

MirandaMods: From Practice to Praxis in Informal Professional Learning Contexts

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Introduction

Marshall McLuhan, one of the first prophets of the electronic age, made some striking pronouncements in the 1960s. Two of the best known, “the medium is the message” and “the world is a global village” focused on the potential effects of new communication technologies as they related to popular culture, and how this in turn would affect human behaviour and relationships within and across established communities (<http://www.marshallmcluhan.com>). Fifty years later, one observation about human behaviour is that despite the pervasive power of digital technologies in society today there are still socio-cultural barriers and training issues that prevent many educators in all phases of education from using these technologies with the facility shown by their pupils (Facer et al. 2003; Downes 2004; Somekh 2004; Preston and Cuthell 2007; Pachler et al. 2011). This chapter illustrates how the paucity of well-designed Continuing Professional Development (CPD) programmes in digital technologies is being remedied. Educators themselves are taking charge of an emerging mode of professional online communication that engages educators in knowledge creation. This mode of communication is a modification of the “unconference”. The “unconference” is a democratic knowledge exchange where all professional participants are considered to have expertise, rather than invited speakers. The derivative designed by educators, called a MirandaMod, is a themed debate where issues of practice and theory are raised on equal terms. These terms are explained more fully in the next section.

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Key Terms

This section defines several terms as they are used in this chapter: educator; digital technologies; the unconference and its derivative, the MirandaMod.

The term “educator” has been chosen as a collective noun for the subjects of this developmental project in order to embrace the roles of all teachers who also teach other teachers about digital technologies, formally or informally: senior managers, teacher educators, staff trainers, network managers, regional advisers and teaching assistants.

The global term “digital technologies” is used to encompass all the technologies that teachers might use for teaching and learning within their classrooms. This term also refers to technologies that are used for teaching and learning remotely, such as Virtual Learning environments. The term “Information and Communications Technology” (ICT) is used both in the UK and in South Africa for the subject as it is both taught in the classroom and deployed as part of pedagogy. However, in other countries, this curriculum subject is often called Information Technology or Informatics. Internationally, these terms imply a concentration on the computer science aspects of computer application: the implication in the UK is that ICT refers to the ways of using computers for information retrieval, communications and pedagogy, rather than how computers are controlled through programming and how hardware operates. Across the world, however, computer science is still taught in schools where learning to programme a computer as well as learning to use the packages in detail are key elements in computer lessons although computers are not deployed elsewhere in the curriculum.

The term “MirandaMod” is used for a virtual debate between professionals who are seen as equals. These innovative opportunities for exchange meet the demands of emerging cultures of professional learning in this digital age. While learning remotely and informally is largely what has been understood about mobile learning, the concept can now be extended to include the informal spaces in which learning takes place – the liminal spaces that those who push the boundaries of digital possibilities now inhabit intellectually (Preston et al. 2009). The term “liminal space (Cuthell et al. 2011)” is a term drawn from anthropology that describes a rite of passage, in which a person moves from one state to another. The anthropological view sees the liminal state as involving a period of time in which an individual may oscillate between old and new states, involve a range of emotions including anticipation, difficulty and anxiety, and at times require the mimicry of the new state until it becomes “natural”. ICT users are transformed in the liminal space by acquiring new knowledge, a new status and a new identity in the community. This is of critical importance if ICT CPD is to be successful.

The mode of learning that takes place in this liminal space has recently been modified by professional educators in two versions. The TeachMeet¹ participants are called in random order to offer a 2- or 5-min focus on the teachers’ knowledge and craft, rather than on theory and abstraction. Each teacher speaks about their

¹<http://wiki.scotedublogs.org.uk>.

achievements in the classroom from their own perspective. There is no theme established. In a MirandaMods,² however, the Fellows chose a theme beforehand. Some lead participants set the tone in a 5-min talk, usually without presentation software, and further contributions are selected by the chairperson of the debate to achieve a balance in participation between teachers, researchers and teacher educators. This chapter explores the emergence of the MirandaMod in more detail, but first the relevant literature on professional learning will be covered – largely from the British point of view.

Literature Review

Three literature strands are relevant to the development of the MirandaMod: social and cultural contexts that look at the impact of digital technologies in informal learning; professional learning issues; and, the basic pedagogic principles that underpin CPD programmes and their relationship to the principles of an unconference.

Social and Cultural Contexts

The new demands of digital technologies are challenging traditional, social and cultural practices as well the agency of teachers and learners (Pachler et al. 2010). Kress and Pachler (2007) warn, however, that associated social, political and economic changes, linked with globalisation, are taking place with a speed that militates against careful reflection within the education profession. These authors balance the attractions of such benefits as democratisation of education through greater access against the transfer of power in the digital realm from state to market. They point to large-scale social consequences where digital technologies and their affordances have already become a prosthesis for some users and are generally influencing our notions of self and society. They ask some “troubling” questions about the gains and losses that are occurring because of the prevalence of technologies in education. “Mobile learning”, “e-learning”, “online learning”, “virtual learning”, “anywhere anytime learning” are typical of phrases that are linked to hardware and software rather than a process change. In contrast, they prefer not to refer to the technology that is being used, but to distinctly new conditions and environments created by technology that are impacting on the experience of learning. The engagement of activist professionals in the policy and practice agenda is essential if the concerns of Kress and Pachler (2007) are to be heeded.

Kress and Pachler (2007) outline learning processes that shift from the notion that learning is about acquiring information to the idea that the learner shapes their own knowledge from their own sense of the world – and that this new knowledge

²<http://www.mirandanet.ac.uk/mirandamods>.

created by the learner is valuable. Central are their reflections on the issues of meta-collaboration – the circumstances that allow people to communicate remotely across boundaries of status, nationhood and culture that have not been so readily available in the past. However, Kress and Pachler (2007) point out that this widespread opportunity for communication for all does not presuppose that the agents have a critical understanding of the potential partners in knowledge creation and how their abilities and status might relate. I make a similar point in comparing the differences between social networking in the general sense and deliberate knowledge creation in a Community of Practice (CoP), where there is trust between members with similar approaches to learning and mutual aims to support each other. However, strategies for leveraging this community trust still have to be mutually developed and understood (Preston 2007).

Professional Learning

“Professional learning” is the outcome of the transformational change described by Friere (1968) in his definition of “praxis”, the evidence that the professional as the agent has forged together theory and practice (Infed 2011). Praxis, is a high-level mode of professional operation where the practitioner does not only possess skills but a deep knowledge and understanding of the theories that underpin practice. This can lead to a profound change in the professional’s sense of identity that is the aim of the best professional development.

As a term, “professional learning” is widely used to cover the activities in CPD programme designs that put educators who are motivated by the prospect of professional change in control of their learning agenda (Pickering et al. 2009; Johns-Shepherd and Gowing 2007). The term emphasises teachers learning actively rather than being passive recipients of an expert teaching agenda. In the ICT CPD Landscape: Literature Review (Daly et al. 2009) the phrase, “professional learning”, is used frequently in the context of change. The researchers explain the challenges for the designers of CPD programmes for professionals who aim to promote change:

ICT CPD, therefore, needs to be recognised as a complex, social, intellectual and practical activity which brings about change in teachers’ beliefs and understandings in relation to changing practice and developing skills. It takes place within a range of locations and modes which provide cultural contexts in which to learn. It involves re-evaluating learner–teacher roles and overall classroom pedagogies. It brings changes in aspects of professional identity. For these reasons, simplistic models of ICT CPD are not helpful – it is highly situated and success is subject to many inter-related human and social factors which vary across locations, strategies and relationships (Daly et al. 2009, pp. 69–70).

In 2010, a further government survey of the UK ICT CPD Landscape indicates that there is an even greater diversity of ICT CPD programmes mostly running at a skills level rather than addressing the need for transformative change (Pachler et al. 2011). In this chapter, the MirandaMod is investigated as a means of providing widely available and cost effective CPD for those leaders who are willing to learn informally from each other.

Pedagogical Models Underpinning CPD

The underlying pedagogical mode of the traditional conference is “information transmission”. This popular phrase is used to denote the communication of expert knowledge that is one way only. Chandler (1994) complains that the information transmission model assumes communicators are isolated individuals. No allowance is made for differing purposes, differing interpretations, unequal power relations and situational contexts. The traditional role of expert educators around the world is to pass on their expertise to students who learn this information and reproduce it for examinations and tests without necessarily processing it to change their practice.

The “unconference” model eschews this approach to learning in favour of demanding that all the participants are actively engaged in generating knowledge and knowledge exchange. In this innovative mode of professional learning, the traditional power relationships between the expert and the learner are unbalanced. The underlying pedagogical approaches “social interaction” promoted by Lave and Wenger in the development of the “community of practice (CoP)” concept over nearly two decades (Lave and Wenger 1991, 1999; Wenger 1998, 2004; Wenger et al. 2002). These are groups of professionals who chose to learn together informally. Thus two related theories expand Wenger’s vision about CoP practices: Communal Constructivism and Braided Learning. Communal Constructivism emphasises teachers’ knowledge building role as they work together often across national boundaries (Holmes et al. 2001; Leask and Younie 2001, 2002).

This “social interaction” approach to learning relates to Freire’s notion of the wider value of collaborative learning in social and cultural contexts for professionals who want to take charge of their own agenda (Freire 1968). As CoPs mature, the MirandaNet observation has been that an interesting form of social learning emerges underpinned by the use of technologies (Cuthell 2005). Salmon (2002) has analysed the five steps of learning that take place when a course is run online: access and motivation; online socialisation; information exchange; knowledge construction; and development. Salmon comments that knowledge construction tends to happen when students are writing their essays in isolation. It would be fruitful in the development stage, the fifth step, if they came back to the classroom and shared collaboratively what has been learnt in their individual studies in order to gain new insights into learning together. This rarely happens because students begin new modules at this stage in new groupings.

Braided Learning theory (Haythornthwaite et al. 2007; Cuthell and Preston 2007; Preston 2008) picks up on the individual learning in Salmon’s step four and then considers how the development step, five, might be an activity like an unconference that is collaborative, community-focused and voluntary. This contrasts with the activity of a group of individual learners moving towards accreditation on a formal course. Braided Learning is an emergent theory that is tracing how this kind of informal dynamic knowledge creation works in a collaborative online context. Braided Learning refers to a meaning-making process that is emerging from the observation of online communication. Cuthell (2005) has traced the development of students’

collaborative knowledge sharing in a MirandaNet online course on e-facilitation in a virtual learning environment in detail. The second Braided Learning studies looked at the productive use of email texts and e-facilitation processes (Preston 2007, 2009; Cuthell and Preston 2008; Cuthell 2008, 2009). In this third study, undertaken as communities of professionals mature in digital competence, the MirandaMod has become a crucible where social learning can find expression using virtual meeting software transcripts, i-chat, remote multi-authored digital concept mapping, microblogging and video streaming.

The MirandaMod development is one answer to the approach to ICT CPD recommended by the Landscape Review: a greater concentration on the role of groups of professionals who meet informally to exchange the theories and practices (Daly et al. 2009). In MirandaNet research the investigators are members researching members and themselves. This ethnographical method was developed by Adler and Adler (1987): the Complete Member Researcher. Originally international MirandaNet researchers were engaged in simply observing the email discussions taking place in professional CoPs, ITTE (<http://www.itte.org.uk>) and Naace (<http://www.naace.org.uk>) are two influential UK professional organisations relating to digital technologies in education. Their members' use of email indicate how online professional learning is orchestrated by the members of the CoP in accordance with their own agenda (Preston 2007; Preston and Cuthell 2009; Preston et al. 2009). In this chapter, the newest iteration of informal learning, the MirandaMod, is the focus of investigation. The MirandaMod extends the opportunities for collaborative learning practised in a "community of practice".

MirandaMod Format

In brief, a themed MirandaMod is an occasion when like-minded educators aim to explore an emerging professional issue and collaboratively create new knowledge. This knowledge is then disseminated through the website to inspire new grassroots practice.

MirandaNet members define the MirandaMod on their website as an informal, loosely structured unconference of like-minded educators sharing ideas about the use of technology to inspire others. The term "Mod" that was offered by a Scottish member historically comes from the Gaelic word for a gathering, assembly or parliament. MirandaMod is usually (but not always) a fringe event following or attached to a formal MirandaNet seminar/workshop or meeting. The format includes a wiki, streamed webcasts, chat facilities, online collaborative concept maps and linked Twitter streams, means that there is an international dimension to these events. Like wikis, blogs, chat and email, this online multimodal communication is unlike previous modes of knowledge construction because remote participation reduces time and cost commitments. In these unstructured activities software such as Flash Meeting, linked to microblogging and instant communication streams, empower digital visitors to engage remotely with those at the terrestrial meetings, even to the point of placing a convivial pint of beer next to their terminal. The virtual world, Second Life, is also being considered as a welcoming MirandaMod location.

These creators of the MirandaMod programme, as well as the participants, value the mix of perspectives at the meetings. Some of them are also members of Naace, or ITTE, or TeachMeet, or all three; users of Twitter. They have engaged in a variety of experiments with “unconference” models in relationship to the topic, the location and the technology available. The MirandaMod format is constantly being adjusted according to the topic.

Typically, a conventional seminar might take place from 1400 to 1700 at the “home” of MirandaNet, the WLE Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London. Some well-known experts are given 30 minutes to talk about their subject at length, followed by time for questions. For example, the MirandaMod on educational games covered different perspectives on games in education by researchers, teachers, teacher educators and games developers.

In a MirandaNet seminar the room is organised without a speakers’ platform. Speakers and participants sit round a table, so that the barriers between speakers and their listeners are broken down and the participants can look at one another in the eye and see reactions. All participants are also invited to introduce themselves, whereas speakers in conferences often do not ask their audience who they are: sometimes because the audience is too big, sometimes because the speakers are keener to talk than to learn. Each MirandaNet seminar will be filmed and hosted on the MirandaNet website, assuming that funds are available. In this way international and national members who could not be in London have asynchronous access to the meeting and can learn from the topics.

In planning the programme, complex decisions by the team have to be made that take account of what is topical, who is available to lead the sessions and what technology is appropriate. “Low cost and no frills” is the norm; speakers are asked to give their time free. So this early seminar and the MirandaMod are free to anyone who has an interest. Supper follows; it is sponsored by companies and by government agency supporters and the WLE Centre where the London MirandaMods are held and continues from 1700 to 1830. During the supper some of the audience leave and others stay; some go shopping for books and return. More participants appear for the MirandaMod who could not attend the afternoon session; these are members of MirandaNet as well as staff and students at the host university, members of ITTE, Naace and attendees at TeachMeet. Where possible MirandaMods are held during school holidays or on a Friday evening, so practising teachers have a chance of attending. Obtaining support cover for teachers in classrooms is increasingly difficult. The “expert” seminar speakers are expected to stay on as well to contribute to the more relaxed MirandaMod. Speakers are invited to see this as an opportunity to learn from the participants as well as contribute.

MirandaMods, lasting from about 1830 to 2100, are open to all students and teachers from the Institute of Education, University of London, MirandaNet and other appropriate professional groups. The full programme for the academic year 2009/2010 can be found in Appendix one, where the range of formats and approaches can be seen even over one season. The full resources can be accessed on <http://www.mirandanet.ac.uk/mirandamods>. Speakers and participants are asked to make their materials freely available and the collaborative maps prove to be a good place for useful but less obvious resources to be posted.

All the iChat text, video stream and Twitter feeds are then posted in the MirandaNet web space so that those who could not participate have a record of proceedings and asynchronous access. Currently, this material is also being used for research, in order to develop the Braided Learning framework more comprehensively.

In specific terms, participants elect to present for 2 or 7 min on the theme of the session. The use of standard presentation software (like PowerPoint) is discouraged in order to minimise the possibility of didactic presentations, and to empower engagement with colleagues. On the evening, the order of speakers is random. Time factors may prevent some from speaking depending on the incidental discussions that evolve about the presentations. The international dimension is made possible by the use of wikis, FlashMeeting, real time video streams, iChat and a Twitter stream (Preston and Cuthell 2010) – all of which can be embedded in a Second Life seminar space. The last half hour of the MirandaMod and time afterwards will be taken up by the collaborative creation of an online multi-authored concept map that will outline the group judgements that have been made on the topic under debate. These maps form the basis of the professional distribution of knowledge and the reports.

The Findings: Achieving Praxis

The evidence for changes in praxis was divided under the key characteristics of an effective ICT CPD programme design described in the Landscape review (Daly et al. 2009) that reflects the complex, social, intellectual and practical process of professional learning. The conclusions have been grouped under three headings:

Under the first heading, “the opportunities for teachers to record changes in their beliefs and understandings in relation to changing practice and developing skills”, there are several observations:

- The MirandaMod is proving valuable in the creation of professional knowledge as opposed to socialising online. This instant communication between work-based experts is a valuable mode for professional learning, where all the participants define the agenda before and during the event.
- In particular, a MirandaMod programme addresses some of the issues raised in the Becta reports on the UK ICT landscape (2010). First, the emphasis on intellectual debate about digital technologies emphasises a deep understanding and application of skills to developing learning and teaching rather than just a discussion of skills. Additionally, teachers’ knowledge and craft are recognised, rather than relying on a crude estimate of their skills.
- Teachers at any level are sharing in a MirandaMod the development of an appropriate “vision” focused on pedagogy. Even if their own focus is skills, other participants can open minds to other perspectives. The teacher development aspect is given in the information experience that they have.

Under the second heading “a variety of locations and modes that reflect different cultural contexts for learning” are these observations:

- Because presentation software is discouraged each participant has to think hard about less linear ways in presenting information and deploy greater use of multimodal forms of presentation. Persuasion simply through eye contact with the audience is also seen to be powerful in terms of performance.
- The way in which a MirandaMod can be set up means that the costs and time required for conventional CPD do not apply. The teachers are, in effect, teaching themselves. They do not need to meet face-to-face in order to keep up their knowledge. The MirandaMod can help to dissipate the “policy tensions” that prevent coherent and consistent development of pedagogy using technologies, and that create conflicts over how time and resources are used to embed technologies within schools.
- This knowledge creation activity is important because the technology is sufficiently transparent to empower all members to set the agenda at the grassroots. This mirrors young peoples’ mobile learning activity outside school in easy to use virtual environments, such as ThinkQuest, Bebo and Facebook, that allow them to follow their interests and to develop and extend their existing talents.
- Teachers can utilise the attendant resources in any way or time they wish. They can use these resources for self study or to share with peers and pupils. They can also author resources for others which change their perception of their role.

Under the third heading “potential for professionals to re-evaluate their identity in relationship to their role and their pedagogical observations” MirandaMods can:

- Encourage democratic debate rather than just promote socialisation.
- Challenge the usual model of conferences for teachers where there is limited interaction, if any, between “experts” on stage and the experts in the audience. This mix helps teachers to see themselves in the wider professional context and, perhaps, open up interests that they were not aware that they had.
- Challenge the usual model of conferences for teachers where there is limited interaction, if any, between “experts” on stage and the experts in the audience. In the MirandaMod, professionals have equal input regardless of their differing status in the world of education, which challenges their understanding of their identity.

In questions about reevaluating their identity the practitioner participants particularly valued the research input which is not normally available to teachers in classrooms. They also found contact with researchers and the chance to question them particularly revealing and mind changing.

Conclusions

The MirandaMod is a new mode of professional learning that employs digital technologies in innovative ways to enrich collaborative knowledge creation processes. The main message is that it is the knowledge gathering agenda that should take precedence over the demands of digital technologies.

Five ways have been identified overall that show how MirandaMods have the potential to promote changes in professional praxis through:

- Reflection
- Collaboration
- Access to collaborative resources
- Publishing new professional knowledge based on collaboration
- Changing existing frames of thought and patterns of behaviour

What is probably most important for the future is the extra dimension MirandaMods add to learning through social interaction, especially when the opportunities for professionals to engage in face-to-face meetings are reduced because of economic constraints. Costs are not high: investment in this form of ICT CPD may be the only way that many educators have access to professional learning in the years to come.

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