

Two

The history file

The development of talk2learn, NCSL's online environment supporting learning communities

This chapter looks at:

- the evolution of talk2learn
- the emergence of programme-specific communities
- refining the tool

In talk2learn, NCSL has developed one of the largest online environments of educational learning communities in the world. When the first edition of this book was written there were around 100,000 school leaders registered in talk2learn, there are now over 105,000 registered users.

Participants include headteachers, deputies, middle-level leaders, school business managers, advanced skills teachers, Fast Track teachers, programme tutors and facilitators plus a range of other interested parties and local working groups. Talk2learn continues to include a wider audience of professionals, particularly with the increasing impact of the Every Child Matters agenda. In addition, **guest experts and policy-makers** are regularly invited to take part.

Talking Heads

talk2learn has, in fact, been in existence longer than NCSL itself. It was launched in February 2000 as Talking Heads, a research and development venture for Ultralab, which was the educational research and technology think tank at Anglia Ruskin University.

Utilising the think.com software developed by Oracle and Ultralab, Talking Heads worked with a pilot group of 1,200 headteachers to find out how online communities could support school leaders in three key tasks. These were to:

- reduce isolation among newly appointed heads
- promote the sharing of good practice
- offer emotional and professional support

Learning messages

Where have we been?

What have we learned?

Access to the communities was through a website, something then relatively new to most heads generally familiar only with email and mailing lists, and Ultralab employed 24 training and support staff. When NCSL was established in 2000, the Talking Heads communities became part of its remit.

Virtual Heads

NCSL used the think.com technology to create another online community for participants in the revised National Professional Qualification for Headteachers (NPQH). Virtual Heads offers general information and hotseats. The online community has gone through several development stages and currently offers a dynamic mixture of general information, hotseats with experts and colleagues: national and special interest discussion and insightful blogs.

Virtual heads continues to develop as NCSL learns more about collaborative learning.

Increased participation in Talking Heads and Virtual Heads led to the formation of additional working groups. Some local teams of school leaders used think.com to support their own needs in small collaborative projects while others with a common interest came together.

New communities

Two more overarching communities were subsequently established.

NCSL in Dialogue enables professionals and experts from inside and outside education to explore key leadership issues. **Policy in action** brings together policy-makers and school leaders and has quickly become the focal point for consultation on policy. It enables school leaders to engage directly with government ministers such as David Bell, Charles Clarke (when he was Education Secretary) and Jacqui Smith (as Schools Minister) on major talking points.

Talk2learn offers online dialogue with leading thinkers in the world of education, policy makers and government ministers. Online guests have included Edward de Bono, Michael Barber and Tim Brighouse.

This kind of access, unimaginable outside the online community environment, is a rare and very valuable opportunity for headteachers to influence current thinking and to register their views at the highest level.

Online communities are also built into each of NCSL's range of programmes as part of the blend of learning experiences such as the training of school business managers. Similarly, Strategic Leadership of ICT (SLICT), Leading from the Middle and New Visions all have their own communities to support programme activities.

External communities have sprung from NCSL's wider reach including Primary Strategy consultant leaders, and there has been marked growth in the number of communities that support other national projects. The government's Innovation Unit, for example, uses talk2learn to engage a wider range of school leaders and education professionals in debate and discussion.

Internationally, talk2learn is used by the **Principals Network in New Zealand** and smaller groups around the world are experimenting with online communities, often following briefing visits to NCSL's Learning and Conference Centre in Nottingham.

Refining the community environment

In the beginning, Talking Heads and Virtual Heads both used think.com software which was originally developed for the 7–13 age group. Its tools include brainstorming sessions, conversations, hotseats and debates and it allows users to create their own home pages, upload a user icon and publish and share files including documents, audio files and videos.

In September 2003, the system was relaunched with a more mature look and feel and the name changed to talk2learn, but NCSL decided a more radical re-think was still required.

Following a year-long collaboration between NCSL, Fronter and LogicaCMG, the new talk2learn software was launched in December 2004. Retaining much of the original functionality, it features a wider range of collaborative elements, new page publishing facilities, live chat, voting and a survey tool. **Better knowledge management** features are being developed which will enable us to capture the results of discussions and share them with a wider leadership audience. These features include podcasting and talk2learn highlights



Toolkit

Facilitator presence

Facilitation

NCSL now has its own team of predominantly home-based e-learning specialists. The role continues to evolve as understanding of online collaboration grows but one thing is strikingly obvious: facilitation is essential in online communities if they are to succeed. Simply creating a community space and leaving participants to manage themselves does not create successful, vibrant communities nor sustain long-term interest and activity (see chapter 6).

Conclusion

The concept of online collaboration is still relatively new and our knowledge about effective practice, the skills of the leaders and even the technology itself continues to develop and evolve.

Toolkit

The theory

Collaborative learning

One thing, however, is crystal clear. Effective online collaboration helps to reduce isolation and, by enabling school leaders to share insights into practice, develops the capacity for school improvement. Users do, however, need to **understand the philosophy, value and purpose** of participating in an online community. They should also realise that effective participation requires time and commitment as well as an open mind towards new collaborative and transparent ways of working.

NCSL must keep growing and nurturing this new culture of online collaboration so that it includes and influences the entire profession.

The original aim, as expressed by NCSL in 2000, remains valid:

To generate a virtual community of school leaders where community members actively engage in productive online activities at a time that is convenient to them. (NCSL think tank)

For further information, references and guidance, go to www.ncsl.org.uk/communities.