

7 Community: together we can...or can we?

The book has taken us through the ways in which participants saw the contribution of computers to education and raised the 'disconnect' between their perspective and that of policy makers. In arriving at a vision of using computers, and articulating that vision, the notion of belonging to a research community has loomed very large. In this final chapter we look in more detail at what is meant by an educational research community; what has it achieved and where should it go from here?

What is the ICT research community and what does it look like?

Community was used by participants in a broad sense to refer to people who shared their interest in technology and pedagogy, and whose work they might have some professional knowledge of. They might look on members of the community as potential collaborators on projects. This shared interest was in researching the educational use of computers. This took in both practitioner and academic research and, for the most part, they did not want to draw a too rigid distinction between the two or privilege one over the other. The research community was distinguished from a practice community (which might, for example, focus on the immediate needs of teachers); a policy making community (which would be directly interested in the making and implementing of technology policies); or, indeed, a commercial technology community (which might focus on the reliability, technical viability, and ultimately the profitability, of developing certain software and hardware). Again distinctions were not rigid and, of course, teachers, policy makers and technologists could feel a sense of belonging to the research community and participants could engage deeply in the concerns of teachers, policy makers and technologists. Community then rested on a sense of engagement with like minded others, based on a shared interest in research. It did not rest on occupational role but a sense of community was strengthened by regular face to face interaction between different members through place of work, membership of professional associations, international teacher associations, academic boards, advisory bodies, co-participation on projects. Indeed, among the fifteen participants, there were examples of co authorship of papers; shared membership of editorial boards; co-participation in the same teacher education programme; co-participation in the work of ITTE and so on.

Distinctive feature of the computers in education research community

The distinctive feature of this research community, as we have seen throughout the book is that it put pedagogy at the heart of its research into the use of computers. This was because the technology:

presents you simultaneously with the need to implement something practically but also it generates all this other thinking and discussion about pedagogy and how people learn at the same time.

This was not alignment with 'any old' pedagogy but a concern which was both broad, yet distinctive, with the desire to make learning more engaging, more learner centred and more playful. The interest in both technology and pedagogy had left participants overwhelmed at times, but it had also privileged them by leading them to constantly rethink pedagogy in the classroom and the relevance of school to the wider world. This speaker saw the research as:

on the edge of educational thinking, actually, the notions of tools and a changing society and changing roles. Somehow this technology, I don't whether we have used it as a vehicle or have recognised its role, is pushing the edges of what is education for these days.

Another distinctive feature of this research community was its concern for practice. Participants felt close to the teaching profession, valued their own practitioner experiences and attributed their knowledge of teaching and learning to participation in teaching and teacher education as this participant explains:

Interviewer: So how about you as an individual, who's been most influential in developing your use of ICT in education...so anybody that's been...?

Participant: It would be loads of people. I almost need to name check everyone or no one. So it would be loads and loads and loads of people. You know it would be my colleagues back in the Humanities department at the school where I used to teach, it would be the kids we used to teach because my use of ICT has always been embedded in some social context, some set of purposes. So yeah, so there wouldn't be one person, one sort of opinion leader, there would be so many people, including me because you know I've had a certain sense of curiosity that I've brought to it and I've wanted to find out about it so we don't just have to look outside of ourselves for those influences, you know, I've been an influence on myself but I wouldn't claim any greater status than all of those other people.

A third distinctive feature of the community was the obvious warmth they felt for its members:

They're immensely social and affectionate, there's a lot of affection, I feel for people and the ICT communities I've worked with have always been really open, interesting people.

Another was asked to compare the ICT research community with other subject areas - would they would have similar stories?

I think they might have similar stories but the ICT ones do tend to have particular characteristics. Things like, experimentation and having a go at things and also a high level of playfulness I think characterises most of our group everybody is fairly light hearted in wanting to see the fun in the activity it's about having fun.

Another frequently used term to describe the community was 'idiosyncratic', 'independently minded', 'frustrated with being tied down by bureaucratic structures'. As several acknowledged perhaps this reflected that they came to computers in a less 'locked down' age:

You've got teachers who've come into the business since then. Well, they've never known anything other than the national curriculum and the QCA schemes of work, the national strategies and so on, are they in a good position to be visionary about schools of the future?

How did this research community grow?

The context is a given. There were astonishing developments in technology and decisions taken at micro and macro level to seek to develop that technology in, and for, teaching and learning. A research community grew because projects and programmes were set up, posts were created, courses funded and schemes devised. It was almost inevitable that on the back of this networks of interested colleagues would develop. However, networks had to meet a need. Researchers and developers were drawn together because they were 'working from scratch'. They needed the information and stimulus that others could supply. This explains the networking that was described in the previous chapter in programmes such as MEP. Here one participant recalls seeking a means of networking tutors in ITE:

This contact has been very important for me. From the early days I think it was the case that we were all isolated we all tended to be working alone in the early days. Perhaps a bit later on people got less isolated. It was very much a self help group. We got together because we were the only people who were doing it so we needed to talk to other like minded folk original meeting I can remember, when it was all about micros going into schools, those first meetings were because the government said the only way we can have the kit was if we put on a twenty hour course for our students and I remember [] who called those first meetings, he said 'Come on what's the curriculum for a twenty hour course? And we kind of bashed around, what are we going to do for these twenty hours that we've all got to deliver? What should we do what software?'. Very much self help.

But to understand why these networks were such 'magical' combinations we need to understand the self belief members had in what they were doing and the value they put on working together. Participants throughout their careers believed in collegiality, in schools, in advisory work, in developing programmes; or, as below, in carrying out research projects:

Well I certainly remember them and I met some wonderful people through those projects. I would say that in a sense the projects were doing almost what the technologies enable us to do now, they created the early networks. And those networks were important, so the important thing about those projects for me were not the technological outcomes, because I don't think they were very profound. We were making incremental changes through those projects. The important thing was the networks they created, the people, the connections. And I am still in touch with

people that I worked with twenty years ago ...OK, I'm not in daily contact with them but when I see them we have a common point of reference and we talk about change, and reflect upon things. So connecting the people, for me that's what those projects did.

This seeking of collaboration arose even on holiday as one participant illustrates in talking about networking with teachers in Australia

I called in on people in the education department to find out what they were doing around technology. And I came across their Teachernet initiative. I called in to see them because I could see that the Internet provided opportunities for joint international projects, so I called in to say, 'hey guys would you like to be involved in some joint international project kids sharing across the internet?' And they said oh yes, and as it happened the British Council was interested in exploring all of this as well. And they picked up that project and took it forward.

As informal networking developed participants recall becoming engaged in well established academic traditions, what might be seen as 'ritualisation'. Journals were set up, papers sought, reviewed and published. Bids were written, seminars organised and conferences took place. However within these rituals some still sought informality, as this speaker describes in this early network of researchers:

These were twenty four hour events, they were deliberately inter disciplinary. Our colleague had a vision of setting up an inter disciplinary group who would be supportive of IT in education. And each seminar was on a specific topic, and he would invite about 20 or 25 people to these. We went lunchtime one day, we stayed overnight, we left lunchtime the next day. And they were more or less totally open ended events nearly always ended by the end of the first day, half the people there absolutely furious with the coordinator who used to sit at the front and he was very good at taking criticism and abuse but he was wonderfully facilitative so of course out of these people who were mad keen to tell him what we should have been doing and he just let them get on. They were all wonderful events, and there I met many of the people who have remained a hugely important group for me ever since. And it gave me a much more interdisciplinary way into it than I otherwise might have expected.

An important early stimulus for academic research for some was Project Intent. This was set up to support tutors in initial teacher education and helped contribute to an academic tradition in writing about computers, one recalls being told:

You need to establish a literature, for IT and teacher education. And so we had that little series called DITTE and they were actually refereed in the sense that we had an advisory panel they were reviewed and went back to the author. I think we did some little job, that at least set a vision and something towards a quality standard as DITTE ended, JITTE started. And (*my colleague*) who had been in Project Intent became very prominent in JITTE from the start. So I think there was some kind of, I don't want to claim too much, but I think there was some carry over there and I think also that the initial group of people who were very prominent in ITTE had a part in project Intent.

I think it helped to establish the idea that it would be a good idea for people to be researching and writing about this.

Another key focus for research in the professional lives of many of the participants was the founding of ITTE:

I should mention, as I have missed out a key point, I think about 1986 there were a number of tutors who were working in teacher education trying to promote the use of IT in teaching. We were all experimenting basically and I called them together here for a conference and I cannot remember exactly who came but we had about forty tutors and at the end of that ITTE was formed, we decided that we needed to set that up. So ITTE started as a result of the conference.

And how did the research community maintain itself?

Again context is important. Developments in technology meant new opportunities, new questions, new contexts. The policy makers' commitment to computers in school stayed and grew. Research was an ever expanding field, rivalries must have existed but remarkably few are reported and chasing research funding did not feel a 'zero sum game'. However community maintenance was not inevitable and again emerged because the community continued to meet needs and participants were community minded. You continued to learn by participation and working together was better than working alone:

I suppose I have worked here thirty years and throughout that time I have more or less kept up with changes in technology so sub consciously I have pursued a line of my own CPD basically. If I say how have I done that it has always been through the association, I have learnt through colleagues in MAPE, in ITTE, by going to shows like BETT, if you are working in IT particularly in teacher education, and you don't make the effort to join the association this would be a lonely environment and if you want to keep you really need to be part of external networks. I put a lot in to ITTE and MAPE but I have got a lot from them and I am sure if the institution wants ...I know this has been in its way my CPD.

Without that close involvement with others participants felt they would lack the drive to engage with research:

I need it for my own intellectual energy as a researcher, I need the excitement of discussion of things and I got that from ITTE I got it from IFIP conferences. The conference last summer in Norway was absolutely magical for me...The whole thing is about community, really none of us could achieve anything without the elaborate networking that goes on.

A sense of community provided participants with the imagined audience they needed to write – or as one put it, the 'audience in her head'. Without networking participants would not have access to the necessary collaboration in order to develop their work and their careers:

And on a personal level I now have this working relationship that come out of ITTE with the four of us have worked on any number of projects over the last few years. That came about because our paths crossed within ITTE and we've now done all this stuff with FutureLab and those things. And that's been a level of discussion and collegiality I couldn't have got within the institution because there is nobody else that involved ...so it was the ITTE community that got that side of things going for me.

What has the research community achieved and where has it fallen short?

Participants spoke about successful outcomes of the research community and its weaknesses, they tried to account for the difficulties they had experienced.

What has the research community achieved?

Do communities need a wider justification than maintenance of identity for their members? Whatever the answer to this, participants could point to some outward looking achievements. The engagement with practitioners has been charted throughout the book and participants felt, at different levels, they had an impact on practice. A key contribution here was impact on initial teacher education. Even when successive governments tried to marginalise the role of higher education in teacher education they kept coming back to the need for an academic input into developing the use of computers:

It has actually kept teacher education on the map at a time when it was disappearing, as we moved to 'everything must go on in school'. Teacher education became a lost ground and the one area I think the government realised that they had to have help was within ICT. So ICT actually kept teacher education on the map, not just for ICT but for the other subjects as well because people were saying 'oh yes, people don't know how to do that yet, there must be somebody else.' And that somebody else was the training colleges and the universities.

Then, there were the academic achievements. In particular the research community had established an academic foundation for the study of computers in education as these three participants describe:

We started off as practitioners. We were just doing things in the classroom exploring playing with things with students and it was a colleague [] who was one of the first people to bang on about the need to really do some kind of respectable research into this area and not carry on with anecdotes. He said we must start to try and put it on a proper footing. This must have been the 90s I suppose.

This is a considered view that what is published now in the journal, if you take the recent issues and compare them with the early issues, there is now maturity anda mature research community has been created.

When we look back to where we started it was just a few folk working together because otherwise we'd all sink, to where we are now, with a relatively respected voice. I'm quite proud to have been engaged in that all the way through. Looking back from where we were and where we are now and all the people who have been involved I think in the group there are some really talented folk.

Finally, in spite of all the difficulties discussed earlier, participants felt that the research community had engaged with policy makers, had had some success in contributing to policy by showing that the introduction of computers was more complex than imagined, and had assisted when asked in helping implement policy through projects and programmes and through CPD work with the result that:

There is a recognition now that it takes more than just the kit, there has to be a pedagogy too, but it has taken us a long time.

Where has the research community fallen short?

The academic achievement was considered by many to be incomplete. Many felt that the research community had been weak in discussing and developing theory, or to be more accurate, theories. For sure, participants had engaged with theory and had found distinctive interpretations of, say, Activity Theory, Community of Practice and ideas of ecological perception. However, there was a worry that theory had not been developed by, or within, the community and theorising borrowed from other non computer related contexts: As this speaker noted:

I would say that there are no major figureheads in our community. Now that may not actually chime very well with what other people may say but for me there are no major figureheads. There is no one or two or three people that stand out as names that I would say 'Ah, this person'. I think collectively this community has generated whatever we have got, however we define ourselves now. And it is very difficult to put individual names to it. Unlike other branches of education, and again this relates back to the fact that we haven't developed our theory. If we had developed this leading edge theory then I think that names would be associated with it. But because we haven't there are no major names.

This fitted a general feeling that the research community was at a deficit compared to other disciplines. As one put it 'education research is not theoretically strong and ICT research is less strong than other work in this sector'. They had built up a lot of empirical evidence about the application of computers but had not adequately theorised or come up with a convincing account of technology:

We haven't had our theory sorted out, strengthened. We as a community were people who did what worked to start with, weren't we? We weren't theoretically strong. I think we are getting a bit stronger but I'll come back to that but I think there's been a weakening recently.

This was reinforced by another participant who had long experience of reviewing papers for publication:

I still think that much of the research is still patchy and inconclusive. I don't know what the answer to that is I've struggled with that for a long time because almost by definition its going to be inconclusive because we are doing small case studies not vast longitudinal stuff. Soa lot of the things we're reviewing for the journal come up with a conclusion of 'I'm against evil. More research should be done!' I think that's really bad, doesn't really nail anything.

Some, however, had vastly different views on this and felt there was too strong an engagement in research and theory and too little engagement in technology and supporting the practitioner:

My own view is that ITTE has got a bit too research oriented for my liking....for example I was really expecting to hear about Wikis and blogs from ITTE, from tutors who have done it on courses or in schools and I think ITTE needs to get the balance right between allowing members to develop their research interest but also to do this other work.....

While this was not the majority view all realised that the research community was not impacting on practice in the way it could and indeed should. Of course it was not researcher's fault if their insights were sometimes ignored by policy makers and practitioners but they could offer both audiences greater coherence and a better account of what technology could be expected to do and not do.

Why the success and why the difficulties?

The achievements of the research community had come about by the proactive work of its members; their willingness to take risks; willingness to straddle pedagogy and technology; and an instinctive orientation towards collaboration. The community was felt to be welcoming and inclusive:

I think almost without exception everyone I know who is involved with ICT is involved with the research side as well, so I think it has been a success.

So what had caused the weaknesses? In terms of practical impact it had always been a matter of size. Talking about MAPE one observed:

I think it has been recognised ...we have always had good feedback from teachers. The problem is MAPE is 300 teachers, at its height 500 teachers, and out there are a quarter of a million teachers and 500 is neither here nor there...

In a similar vein, talking about ITTE one observed:

When any initiatives in ITTE get discussed; we just don't have the critical mass. It just sustains things over a long period of time. An obvious area might be you take the initiative like the ICT tutors website, well look how difficult it is to keep something like

that going. And that's got money behind it. Sometimes if there was to be a major undertaking it would be something like getting ITTE to have a method for sharing its expertise, I mean that at all different levels. The most obvious thing being why there can't be some project to pull together the five best teaching sessions that you've ever taught. To build a library of resources, and archive of resources, for example, that would give a real insight into how other people do stuff. I have only a marginal understanding of how you work in your place. And I'm not sure to what extent I need to have a better model. Sometimes I feel that that is an oddity about the type of organisation we are. We only really know about each other in a very general way. I don't know what you'd do about it. You'd have to have somebody go around these places and get the data.

In terms of developing academic research, the community was too small; members had too little time; they had over extended professional lives; and they faced a context that was shifting too quickly. In addition, several noted the 'newness' of the field and most members had not grown up thinking about technology but had adapted to it. Looking further, such strong practitioner roots could be a weakness as well as a strength:

People come in with different values and different backgrounds - it's a question of biography, you know what had I been doing for the past eighteen years when I became a full time member of staff here? Well I'd been doing other stuff, I hadn't been doing research. What has somebody who has done a first degree and then a higher degree and then become a university lecturer what have they been doing for a comparable length of time? They've been doing research. So, I extend that out to education departments in general where, by and large, people have got a background as a teacher, people come in after being a teacher, and you don't come in to that world prioritising research, but prioritising teaching.

Perhaps there were weaknesses in the community itself and was it as inclusive as they imagined?:

Areas like the obvious ones, networking is good but I can't say there is any major or long term and sustained relationships I've got with colleagues at a distance as a result of being in ITTE.

And the tension between practice and academic engagement could prove a weakness as well as strength:

I think there is a dislocation between colleagues who are engaged in the theorising and the research and colleagues who are engaged in designing these modules and teach them.

In spite of intention perhaps the community could appear closed to newcomers:

I was involved and went backwards and forwards for a few years, I was always on the periphery. I think as a young person at that time I was still suffering acute insecurity.

Or certain colleagues might appear careerist in orientation:

And actually I know some people have been critical of some of the chairs of ITTE, using it for their professional advancement. Because quite a number of chairs of ITTE have ended up as Profs, for example. But I really don't think that the people in ITTE take on those responsibilities and go on the committee and do all that for personal advancement. That's one of the few communities in education and higher ed that that is not part of the deal. And it's not surprising that the people who have that kind of commitment and engagement end up in positions of responsibility and influence and power.

All noted the age profile needed shifting. For example, many who had been involved in ITTE were approaching the end of their careers together. This created problems of continuity and, intriguingly, one noted perhaps members were not 'at home' with technology in the same way as young people:

The way a teenager operates in social networking with groups of people they've never set eyes on. They are working in a fundamentally different way, it seems to me, and we are stuck with the legacy of working in the way we do simply because that's who we are and that's where we are in the timeline. And it's very difficult to break out of that..... I mean potentially we could be doing more of the open network. And I'm still the same. I will only start having exchanges of papers and ideas with people I've met and talked to. If somebody comes online and says 'Look I'm so and so and ..', I'm wary, because it's the way we are and it's characteristic of our generation. Whereas my eighteen year old daughter would be open to that, much more than I am.

Where to from here?

In discussing the future many of the participants realised that though they still had many projects and issues which engaged them another generation was needed to move the work of the community forward. They were pleased to have been engaged with computers in education and proud of the tradition they had helped create for the research into computers. This tradition valued educational reform; stayed close to practice; believed in collaboration; sought to be serious, critical, playful and enthusiastic. There were gaps. Over time some had sensed that their initial vision was unachievable but worth trying to achieve any way and to go on trying.

Summary

This chapter has looked at the idea of a community committed to the research of computers in education. It has described membership of the community as founded on a sense of belonging and suggested some distinctive features of this particular community. It describes both achievements and shortcomings in the community.

The key question asked of community was ‘what are its achievements and what are the challenges?’

The achievement is to have established a tradition of support for each other; to have made research into technology respectable; to have looked both at technology and pedagogy; and to have had some impact on policy and practice. The difficulties are weaknesses in developing theory and low impact on practice. The challenge is to develop theory and develop practice while recognising the constraints on activity.