused. By preference, I mean to contribute to the dialogue centering on the reinvention of professional learning on the one hand, and the invention of professional learning environments on the World Wide Web on the other.

In service of that intention, I examine the synergetic union of professional learning and the world wide web through two related lenses “relevant theory operating in effective practice” and online learning environments as “environments that learn”. Through these dual lenses I describe the theoretical underpinnings of effective online learning environments, the characteristics of TIL’s organic online learning environment, and the developing rivulets of understanding that are resulting from my design of and participation in TIL. Finally I offer as a worthy goal, the generation of organic professional learning environments that spill from their virtual basins into our classrooms, schools, and communities, exchanging and unleashing energy as they splash into understandings flowing from those face-to-face-environments into the cyber sea.

The Sirens’ Fatal Song

“Nothing before has captured the imagination and interests of educators simultaneously around the globe more than the World Wide Web” (Owston, 1997, p. 27). Driven by their interest, educators seek to coax ideas out of turbid estuaries hoping to understand and identify exemplars of relevant learning theory operating in effective online practice. As a steady stream of learning environments set sail upon the cyber sea, educational web designers face inherent perils that can be compared to a tale from classic mythology. In this tale, Odysseus ordered his crew to plug their ears to escape the pull of the Sirens’ fatal song. For once heard, the song became an irresistible distraction placing both their voyage and their lives in jeopardy.

On the cyber sea, the lure of the sirens’ song can be just as powerful. These irresistible distractions can result in professional learning environments that leave educators drowning in information and thirsting for meaning. This thirst might be explained by underlying assumptions linked directly to the prevailing instructional culture of professional education. Specifically, the conceptual frameworks that guide the construction of professional online learning environments may be flawed. The conceptual flaws can be summarized by three questions, namely: What is to be learned?, “What are the learning goals?”, and “Who is learning?”. These questions when considered together speak to a larger question “What is the point of contact?”. I will consider each of these questions and their influences on one another to address the larger question.

First, considerations of “what is to be learned” often guide educational designers to fashion web environments around information resources and/or communication options in varying amounts and degrees. Their design decisions can be influenced by where they fall on the acquisition/participation debate. This is unfortunate, since seeing a set of metaphors for learning—learning as acquisition and
learning as participation—as mutually exclusive can be perilous to the resulting learning environment (Sfard, 1998). In any learning environment, Sfard warns, no two learners are alike and “theoretical exclusivity and didactic single-mindedness can be trusted to make even the best of educational ideas fail” (p. 11). She concludes that environments dedicated exclusively to learning as knowledge acquisition are equally as dangerous as environments that are devoted to the “deligitimazation of instruction that is not ‘problem based’ or not situated in real-life context” (p. 10). Online professional learning environments are no exception and the needs of learners can never be met by too much of even a good thing. Flawed assumptions about teaching and learning transferred to new technologies offer little promise. Professional online learning environments can not be an “either/or” proposition and the design of these environments should afford professionals the opportunity for individual enrichment as well as collaborative discourse.

Embedded in the dichotomy between knowledge acquisition and participatory problem-solving is value placed on communication options and information resources. If knowledge acquisition is the goal, the temptation for designers is to fashion web environments that exploit the association linked, nonlinear inherent nature of the web. Conversely, if the goal is creating a community of practice, communication options and links to other learning communities fill the design. On the cyber sea the idea of more connections often transcends principles of quality connections. Online environments are stocked with communication options and information/resource links. Designers assume, in these cases, that their efforts will enhance professional voyages that will result in significant learning. In fact, just the opposite may be true.

The question of “what is to be learned” was never meant to stand alone. In fact it is critical to fuse what is being learned with how it is learned (Savery & Duffy, 1995). Seduced by the infinite horizon of the cyber sea, the web, and the quest for “what is to be learned,” educators can be led on a voyage of endless exploration. In fact, Salomon and Almog (1998) suggest that the intrinsic hypermedia characteristics of the web contribute to a phenomenon they term the “Butterfly Defect.” “One item just leads to another and one is invited to wander from one item to another, lured by the visual appeal of the presentation…[resulting in ] a butterfly-like hovering from item to item without really touching them.” Surfing a well stocked environment often leads educators to engage in shallow exploration “sidestepping hierarchically structured connections” that foster deeper significant learning (p.234). Moreover, these shallow voyages can result in weak cognitive representations.

Shallow exploration—often affected by visual appeal and characterized by a lack of defined purpose is quite different in both process and outcome from a significant and logical search. The latter is characterized by self-regulation and guided by the pursuit of an identified goal (Wright & Vliestra, 1975). Online professional learning environments, then, should seek to support learning goals rather than seek to arrange and connect what is to be learned.

Consideration of “What are the learning goals?” provides interesting insight to the educational designer. As Savery and Duffy put it “what we understand is a function of the content, the context, the activity of the learner, and, perhaps most importantly, the goals of the learner…cognition is not just within the individual, but rather it is a part of the entire context, i.e., cognition is distributed…it is the goal of the learner that is central (1995, p. 31). Simply put, learning goals determine what is learned and these goals cannot be assigned or designed for educators. Assigned learning has little value, for learning must have a clear purpose.
Then how does this purpose arise? Dewey (1938) saw the “problematic” as the guide and organizer for learning. Learning goals, he proposed, are part of what the learner brings to the learning environment and the problems to be solved. Goals, then, are fundamental to the construction of understanding, and understanding is a complex process based on much more than simple associations that require a mere relationship between factors. Understanding frameworks are formed by directed associations that coordinate specific relationships among factors with a specific goal (Selz, 1982a, 1982b). Applying this thinking to online learning environments helps us to discover the purpose of contact. Effective online learning environments do not merely connect educators to information, or educators to each other in multiple ways and interesting ways. By their very design, effective online environments should engender and learn from the goals that practicing professionals bring to the environment.

Third and finally, in matters of web design, it is critical to consider “who is learning”. The query moves beyond knowing the demographics or content expertise of the learners and goes to the heart of whose learning shapes and is shaped by the learning that occurs. Speaking to the issue, Driscoll (1999) explains that adopting a learning-centered orientation “puts learning in a broader context and implies that learning is something that goes on in an environment in which different actors operate, involving themselves in a variety of processes of interaction” (p. 4). Therefore, she states, all learning—that of the students, teachers, and instructional systems—is important.

Driscoll’s position implies an orientation of reflective practice that is crucial to both the professional learner and the professional learning environment. But merely encouraging reflective practice has no significant effect on learning and thinking unless that reflection is systematic. Systematic reflection implies that reflection is context bound (Dewey, 1933) and occurs through the purposeful application of a criterion to the event, understanding, or practice being reflected upon. While the juxtaposition of the two items continues to yield interesting paths of inquiry and guide my thinking about and participation in TIL, four tenets synthesize my present understanding of TIL as an ecosystem (Moss, 1997). In that way reflection becomes a generative process. Reflexive learning (c.f., Cunningham, 1992) occurs when we become aware of the inadequacy of our knowledge or beliefs about a particular situation or phenomenon. In this sense, reflexive learning is learning that is “directed, or turned back on itself, or self-referential” (Duffy & Cunningham, 1996, p. 181).

Considering the three questions “what is to be learned?”, “What are the learning goals?”, and “Who is learning?” offers insight to the design and support of professional online learning environments. The environments should be both open-ended and embedded with frameworks that simultaneously support and liberate learning. These environments should honor the ability of professionals to set goals for their own professional learning. Most importantly, a professional learning environment should generate learning that is turned back on the environment itself. For environments to learn, they should demonstrate relevant theory operating in their effective design. In these ways, online learning environments can be conceived as organic and capable of generation.

Changing Tack

Conceiving of and creating an online learning environment that seeks to be generative and organic required that I think outside of the box. To encourage myself to do that kind of thinking, I relied on Shank’s Law of Juxtaposition (1988). “The law simply states, in its general form, that human beings will inevitably be drawn to attempt to reconcile, by abduction, any two juxtaposed items into a
meaningful, conclusive third” (p. 853). I applied the law to the design of a professional learning environment by examining the environment through the metaphor of an ecosystem. The same juxtaposition guides my participation in the TIL online learning environment. I share my thoughts here in the form of four interim tenets.

First, the energy exchanged in an ecosystem occurs because each thing in nature is connected to everything else in the universe. I now view an online learning environment in a more holistic way. I recognize the interdependence of communication and technology options, the effect of visual, emotional, and intellectual appeal, and the generative influence of each person’s smallest insight. Furthermore, I understand that an online learning environment exists within a larger ecosystem and what occurs in the TIL online learning environment influences understandings and practices in classrooms, schools, and communities. In turn, these practices and insights that flow back into TIL causing ripples of energy. This energy allows and demands that TIL grow in responsive and responsible ways. Second, I now realize that everything that occurs within the TIL online learning environment leaves a trace. Some things infuse the environment with nutrients, leaving it more fertile and lush; other things, like artificial tasks or unrelated inert bits of theory, emit toxic waste that will affect subsequent life. What occurs across time and space becomes part of the ecology of the environment as a living, learning whole. Third, I base my decisions on the assumption that complex functions develop over eons of time. As a learning environment that learns, the TIL online learning environment is dedicated to discovering meaning over time in messy and intriguing ways. Fourth and finally, I am coming to understand more clearly that it takes effort to force a system to operate unnaturally. Honoring the nature of scholarly practice requires that the TIL online learning environment place itself “…in service of the scholarship of practice” (Moss, 1999). Guided by this covenant, TIL dedicates itself to supporting, documenting, sharing, and being informed by the scholarship of practice.

Applying the ecosystem metaphor to the TIL online learning environment continues to yield interesting and informative lines of inquiry. Each day those of us involved in the TIL program strive to move closer to an organic perspective. Viewing our efforts in the context of an ecosystem implies a generative orientation—one that moves beyond reacting to the present to energetically reinvent the future.

One of the first and foremost online environments can cease to be at odds with the natural ebb and flow of professional lives.

**A Voyage of Reinvention: Lessons from the Captain’s Log**

The launch of the TIL program was preceded and is actively supported by an on-going research effort to investigate professional learning, reflective practice, teacher beliefs, teacher inquiry, and the affordances of technology (see McCown, Moss, & Driscoll, 1998; Moss, 1996; Moss, 1999; Moss & McCown, 1997, Moss & McCown, 1998; Moss, McCown & Driscoll, 1999a; Moss, McCown, & Driscoll, 1999b; Moss & Nyiri, 1999). Dedicated to the mission of CASTL, TIL honors “practice and theory as legitimate and complementary sources of knowledge about the teaching-learning process” (McCown, 1997).
With generative scholarship as the point of contact, design questions for the TIL program progressed beyond dealing with technology and communication options to supporting connections among educators, among institutions of learning, between theory and practice, and to human and information resources. Creating the TIL program demanded consideration of the degree of connection rather than the number of connections. Meaningful connections among individual educators, as well as communities of practice, could support and engender the ebb and flow of ideas while developing a community memory.
References


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