Ten
Conclusion

Where do we go from here?

We have come a long way in the six years since the original Talking Heads pilot project. It brought together 1,200 new headteachers. In today's talk2learn community space, an impressive 105,000 school leaders can exchange ideas and meet for **debate, discussion and discourse**.

We have learned some valuable lessons en route.

For NCSL, learning about online communities is an ongoing process.

We continue to find out more about how to make the online space work most effectively for school leaders and how to make the very best use of the suite of tools we have at our disposal and introducing new ones like 'Virtual Classsroom', meeting software, and use of existing aids such as podcast, pdf summary and videos.

Since we started writing this book, two major research and evaluation projects, carried out by Demos and the Open University, have examined the impact of talk2learn and online communities.

The key learning messages from the latest research are as follows.

• Make the community as simple as possible. Users have a limited amount of time to spend online.

• Less is definitely more: concentrate on the right activities, facilitate them well and provide participants with useful resources as a result of the activities.

• Make **extensive use of your users** to develop and promote activities. They will then use the community more.

• Make sure the participants have a very clear rationale for going online, particularly in the context of a blended learning programme of study.

Toolkit

Basic facilitator skills

Community page design and accessibility

We have already begun to address these points by simplifying and redesigning our main communities. We have reduced the number of community spaces for participants to visit and improved the facilitation in those areas they do visit. We have also developed guidelines for publishing, both in terms of look and feel and appropriate content.

To supplement this book and help move thinking forward, we have created a set of resources and tools online , the e-learning facilitation toolkit. This is an outline resource which is supported by case study material. To access the toolkit go to www.ncsl.org.uk/elearningfacilitationtoolkit.

NCSL now commissions out most of the online community facilitation surrounding its Programmes (http://www.ncsl.org.uk/programmes/index.cfm) to regional providers so delivery is achieved at a local level. As a part of the commissioning process NCSL developed a set of e-learning guidelines to:

- support Programme providers in achieving sound blended learning opportunities for programme participants

- enable robust quality assurance procedures for commissioned programmes

The e-learning guidelines cover roles and responsibilities, theory, learning technologies, facilitation, talk2learn user guides, offering a useful tool for those running online communities. Of particular interest is the e-learning evaluation matrix which enables providers to self-review their blended learning approach and to contribute to quality assurance measures.

The guidelines appear as a PDF on the NCSL website and in folder form. The e-learning evaluation matrix is also part of the suite of matrix tools at www.ncsl.org.uk

We hope that this book has shown you that online collaboration is an immensely powerful way of working and can go a long way towards managing the complexities of individual learning and enriching the opportunities that technology can provide. There is potential for learners of all ages to benefit from online communities whether it is to support homework, CPD, liaison with parents, networking across schools or indeed headteachers grappling with the challenges facing school leaders into the future.

Make the most of this opportunity … 100,000 heads really are better than one.

www.ncsl.org.uk/communities
www.ncsl.org.uk/elearningfacilitationtoolkit