

## Blended learning in action – what works and what doesn't

**This chapter looks at how online learning communities can be used to support continuing professional development (CPD) programmes or other activities as part of a blended learning package.**

Blended learning enables an individual to choose to learn at different times and in different environments, for example, face to face or online, individually or in groups. It covers NCSL's:

- Bursar Development Programme (the certificate and diploma of school business management)
- Strategic Leadership of ICT (SLICT)
- Foundation Stage leaders – building a new community

We also reflect on the role online learning communities play in fostering international links.

---

### Bursar Development Programme (BDP)

---

The concept of **blended learning** was built into the BDP from its inception in 2003 and its activities cover the full range of learning styles – residential, collaboration through discussion and debate online, reading, research and project work. As such, it combines the systematic acquisition of knowledge with support to enable candidates to explore and develop their own administrative and management skills and, therefore, raise the quality of their schools.

As they often work around computers most of the day, we have found that school business managers naturally take to the online community as a part of their professional life.

## Learning message

Different combinations suit different contexts.

talk2learn plays a central role in the programme. Participants are assigned to their own **unique community**, Bursars Count, where they discuss and collaborate on issues usually based around the module topics (financial management, environmental management etc).

By the end of the course, participants need to understand the political, economic, social, legal and technological environments within which educational institutions operate and be able to manage resources and school administration.

These issues can be facilitated within the online community but, as with learning face to face, people need support and everyone needs the opportunity to make a contribution.

The programme is regularly evaluated and the core materials are reviewed and updated. The online environment and its **pedagogy** are rethought and updated as technology changes and participants give regular feedback to help the programme to develop.

---

## Lessons learned

---

We have made some **changes** as the gaps between theory and practice have emerged.

Once the programme has finished, BDP graduates join other school leaders in other online communities and work with tutors to support new candidates coming into talk2learn. These graduates have also helped NCSL to develop talk2learn's online mentoring training and facilitation courses.

In feedback, participants describe the personal as well as professional benefits of working with the online community. For some, talk2learn has become their default source of support.

*“The sense of **isolation** you can get working in a school office has been removed because help and support is only a computer screen away. I have shared information about finance policy and gift aid with colleagues all over the country and knowledge gleaned from the talk2learn site is incorporated into various school policies that I have written.”*

*“If any issues arise, I automatically visit talk2learn. I have passed on web links to co-ordinators in school, picked up ideas about fundraising and looked at best practice in many areas. I never say ‘I don’t know’, but, more to the point, ‘I will get back to you’. A quick surf on talk2learn and information, links and expert advice is available on most educational areas. The main advantage is that you keep yourself up to date on **current policy and practice** and have a better overview of any issue.”*

---

## SLICT

---

SLICT is NCSL’s strategic ICT leadership programme. Originally for headteachers only, there is now also a team-based programme. The online community plays a key role in supporting both.

As part of the blended learning experience, participants attend a **three-day residential course**. Prior to this, heads are directed to the online community where they introduce themselves and start to talk about where their school is and what they expect to gain from SLICT. These issues and reflections are recorded and discussed throughout the event.

A varied programme of online activities is offered and members can also access the main SLICT community where previous and current participants can talk with their colleagues.

But it has not all been plain sailing, and this is where some of the issues around facilitation and engagement discussed in other chapters come to the fore.

---

## Lessons learned

---

Feedback suggests that 90 per cent of headteachers visit the online community prior to the residential event and get to know their colleagues there. But engagement really dropped off, sometimes quite alarmingly, afterwards. A hiatus should be expected as heads return to their school and are immediately thrust into fighting the fires that have been sparked by their three-day absence. However, this doesn't explain why many communities simply wither and die while a smaller number thrive with heads really exploring issues and learning together.

What it has underlined to us at NCSL is that the 'if we build it, they will come' attitude doesn't work. This is not how online communities grow and this does not take into account a **natural nervousness** experienced by some people when working and collaborating online.

Small communities work well when all members are actively involved and buy into it but this cannot be expected from a group of school leaders thrown together by the happenstance of attending the same event. Lessons have been learned from this and changes have been made to the SLICT programme, but it is an issue to bear in mind if you are considering setting up your own community with a potentially large and disparate membership.

Key questions we asked ourselves were as follows.

- Each community has its own **unique feel and atmosphere** in the beginning. How do we sustain this?
- How do we facilitate learning for headteachers effectively after the event?
- How do we get those providing the programme to buy in to online communities?

The blended learning experience now offered by SLICT is as follows.

- There is an invitation into a cohort online community by those providing the course to **practise** the online techniques required to collaborate online.
- The community is exploited fully at the face-to-face event.
- Post-event, participants can join national discussions facilitated by those providing the course according to a strict and clear timetable of events. There will also be **success stories** associated with logging on to the community, for example a monthly ICT update on the front page.
- Participants can also access further content and video case studies by linking with the Learning Gateway, NCSL's virtual learning environment.

---

## Building a new community: Foundation Stage leaders' community

---

NCSL's experiences in establishing a community for leaders who work in state nurseries, playgroups, integrated children's centres and other early years settings highlight some of the issues that arise in the launch of any brand new online group.

Research shows that ICT issues tend to **loom larger** for Foundation Stage leaders. Some, such as those who work in pre-school settings with the under-fives, tend to be less confident than others in the beginning. Foundation Stage leaders are less likely to have access to computers with internet access at work and so their use of technology may not be as confident as other users.

It's not a disadvantage that necessarily persists. In our experience, people get up to speed quickly with technology and are as adept as staff in other phases. There's a **universal lesson** here: don't assume that unfamiliarity with technology indicates inability or lack of interest.

We held a number of online sessions to help our group get to know each other and then organised an introductory (face-to-face) event for around 20 leaders. Here, we demonstrated the benefits of, and the differences between, face-to-face and online learning and involved the leaders in discussions about how they might use the community.

They also had the chance to **familiarise** themselves with the technology. A training page allowed them to play around with the tools and to discuss non-educational topics – ‘Tell us something no one would guess about you’, for example – as a means of building connections between people in a light-hearted way.

Having this opportunity to meet, discuss and throw around ideas was a major factor in getting the community up and running. It was intended to make people feel confident about accessing and contributing to the community. The emphasis throughout was on practicality: we made sure people felt comfortable at every stage and we took them through the process step by step.

**Accessibility, ownership and content** were key issues. The facilitators felt very strongly that users should, as far as possible, take ownership of the community from the start. There was an outlined agenda for the two days which listed facilitators’ ideas on content, but it was flexible enough to respond to issues the group raised. In small groups, the leaders discussed various ideas, including the look of the community, for which they discussed various metaphors.

In the end, the most popular metaphor choice turned out to be a Foundation Stage setting with icons indicating ‘creativity’, ‘reading’ or ‘staff room’, for example. The choice of **iconography** was, however, less important than the fact that the group themselves had chosen it. It was another way of giving them a sense of ownership.

Similarly, in discussions on the first day, we asked participants what the burning issues were for them as leaders and recorded their thoughts on flip charts. Later we drew on these ideas, using people’s own words and phrases to start online discussions on specific topics.

Immediately after the face-to-face event, 20 Foundation Stage leaders began using the new community and we have had some highly positive feedback about both the face-to-face event and the community development from the beginning. We had more than 2,000 visits in the first few months and there are now around 130 members.

The most popular areas are the **introductory section** where leaders can just say hello, talk about their setting or ask a question. A featured school page which was set up to show the organisation of a school and how its unit works, with a chance to ask questions, has also proved popular.

---

## Lessons learned

---

This particular community was launched after an earlier version for Foundation Stage leaders failed to get off the ground. The key reason for its failure, we subsequently realised, was a lack of access for anyone but primary school heads, rather than being targeted at Foundation Stage leaders. Many primary heads have little early years experience and often **delegate** that leadership responsibility to other staff, so would be unlikely to take up an invitation to join a Foundation Stage community. The lesson here is: know your target market.

---

## International activities

---

One of the great things about online communities is that they transcend barriers of time and geography. Members can live virtually anywhere, united by a common purpose or interest, rather than a postcode or timetable.

talk2learn's Global Community was established as an arena for school leaders from around the world to discuss any aspect of leadership. A large number of schools in England have used it to establish active links with others overseas.

It runs online conferences, concentrating on leadership issues in particular countries with **local hotseat guests**. There are also more general discussions where perspectives from the country can be shared with colleagues elsewhere.

NCSL receives a stream of overseas visitors wanting to evaluate how a national college for school leadership could operate in their own countries or how their existing CPD could be improved. The Global Community allows these visitors to continue the engagement and connections they have made with NCSL after they have returned home.

The **International Placements for Headteachers (IPH)** programme, which NCSL runs with the British Council, has its own online community, a key part of which is the placement group pages that come into effect when groups of headteachers, led by a facilitator, visit an overseas country.

The group is provided with a specific placement country page in the IPH community, set up to allow the group members to network, share information and support each other prior to the study visit. They can also keep in contact and collaborate on the report to share their views and experiences after the placement.

Here's a sample of the feedback we have had from the communities.

*“ I work as an educational consultant for the Supreme Education Council in the State of Qatar. Qatar is currently embracing major educational reform. I think global sharing of ideas is extremely useful.”*

*“ I wasn't aware of this wonderful global interaction until just now – what a powerful, influential learning platform for us. I am a Principal of a 550-pupil school just north of Auckland, New Zealand.”*

*“ I am a headteacher of a large multi-cultural school in Doncaster and we have been very lucky to have been involved in visits to the Caribbean, Hungary, Botswana and, more recently, I went to Taipei. All were life-changing visits and have had huge impact on our school in terms of the curriculum and the excellent CPD it has offered staff. We have an international co-ordinator in school who has formed a network with other schools in the area to promote internationalism.”*

For further information, references and guidance, go to [www.ncsl.org.uk/communities](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/communities)