Talking Heads - An Online Community For Headteachers

Introduction
This report is a short version of the Talking Heads report produced by ULTRALAB for the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) in July 2002. This report overlaps the previous report but has identified a number of strategies for facilitators to use in developing and sustaining online community participation.

The report comes in 6 sections

1 Background and ULTRALAB's philosophy of informal online communities
2 The story of the development of Talking Heads
3 Methods
4 An analysis of how headteachers use Talking Heads
5 Lessons for online facilitators following the Talking Heads experience
6 The impact of Talking Heads

Section One: Background and ULTRALAB's philosophy of informal online communities

1.0 Pedagogical Implications for Online Learning
Empowering learners is a key foundation in ULTRALAB's research philosophy, which is based on the work of Vygotsky and his notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which the tasks and concepts still being developed are within a learner's ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). A learner progresses with concepts so that they move outside of the ZPD by dialogue with others and through self-dialogue. Palinska (2001) is most explicit in considering dialogue. It is the means by which learners are provided with scaffolded instruction. It is through this scaffolding that social learning takes place (Bruner, 1986). It is recognised that learning through dialogue and reflection is most appropriate for deep (Biggs & Moore, 1993) or independent learners (Jih & Reeves, 1992).

There has been a lot of writing about different types of online learning. A recent report by the Cambridge programme for industry reviewed a number of different learning theory clusters (See table 1.2). This model clearly locates Talking Heads within the social and constructivist practices.

Table 1.1 Clusters of Learning Theory
Source: CIPD/ESRC Seminar Feb.

Table 2, also from the Cambridge project, illustrates the position of Talking Heads as a community based upon informal learning, which is practice led and focused and is based upon participation.

The diagram is important because it emphasises that there are other opportunities for learning, even in the online environment, (let alone in face-to-face environments) through programmes (such as LPSH or NPQH) and through distance learning. Put another way, Talking Heads can be seen as a part of the 'blend' of learning on offer to headteachers, providing continuing opportunities for self-directed learning and support during the times that formal learning is in abeyance.

Table 1.2 Learning Styles
Source: Developed from Caley, L. CIPD Seminar Edinburgh 2002, The Cambridge Programme for Industry

1.1 Tools for learning
The think.com software designed by ULTRALAB and developed by Oracle specifically aimed to engender participative (Heppell, 1994) learning.

Jonassen (1994) uses the term "cognitive tools" to signify the use of technology to extend learners' understanding through facilitating their ability to represent what they know. This is achieved through providing the user with scaffolding to support, guide and extend their thinking.

The advent of more user-friendly computers with high-level interactive multimedia

capabilities, has the potential to make technology accessible to an unprecedented degree. This technology can provide learners with the powerful tools of which Papert (1993a; Jonassen, 1994; Jonassen, Campbell, & Davidson, 1994) have spoken, to facilitate and authenticate their designs.

For these reasons, the facilitation team works hard to assist headteachers to "appropriate" the Talking Heads' community tools to match their professional and learning needs.

1.2 Towards a definition of Online community

Talking Heads is both a social environment that reduces isolation and a community where learning can take place through the interchange between individuals. It is important to differentiate such learning from programmes such as NPQH online. In Talking Heads, learning is informal and largely unplanned, save for the construction of the environment and conversations through which learning can take place.

Collarbone (2001) says about learning communities,
"Imagine a collection of individuals, working in close proximity, sharing a common purpose and passion - a desire to learn... Imagine this same collection of individuals, working closely together, sharing knowledge, aspiring to the same vision... Imagine that same collection of individuals, sharing each other's hopes and fears, empathising emotionally, unleashing the power of their collective intelligence's. This is a learning community."

Talking Heads, with its emphasis on informal peer based learning, discussion and dialogue, is different from the traditional training model for headteachers.

The word 'community' is used widely in a variety of contexts. Talking Heads aspires to, 'informality, familiarity, honesty, openness, heart, passion, dialogue, rapport, empathy, trust, authenticity, disclosure, humour, and diverse opinions' (Ramondt 2001 Talking Heads Facilitators Discussion).

The term community was adopted because it suggests interrelationship and interdependence, and there is a sense of mutual interests. Another aspect of community is the sense of togetherness, friendship, trust, association and joint concern. This brings in the affective domain and the sense of belonging or affiliation. A further emphasis, within these definitions is clearly participation in exchange. Clearly exchange of ideas and knowledge, within the community happens through participation. If there is no participation there can be no community.

While headteachers may have mutual interests only some, but not all, may see the value of being part of a collective of practitioners. The values inherent in building an online community are a significant long-term goal to achieve in school leadership in the UK in the 21st Century. These values include continuous professional development, self-directed learning, collaboration, dialogue, discussion, exchange, sharing, disclosure, support, vision, and criticality.

Online learning communities like Talking Heads are comparatively new in the UK and in education. This is a significant factor in researching and evaluating the success of Talking Heads. Quite simply the technology and processes have only been developed over a limited period of time. As Fullan (1991) states, "Assume that effective change takes time. Three to five years for specific innovations, greater than five years for institutional". Within this context, it is heartening to see real evidence of the impact of Talking Heads on professional practice (see Section 6).

Heppell and Ramondt (1998) list some key ideas from the literature on which online learning communities are based, they include:

- The centrality of self-directed participation to learning communities (Senge, 1994; Tebbe, 1997)
- A sense of ownership can be engendered through the provision of tools for learning (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989/95; Jonassen, 1994; Prickett, Higgins, & Boone, 1994)
- The evolutionary process inherent in online communities (Cox, 1997)
- The role of informal, social conversation and the exchange of stories to build a sense of community (Comstock & Fox, 1995)
- The influence of computer software on shaping the dialogue (Comstock & Fox, 1995)

New web technologies are providing unprecedented opportunities for communication. For people to move towards a shared understanding with the potential to transform work practice they need to engage in dialogue. Isaacs, (1994) identifies dialogue as a climate of openness, free of preconceptions, which supports people to acknowledge each other beyond their roles. This provides the foundation to generate new insight and deepen understanding. He describes the progression that ends either at "metalogue" the level of true shared meaning, or alternately debate, which readily becomes a process of beating each other down. The outcome depends on the willingness of participants to suspend their preconceptions and to be open to listening to other's perspectives. The power of asynchronous communication is that it allows participants to join in online conversation at their convenience, to reflect upon what was written, and then to return to affirm, clarify or challenge.

Another definition of learning community is that derived from and developed by Wenger and Snyder (Wenger 1998) who emphasise a community of practice and state that,

"A community of practice is a community established by members who wish to develop their specific expertise through open participation in the creation and exchange of knowledge." (Harvard Business Review, Jan/Feb. 2000)

Wenger argues that learning is a social activity, where people become active participants in the practices of social communities and construct identities in relation to these communities (Wenger 1998). However, they distinguish

communities of practice from communities of interest, which may be broader in scope and have members that are not regular contributors but are members in order to learn (Lave, Wenger and Snyder 2000). Hence for Wenger, participation is key to becoming a true 'community of practice'.

Chapman & Ramondt (1998) identify ownership in online communities by the change in language use and behaviour. The participants' references to "we" and "us", deepening dialogue and the voluntary initiation of community events and activities indicates that the community stage has begun. They also identify that this stage (stage 3) is not reached until participants are comfortable with the navigation and use of the software (stage 1) and are readily answering each other's questions and providing information online (stage 2).

1.3 Types of Community
With the variety of definitions and purposes for online learning communities discussed above and currently involving 6000+ headteachers, a number of different community types have been developed. Table 3 illustrates how the term is used in different types of groupings within Talking Heads. Although indexes of community such as sociability, thanks and humour, can be seen in large groups, they are unlikely to be particularly intimate or disclosing.

Table 1.3 Types of Community developed in the Online Community of Talking Heads

1.4 Previous online community research findings
ULTRALAB's pioneering work in online learning communities carried out in the late 80s and 90s, has amassed a considerable knowledge base.

Some of the findings (Chapman, 1997) from a children's seven year online learning community follow.

- Individual identity matters
- Virtual learning works and can cross age, gender and ethnic boundaries
- Participation is not interaction and it is participation that is vital
- Asynchronous communication which gives time to reflect, and to contribute works better than synchronous
- Facilitation and mediation are essential for successful online learning communities to develop and sustain
- Authoring and annotating are needed as well as browsing and selection
- Access needs to be anywhere, anytime, on any device so standards must be open
- Software should be used to empower participants as contributors, not just to explore others' work

Based on this work, an adult learning community of educationalists was developed. This project generated a number of findings (Ramondt, 1998) and implications for Talking Heads.

- Successful online connection and computer use is essential; this informed the Talking Heads' tutorial guide and help line support.
- Active and productive participation leads to an increase in collaboration and fluency; Talking Heads facilitators modelled desired practice such as disclosure, openness, brevity, and questioning.
- Rights, responsibilities and community closure, should be pinpointed from the outset; his led to the provision of a Code for Practice Talking Heads participants.
- Discussions develop in "slow motion" supporting deep reflection; in Talking Heads, newsletters, emails and stickies are used to inform members regarding new developments
- Posting messages is a public act and members may feel vulnerable to an unseen and potentially critical audience; this led to audience statements and active encouragement to contribute
- Online conferencing and chat are currently still primarily text based; this led to early experimentation with video and text in Talking Heads.

It is difficult to find in the published literature reference to the paradigm shift that true online communities demand. The shift is from one-to-one, to many-to-many communication. This requires collaboration and a willingness to work transparently that can be both exhilarating and threatening. *"Collaboration: the process of shared creation, two or more people with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own."* (Schrage, 1995 p 33)

This does not suit everyone's learning style.

1.5 Facilitation
As stated previously one of the key findings of ULTRALAB's research is that the facilitator is central to establishing an online community, keeping it vibrant and relevant.

"Online communities and virtual workgroups do not always "happen" spontaneously. They require care and nurturing: facilitation. The core of facilitation and hosting is to serve the community and assist it in reaching its goals or purpose ... Facilitators and hosts encourage member interaction and participation. But their most important skill is as a genuine, authentic communicator." White, N. (2001)

In Talking Heads it has been important not only to try and meet the needs of headteachers but also to keep in mind the needs of our collaborators and partners. As Kim (2001) points out: "*a cornerstone for building any successful Web community is to focus relentlessly on understanding and meeting the needs of the members, while also achieving the objectives (be they personal, financial or social) of the community owners and/or leaders.*" The DfES is committed to increasing transparency at a policy level. To this end, school leaders are able to directly question DfES policy experts on topical issues such as Threshold Payments to teachers. The DfES community has also hosted a number of "hotseats" with policy makers leading to some in-depth conversations. This caused Michael Barber to

comment:

> *"The online learning community is the thin end of the wedge. I'm sure it will become a standard means for policy-makers to learn from experienced practitioners and to gather and disseminate best practice. The National College for School Leadership will lead the way, but government as a whole will follow. As we move into an era of transformation, policy success will depend on the capacity to learn from the front line."* (Barber, 2000)

1.6 Model of Participation and Facilitation

The foregoing theory underpins the Online communities participation and facilitation model that informed the development of Talking Heads.

Figure 1.1: Online communities participation and facilitation model (TH team 2002) The model above aims to show that facilitators support participation to achieve the project outcomes of reducing isolation and promoting professional dialogue. There are six identified stages. Stages one and two deal with access which is primarily about induction and participation, stages three and four are primarily about building commitment and can be identified by community and ownership. Stages 5 and 6 are seen to be where self-direction is fully employed. These stages were initially predictive although this is starting to be observed within a few of the Talking Heads' communities. All findings from Talking Heads support this model.

Stage	Characteristics of Participation	Facilitation
1	access, training, induction navigation	guides to software, technical support, designed induction activities and welcome
2	reading, initiating questions responding	topics are posted, members directed to related topics. Hotseats, online events and calendaring designed, email newsletters
3	communication, community through sociability and openness. Members increasingly use the word "we".	members needs identified small communities blossom members use tools to help design community
4	collaboration,exploration of technology appropriating and applying technology.	help members to implement their ideas. Champions identified and trained
5	membership steward new communities which become self-sustaining.	online community consultants assist in the design of new communities

| 6 | expansion as models are replicated massification | provided from the group's resources with occassional consultancy role |

Table 1.4

1.6.1 Background to the model

The facilitation team honed this model during the process of collecting evidence of the impact of Talking Heads. It was based on the four-stage model developed by Chapman and Ramondt (1998) to describe the process for participation, which emerged when comparing two previous ULTRALAB online learning communities. Similarities are seen with the model developed by Gillian Salmon (1999) although the model was developed independently to describe participation in online learning communities rather than online course participation. Stages five and six were initially added as a predictive model for generating and sustaining authentic participation during massification. Early evidence of this is being seen amongst the some local working groups who have established their own online community and a cluster group which are embarking on establishing a proactive Networked Learning Community. The facilitation team has scaffolded both groups to assist them to reach this stage.

In revising the model, Chapman and Ramondt acknowledge that dialogue, previously seen as a key element of stage three, is in fact extremely difficult to sustain online due to the asynchronous nature of the environment. Not only is the response delayed, sometimes by weeks or months, but also, readers needs to re-familiarise themselves with the content of the discussion when they return.

It must be noted that participation does not necessarily progress along a simple continuum. A new Talking Heads member who has experience with other online environments may be strongly motivated to establish a community (stage five), and move very quickly to learn and appropriate the technology (stage two and four) yet use the environment as a website for publishing minutes and agendas, therefore missing out entirely on stage three. Alternately, a member may be very excited by the technology initially, and move through stage three to stage four or five and then nol onger contribute when there is insufficient response from their peers.

1.7 The Research Methodology,

The research methodology used is a form of collaborative interpretative, illuminative and applied action research and development. While creating the environment of Talking Heads we have attempted to articulate our own values and the values of the participating headteachers. We accept and handle the multiple perspectives, the complexities and "embrace the paradoxes" (Simons in Bassey 1998)

The research sits within a tradition of research variously described as 'interpretative' (Denzin and Lincoln 2000), and 'naturalistic' (Robson 1993, Patton 1990). Much of the work also has the characteristics of a case study (Yin, 1989, 1993, Stake 1995, and in Denzin and Lincoln 2000). Case study research also allows the "how and why" (Yin, 1989) of the research question to be addressed and to use quantitative data for triangulation. The case study report also aims to

promote empowerment, resonance (Lincoln & Guba, 1990), reflection and action (Adelman, Jenkins, & Kemmis, 1976).

Clearly much of the data deals with socially constructed 'truth'. Yet we accept that if the actors say that is the way it is then it is. When a headteacher says that 'Talking Heads is fantastic and inspiring' or that it is "slow and time consuming" they mean it. However, this meaning must also be set in the context that a short trip to PC world, the installation of ISDN connections and a little expert training would go some way to modify this view. However, if its basis is 'I don't value the idea of an online community' then it will not change their perceptions.

The term 'reliable' in traditional scientific research, suggests that if the research were to be repeated the same results would occur and the results would be consistent. (After James and McCormick 1988:188). Clearly, beginning a project like Talking Heads again would not be possible. Rather, the key question is surely the question of validity. Hammersley distinguishes between descriptive validity and explanatory validity. One test would be whether the research is seen to be an accurate portrayal by the actors taking part.

In conclusion, the test of the authenticity of this research should be:
•   the systematic care of the research procedures
•   the results of feeding back the case study reports within the team of researchers and checking out through groups of headteachers
•   the experience, training, skill and knowledge of the researcher team

Section Two: The Story of the Development of Talking Heads

2.0 Development of Talking Heads
Talking Heads was funded by the DfES as a one year online community pilot project for newly appointed headteachers. The first cohort consisted of approximately 1,200 English headteachers, who were appointed to their first post in 1999. The participating headteachers were given a laptop, were visited in their schools by trainers and shown how to access Talking Heads via the web.

The ULTRALAB facilitation team, consisting of 12.5 full-time equivalent staff, were employed. Talking heads facilitators were members of an established team of advisory teachers, who had previously worked in the development of 'Tesco SchoolNet 2000', the world's largest online schools' project.

Talking Heads was designed as a community forum, which provided headteachers with the opportunity to talk freely, and in confidence, to other colleagues about all aspects concerning leading a school. It enabled discussion and networking, and provided opportunities to share common problems with other school leaders as it recognised that most expertise had been hard won by their peers. Furthermore, Talking Heads provided headteachers with the chance to share best practice, debate current professional issues, and develop new approaches to tackling the real issues facing schools today. The potentially isolating position of headteacher was also recognised as a key concern that bringing headteachers together in online communities could address.

The think.com software, used for Talking Heads, has been and continues to be developed specifically for classroom use. This software was designed by ULTRALAB and developed by Oracle, an international database company. The software design was based on considerable experience of earlier projects in ULTRALAB and set out to foster collaboration and framing of discourse to promote participation online. The ULTRALAB team worked collaboratively with Oracle to adapt the appearance for Talking Heads. With the help of Sodium, a design team based at ULTRALAB, an adult "skin" and icons were designed for the Talking Heads pilot group.

Talking Heads officially 'opened' to headteachers on February 14th, just over a week after the think software had been upgraded.

Access to Talking Heads was via a URL, and the software was password protected, with full access to the discussion areas restricted to registered headteachers and facilitators. Agreement was reached with the DfES that they would have no access to communities, but would receive regular reports regarding issues of concern to headteachers. In addition, DfES members had ongoing dialogue with Talking Heads participants through the DfEE Welcome community.

Each headteacher was assigned a personal facilitator whose name, email and phone number were sent to the headteacher in a 'welcome letter'. The welcome letter formed part of a pack sent to Talking Heads participants, which included a

CD-ROM demonstrating the communities and introducing the facilitation team, the letter mentioned above, and a tutorial booklet which included community philosophy and a code of practice.

From start up there was enthusiasm about the project and those headteachers in the pilot group responded positively to the community discussions. The hotseat tool provided by the software quickly proved to be very effective. The hotseat allowed questions to be answered by a specific person or group directly below each question, therefore allowing on-screen "threading" within the web page. From start up a number of high profile education guests from the DfES and policy took part as experts in the DfES community hotseats. Guests included Tim Brighouse, and Michael Barber who took part in the first hotseat in March 2000.

The success of the pilot project ensured Talking Heads' continuation and plans were made to roll out to all 24,000 headteachers in England. In recognition of the key role played by ULTRALAB facilitators, the DfES increased the facilitation team from 12.5 to 23 by the start of January 2001. In addition a number of interest groups within the DfES had noted the success of Talking Heads, specifically in terms of increasing communication and sharing best practice, and requested that communities be created for special interest groups of headteachers. To satisfy this request the 'EiC', 'BEACON' and 'Schools facing Challenging Circumstances' communities were established.

When the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) was launched in November 2000 the Talking Heads project was handed over to the NCSL. Between March and April 2001, a second cohort of new headteachers (those who had achieved headship in the academic year 2000) were given a new laptop, and some training to help bring them into Talking Heads. By the summer term NCSL had added an online registration form to its website and Talking Heads became available to those headteachers who registered online. A community area was added called 'NCSL in Dialogue' to allow headteachers to discuss with the college issues of school leadership.

In January 2001 Talking Heads was joined in the think.com software by 'Virtual Heads'. This was a community for those aspiring to headship by undertaking an online programme called the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). Although Talking Heads communities remained private to headteachers, both DfES and NCSL communities were open to all Virtual Heads and Talking Heads members.

Since September 2001 NCSL has continued to develop the online community component of all college work and extended the use of think.com to all NCSL programmes and courses, including those aimed at middle management. Cohort 3 of new headteachers (those who had achieved headship in 2001) were brought into the software and for the first time trained at face-to-face sessions by ULTRALAB facilitators. The Laptop for Teachers scheme is set up so that all headteachers can now be registered for think.com when they apply for their computers. This means that in the future Talking Heads will fulfil the DfES vision,

reaching out to embrace all English headteachers.

2.1 Structure of Talking Heads

ULTRALAB has been involved in the design, implementation and development of online communities since the late 1980s, so there was already a substantial body of knowledge from which to draw for the Talking Heads project. From research undertaken at ULTRALAB prior to January 2000, the project started with a number of 'givens' concerning what worked and what didn't, what a successful community should look like and how to implement new initiatives.

At start-up headteachers had access to a range of communities within Talking Heads, but all headteachers were assigned to either the Primary, Secondary, Middle or SEN community and a Home community. Additional communities focused, in the main, on topical issues of school leadership and management within their particular age-phase and specialisms.

By March 2002 there were 154 Talking Heads communities, all with varied membership. Almost every size of community has been established and the extended nature of the Talking Heads project has required changes to be made in size and structure over time.

2.2.1 Overarching Space

The 'Community of Talking Heads' is the overarching space that all headteachers belong to. Initially it was used to provide topical news and as a general conversation area, used for exchanging information. By October 2000 the 'Community of Talking Heads' had contained conversations for headteachers to suggest topics, a headteacher's diary, and "showcases" or "taster" pages. These pages had conversations on issues being discussed within the smaller communities. This led to confusion, whereby members felt 'lost' in the software and were confused by the navigation, and uncertain about where to post contributions.

In July 2001, with the release of the new version of think.com the 'Community of Talking Heads' was renamed 'Talking Heads Central' and acted primarily as a navigation map retaining only pages for peer-to -peer hotseats and the hotseat archive

2.2.2 Home communities

Home communities consisted of around 25 members and were set up for for the pilot heads by each ULTRALAB facilitator. They were established as a place to provide some privacy for small groups, and aid familiarisation with the online environment. Participation in these communities was mixed. Several facilitators ran online synchronous conversations or "chats" which brought some enthusiastic members to the fore who became very active within the communities. In response to the apparent decreasing need of headteachers for these small home communities over time, each facilitator amalgamated them into one community with around a hundred members. These spaces maintained a "one stop shop" to communicate with groups of headteachers.   With the expansion of Talking Heads

these groups largely ceased.

2.2.3 Cohort Communities
Cohort communities developed following a meeting in July 2001 in response to the anticipated increase of numbers coming into Talking Heads. The aim of these communities was to provide a central space for a manageable number of headteachers to get quick answers to questions and raise issues of immediate importance. A number of existing domain-specific specialist communities, covering such topics as Finance and Professional Development, were restructured to create one cohort community of those members registered before July 2001 (Cohort 1), whilst new members registered from September 2001 were inducted into a newly designed space (Cohort 2). With the new influx of headteachers in March 2002 Cohort 3 was established specifically to serve the needs of these new heads.

2.2.4 Specialist Communities
Specialist communities were designed for small groups of headteachers and entry to the community is by request. The aim of these communities is to allow groups of headteachers to discuss issues in depth and form working groups to collaborate over relevant issues.

For the Talking Heads pilot, specialist communities were developed either from the initial data provided by the new headteachers (e.g. 'Performance Development' 'Primary') from the facilitators' skill domains (e.g. 'OfSTED') or following requests from heads, (e.g. 'Special Weaknesses').

By July 2001 the needs of headteachers had changed and there were a number of communities which were no longer active. Many like 'OfSTED' had come to the end of their life cycle. These unused specialist communities were archived and conversations summarised.

2.2.5 Local Regional Groups
These were communities set up by a group of headteachers in a region. The first community to be set up and run by a headteacher was the 'Gloucester Community', but there was little or no response and the community failed to generate participation.

Following a series of face-to-face events facilitators were asked by headteachers to set up a number of these regional grouping. They have had varied degrees of success.

2.2.6 Hotseat
 The materials for a hotseat consist of; a biography, a starter article of roughly 200 words and stimulus question(s) followed by a Q and A with an expert for approximately 2 weeks. The concept of a hotseat is that a guest (or guests) answers questions posed by members of the community. The guest can be any member of the community or, more usually, someone invited in specifically for the hotseat discussions.

Hotseats were extensively, and successfully, used in the DfES in Dialogue community and in NPQH. In September 2001 it was decided to offer peer to peer hotseats in the Community of Talking Heads. Since that date hotseats have provided a forum for a number of headteachers ot discuss issues in depth and in one case have led to the formation of a specialist group to work on issues raised in the hotseat.

2.2 Conclusion

The central aim since Talking Heads was formed has been the desire to build a participative community of headteachers. The tension between 'information' and 'community' in an intimate social environment has been explored, communities being adapted a number of times to better meet heads needs. Issues of size and structure of sub-communities are central to this exploration.

The belief in empowering headteachers to own and create their own communities, has been explored in the practice of the Talking Heads Facilitation Team. The nature of the tools available through think.com community software has been tested through the continually innovation and the development of online activities. These issues are dealt with in more detail later in this report.

Overall, the story is one of competing demands and compromise on how to structure and design the community of Talking Heads to deliver development of an online learning professional community.

Section Three: Methods used to research Talking Heads

3.0 Methods
This report is the result of the collaborative research of the team of 24 facilitators who supported the development of Talking Heads. The methods used to collect the data were as follows
   • A collaborative electronic online research community.
   • Facilitator's records of e-mails, phone calls, stickies, face-to-face events.
   • Transcripts of headteacher focus groups and facilitators' discussions.
   • Documentation recording decisions made or discussed with key stake holders
   • A numeric and discourse analysis of large and small communities
   • An analysis of question formats and responses.
   • Web archives of community development and online conversations
   • Collation of hits and contributions data and Oracle statistics(March-June 2002)
   • Online feedback forms embedded in each community front page.
   • A transcript of a facilitator discussion May 2002.
   • A longitudinal study of 17 participants of the pilot, who completed all three questionnaires in 2000 and 2001.

Data was also collected through:
   • A survey form on entry to Talking Heads February 2000 n=1028 (Pilot Questionnaire)
   • A questionnaire survey in September 2000 n=124 (2000 Questionnaire)
   • A questionnaire survey in December 2001 n=165 (2001 Questionnaire)
   • NCSL face-to-face impact evaluation March 2002 (respondents 46)
   • Laptop 3 training evaluation report (respondents 781)

Analysis was undertaken using a number of case record formats including use of the Open University's six questions for curriculum evaluations, adapted for the purpose:

   • What did the headteachers do? (a description of activity)
   • What did the headteachers learn? (an assessment of impact and learning)
   • Why is this activity worthwhile? (expressing values)
   • What did the facilitation team do? (a report on action and cause)
   • What did the facilitation team learn? (generalisations about what works)
   • What do the facilitation team plan to do next? (action planning)

This is consistent with the research methodology outlined in section 1.

Use of this methodology to research within Talking Heads has enabled us examine how headteachers use Talking Heads and to identify twenty strategies carried out by online facilitators, which will ensure that professional online learning communities develop and sustain.

Section Four: Headteachers use of Talking Heads

4.0 Introduction
Talking Heads, with its emphasis on informal peer based learning, discussion and dialogue, is different from the traditional training model for headteachers. Talking Heads is both a social environment that reduces isolation and a community where learning can take place through the interchange between individuals. It is important to differentiate such learning from programmes such as NPQH online. In Talking Heads, learning is not explicit but informal, supported by the construction of the environment and design of the conversations.

While headteachers may have mutual interests only some, but not all, may see the value of being part of a collective of practitioners. The values inherent in building an online community are a significant long-term goal to achieve in school leadership in the UK in the 21st Century.

These values include continuous professional development, self-directed learning, collaboration, dialogue, discussion, exchange, sharing, disclosure, support, vision, and discernment.

The philosophical shift required to move headteachers to a more collaborative practice, and thus ensure that the whole community benefits from advice, has been discussed in section 1. Optimal benefit is gained from participation in Talking Heads through establishing a routine of logging on regularly.   The evidence and logic suggests that where familiarity with the community software and community structure are not established, passwords are forgotten and the time required to reorient to the environment acts as a disincentive to participation.

When establishing the benefits of participation, the DfES 2000 evaluation report identified three primary patterns of use by headteachers. These were; communicating with peers and sharing ideas 49%, community feeling/ reducing isolation 20%, and up to date information 21%. This ability to share the experiences both good and bad with colleagues is a central feature of the Talking Heads communities as a whole. As one head put this,

"Talking Heads keeps us informed of all the things we should be worried about - and shows that we are worrying with others"
 Individual unprompted feedback to facilitators (March 2002)

The paradigm shift that true online communities demand is from one-to-one, to many-to-many communication. This requires collaboration and a willingness to work transparently.

4.2 Different uses of community
Different communities within Talking Heads have different purposes and are designed to meet the needs of community members. In using these communities, there are a number of different and overlapping reasons for headteachers' participating. The primary needs to gain access to current thinking and information

as well as the need for support are catered for by a variety of communities.

4.2.1. Topical discussions

Many headteachers use the online communities as a means of finding out information from colleagues who have particular experience or knowledge of a subject or who can help them with a particular policy requirement. This use is not the same as finding a report or other information from the DfES website, as the information is given by a colleague who understands its relevance and application in context. The quote below from a headteacher illustrated this use.

 "The contact with other people who face similar challenges has been very helpful, but more importantly, I can 'benchmark' my ideas against the opinions of other professionals, and so have a relative measure of how I am doing."

In Talking Heads, the Cohort communities provide the primary place for this type of exchange to take place. Conversations are on a wide range of topics that impact upon schools between headteachers of; widely differing experience, geographical spread, school phase, and specialisms. Facilitators in these communities undertake to; highlight key topics, find members who can provide information, provide resources such as annotated weblinks, and organise key topical specialist events run by experts or practitioners.

4.2.2. Specialist or affinity communities

Within affinity communities members share a common educational context. For example a school phase, like 'Nursery and Early Years' or shared areas of concern such as "Faith" or 'Schools facing Challenging Circumstances'.

These communities tend to have smaller memberships, bound by their commonality. For these communities to sustain, there needs to be a clear sense of purpose and the need to communicate and share (see section 5).

Members of topic communities are addressing overarching and generic topics such as the Faith or Racial Equality community and will have a membership across school phase.

These communities have optional memberships which may be transitory depending on interest at the time or need. However, to ensure that their support function is fulfilled, members are encouraged to actively participate, and asked where appropriate to contribute at least once a month.

4.2.3. Policy discussion

Headteachers take part in large-scale discussions through hotseats chaired by "experts" in a field, for example DfES officers, policy makers or leaders of national projects such as the Numeracy Strategy. Both experts and members value the resultant two-way flow of information in conversations that are often very open and supportive. Some topics hit a rich vein and generate enthusiastic participation as members realise that others share their professional concerns and uncertainties for example the Curriculum Design, or Threshold Payments hotseats.   Access to

policy makers has been an invaluable part of the Talking Heads experience., and has also been adopted within Talking Heads as a vehicle for peer to peer hotseats.

Facilitators need to ensure that guests have a smooth induction into the community, just as guests at a physical conference will have the event organised so that they are only required to deliver their speech.

4.2.4. Supporting established networks

Local working groups tend to be small communities that originate from regional groups, however they have an agreed purpose and commitment for their participation. These groups could be pre-existing 'natural communities' of school leaders such as local networks or consortia of headteachers or they could be cluster groups.

ULTRALAB case records show that for these online communities to succeed there needs to be a very clear purpose and set of goals, as well as a determined commitment to make the online community work (see section 5)

4.2.5. Communities of practice

Headteachers who have a passion about a particular topic choose to work with a group of like minded colleagues. These groups commit themselves to a focussed and high level of participation with clear agreement on the domain and how they will work together. These communities typically have a small number of headteachers, such as the Pupil Behaviour Management community which has run successfully over the past 2 years accommodating a changing membership, but keeping a clear focus and purpose. The output of these communities can be a valuable resource for the rest of the members, but they do require high levels of facilitation with pro-active facilitation time to develop

4.2.6. Conferences

Like face-to-face conferences these are online and time limited which provide the opportunity to take part in an activity for a known period of time and can cross geographic boundaries, attracting international experts and participants. Addtional advantages of such conferences is the possibility of passing the discussions into wider communities for consideration, and possibly extension. ULTRALAB's research shows that the number of readers after participation in the conference can be as high as during the conference itself, proving that such a resource is a useful addition to the knowledge base.

The asynchronous online conference on Thinking Skills was a spectacular success, attracting 1,200 registrations in just a few days. Experts in the field of thinking skills, including Edward De Bono, fielded questions from participants and through a series of conversations were able to discuss implications for creating 'thinking schools'.

4.3 Conclusions

Talking Heads has established a number of different types of communities which serve the needs of headteachers. It is understood that headteachers may join and

participate in different communities depending on their needs at particular times but it is hoped that there will always be a community relevant to a specific headteacher at a particular time.

Section Five: Lessons for online community facilitators

5.0 Introduction
ULTRALAB, through working with Talking Heads, have developed a number of strategies for facillitators to ensure online communities develop and sustain. These strategies are outlined below.

5.1 Strategy One: Match the rhythm and pace of the school year
Key topic discussions and theme events need to be scheduled and publicised in advance to fit the school year and to allow headteachers to plan their participation For school leaders the school calendar influences activity. Key management issues, with their own cycle, also dictate topics of interest, such as budgeting, recruitment, and the introduction of performance thresholds. Where activities are set in the context of the school year, it is de facto more topical and relevant and more likely to attract participants.

Topical events need to be raised at the right time. For example, the Racial Equality Policy hotseat was held four months too early in the Community of Talking Heads and only generated nine responses. The issue became "hot" in the two months before the policy was required to be in place. At this stage there was increased interest in collaborative policy design.

Holiday periods are also very quiet and require only a skeleton staff. Prior and post holidays are often a lull period, as headteachers focus on school activities. The return to school is a key period for generating online events to draw members back into the habit of participation and to prime the communities for activity. Because of this rhythm, rollout of the online community to new groups and high profile online events are best timed for quieter periods of the year, for example, January.

5.2 Strategy Two: Ensure pro-active contact, which reflects the style and strengths of the facilitator
ULTRALAB have found that when communities are less actively facilitated activity drops off. Sustaining participation requires pro-active facilitation, as many demands compete for the headteachers time

> *"I have never yet asked a question in TH and failed to receive an answer. Often the replies come in the form of stickies or emails but they are always helpful - and TH has saved me time!"*

The collaborative, reciprocal, many to many, and transparent nature of online communities is still a new philosophy for many. It takes time for members to realise that e-mail deprives the larger group of the benefit of their experience.

> *"I have used the Talking Heads project to ask questions and have received pretty quick replies. I haven't made use of stickies, but have sent direct e-mails. I have also on occasions spotted people's questions and e-mailed them with my thoughts."*
> Email feedback to ULTRALAB facilitators (April 2002)

For this reason, some programmes actively discourage the use of e-mail.

Facilitators need to build on their own style and strengths to ensure their personality is apparent to members. Each facilitator has a highly individual style which contributes to, rather than detracts from, the success of the community. Many also build strong empathic relationships.

Statistics gathered in the 2001 questionnaire and from the New Heads face-to-face training indicate that 55% of members would like to be contacted by their facilitator. The February Headteacher Focus Group reported that they greatly appreciated being actively contacted by facilitators and being reminded to participate. The facilitation team confirms that they initiate most of the contact with headteachers. .

"Some (communities) are not used and lie dormant. Much depends upon how willing the facilitators are to keep cajoling people to use it. That isn't supposed to be the idea, I know, but people are busy...."
(2001 Questionnaire)

Strategies used by facilitators include emailing members to keep them in touch with activities in the communities and fostering a group of enthusiasts who are prepared to be contacted when a crisis question requiring an immediate answer is posted.

5.3 Strategy Three: Foster champions
' Champions' are members who have the passion, curiosity, self-direction and belief to drive activity in a community forward through active participation, facilitation, or through initiating or leading activities. Within Talking Heads, 'champions' are generally headteachers. The recognition and development of school leaders acting in a championing role has been a key factor in the development of Talking Heads since its inception. There is a considerable overlap between Community of Talking Heads hotseat guests and champions.

Talking Heads research set up seventeen case studies looking at the role of a school leader champion within Talking Heads. To date, the most successful champions have had well-structured support from facilitators, who have worked with them to provide a clear purpose.

Recognising and developing champion facilitators has been a key factor in extending innovation in Talking Heads. Facilitators identify champions during face-to-face events and through their active participation in a number of areas of the Talking Heads site.

There is a danger that these members become overused. Champions have worked most effectively when there has been a clear purpose, agreement and time limit put on their role. This has brought about a commitment, coherence and enthusiasm, for example five champion headteachers were asked to support the numeracy conference online discussions for a fixed period of time. This allowed them to plan their participation within their timetable.

As a further motivating factor it is recommended that accredited professional development opportunities should be provided for champions. These should range from recognition by the use of certificates and being offered participation in an online facilitation course, through to being able to use the experience towards further qualification, for example an MA.

5.4 Strategy Four: Create a clear sense of audience
There are a number of elements that members require to feel safe to speak openly and to benefit from the scope that the internet provides. These are: internet security, knowing who the audience is, a code of conduct, and breaking the ice. These are influenced by the issue of community size.

As one headteacher indicated, posting online is a public act.

"First time you participate, you wonder if you've done the right thing, and it requires some confidence to do this, especially when members haven't developed a routine and the audience is not known to the individual. It will take time for users to go regularly and develop confidence with Talking Heads technically, but it is largely confidence in being able to speak freely. … I think heads are also shy about floating good ideas … on a national platform." (2001 Questionnaire)

Some headteachers admit that they feel shy posting to a large and invisible audience. *"Shyness in talking to strangers"* (2000 Questionnaire) As one nursery headteacher said *"I speak to small children all day"* (Birmingham face-to-face February 2000) or an other asked *"is it PC (politically correct) to mention football?"*(Manchester face-to-face November 2001). It has also been observed at face-to-face events, that although a headteacher will tell a relevant story that can elucidate a topic, they frequently don't post this information.

Another element of audience is that members are exposed to other members outside their LEA regions, and see other standards of practice.

"The ability to talk with new heads all over the country about topical issue and access information that different LEAs / Schools have available. Heads involved have been very open with information, this has been very valuable."

"The ability to share problems with colleagues from different parts of the country rather than merely within one's own LEA. It's good to talk - and this can be a very isolating job!"

Then there is also the element of privacy. Who can read my words? For this reason, audience statements are posted at the top of communities to indicate who the audience. A Code of Practise statement is posted on the NCSL website, clearly outlining the community agreements including reciprocity and confidentiality.

Finally, there is also the issue of Internet security, which appears to have gained in prominence being mentioned a number of times at the 2002 face-to-face training.

There is no easy answer to this, but the Headteachers Focus Group (February 2002) indicated that they would not consider discussing litigious issues online.

5.5 Strategy Five: Enable ease of navigation by limiting number of contributory items, providing site maps and other strategies

To win the hearts and minds of headteachers requires that access is easy, navigation simple, relevance high, topicality ensured, and rhythm for events and use established,

Facilitators can aid navigation by providing maps which help members build a mental model of the communities and also by limiting the number of contributory items in the communities. Talking Heads has developed a navigation map which signposts the main communities and includes quick links to the communities on each community page. Steps have been taken to limit the number of items in the communities so that members can easily find their way back to contributory items. Index lists of past items allow for quick access. Clear titles are selected for conversations, and "guided tours" consisting of articles providing annotated hotlinks to previous conversations on a theme, are other strategies used to facilitate ease of access. Banners are used to signal a sense of place. Images are used sparingly for signposting, information, and for humour, and are optimised for fast download. The page is designed in two columns to accommodate members viewing the pages on 800 x 600 resolution monitors.

5.6 Strategy Six: Develop a social, fun environment to generate a sense of community

Sociability is a key factor in generating a sense of community. Informality is recognised to be an essential element to generating the rapport and disclosure fundamental to the sharing of professional uncertainties. It has been found in Talking Heads that there is a strong and fairly constant ratio between social and task focused messages. Across the communities on average 55% of messages are task focused, 25% are social /emotional and 20% of messages are both task and socially focused. Our figures that indicate, sociability isn't restricted to small communities, it also flourishes in large communities.

Informality is generated through the use of greetings, expression of thanks, self-disclosure and the use of first names. These are encouraged and where appropriate, modelled by the facilitators, along with community etiquette such as thanking others and giving public feedback. Brainstorms are used as ice breakers, champion heads are sometimes asked to "seed" the conversations and bulletin boards are used for introductions and for the day to day discussion in smaller communities.

5.7 Strategy Seven: Emphasise philosophy

There is a philosophical shift required to move members to collaborative practice (see section 1). This needs to happen to ensure that the whole community benefits from advice shared and collaboration rather than competition, as emphasised in government policy.   This philosophy can be fostered by: providing an appropriate code of practice; being explicit about expectations, including the

expectation to participate regularly and reciprocate; role modelling; and providing opportunity for community atmosphere to develop through the addition of humorous items and modelling a social tone.

5.8 Strategy Eight: Fulfil heads needs (information, support)
Close contact is maintained with members through focus groups, face-to-face training, online discussions and questionnaires, feedback items and individual conversations with facilitators. From this it is evident that the two primary motivators for participation are quick access to topical discussions and the need for support and community. When establishing the benefits of participation, the DfES 2000 evaluation report identified three primary patterns of use from the qualitative data. These were; communicating with peers / sharing ideas 49%, community feeling/ reducing isolation 20%, and up to date information 21%. In the 2001 questionnaire quantitative data headteachers reported using Talking Heads to; find useful information 70%, reduce isolation 49%, and discuss current issues with DfES and policymakers 56%. We need to ensure that we design communities to fulfil these varied needs.

Feedback from members who gain to seek information includes;

> *"Thanks. I've taken some time to look at the stuff on emotional literacy. I have really enjoyed using this site and have found it v. helpful both for information and making contact with other like-minded heads all over the country. It was great to get help with policies and proformas before our OFSTED from such diverse places as Northampton and Sheffield"*

> *"Fantastic. I only popped in for a quick read - must have been here for an hour reading and contributing. Some great ideas."*

> *"I read what others had to say and feel that the question is one that can't be easily answered, if at all. However... I am convinced that teaching thinking skills must be a paramount issue as it seems ridiculous for teachers to not impart these skills to children"*

> *"Talking Heads keeps us informed of all the things we should be worried about - and shows that we are worrying with others"*
> Individual unprompted feedback to facilitators (March 2002)

5.9 Strategy Nine: Move readers to participation
It is accepted that at many face-to-face public events, more people listen than talk. The Oracle statistics on hits to contribution ratios, along with feedback to facilitators indicates that many headteachers benefit from reading others' conversations but don't post. One said, *"I spend a lot of time reading the comments and concerns of other head teachers..."* (2001 Questionnaire).

A series of case studies focused on headteachers who had been members since the pilot stage. Amongst this group, the most frequent participation was as a reader, browsing through communities in which the headteachers' had an interest.

One visited Special Educational Needs (SEN), Multicultural and OfSTED communities. Another SEN, Small Schools, and Faith community. Teaching and Learning community was another frequently visited area for one headteacher. Overarching communities such as the Community of Talking Heads, NCSL in Dialogue and DfES in Dialogue were a popular and fairly common areas to visit . Hotseats were seen as useful areas to visit.

The case studies highlighted a group who were 'hidden' users. For this group, facilitators were mostly unaware that they were using the communities and, although they emailed them on a regular basis, facilitators rarely, if ever, received a response. This group were gaining value from the communities but were 'not present' because they never contributed.

Items in the communities need to be created for 'readers' to express their interest and appreciation, for example an item named 'footprints in the sand' asking readers to leave a short note if they found the community discussions useful, is now being used in one community for this purpose. Moreover, headteachers are encouraged to develop a habit of giving feedback in the discussion items themselves, when they find information useful.

There is no doubt that readers benefit from community membership and facilitators need to value them, however reciprocity must become embedded for community to thrive.

5.10 Strategy Ten: Determine appropriate community size
There is no ideal community size. A group of six heads who incorporate the use of online communities in their daily practice can generate a thriving community as successfully as a group of 300 who are committed to a specific topic domain.

Talking Heads was established with a high facilitator to member ratio (1:100), which allowed empathic and personalised relationships to flourish. As the size of the membership increases significantly (1:1000), there are significant changes in our facilitation practise. Although we suggest that heads be allocated a named facilitator, they are only actively facilitated via the communities (ie the facilitator contacting the head to network etc). It is no longer possible to actively pursue non-participants.

To accommodate the influx of numbers, the large cohort communities provide a wide range of topical conversations to provide for members who primarily have information needs. As it has been found that many members who are primarily seeking information do not require ongoing individual facilitation, an increased focus on the small specialist communities is possible e.g. 'Small Schools', 'Managing Special Educational Needs', and 'Pupil Behaviour Management,' which provide support. Members of the small communities are being encouraged to participate regularly, whereas membership of the cohorts incurs no commitment. Events are organised to meet the needs of both groups.

Increasingly, some of the proven strategies are being undertaken at an

administrative level, such as a clear setting of expectations regarding the benefits and commitments of participation which can be achieved online or by leaflet on registration.

Overarching large areas with memberships over 6,000, for example Community of Talking Heads, DfES in Dialogue, and NCSL in Dialogue, have proved to be effective administration areas, but do not constitute communities. Although informality can flourish in the cohort communities a genuine sense of community is more likely to be engendered amongst smaller memberships where members begin to recognise each other by name and work together to solve issues.

5.11 Strategy Eleven: Be aware that patterns of use will change over time and with need

Members participation in the community will vary depending on need and time available. New heads have been found to be particularly in need of support and access to information as they face situations for the first time. Experienced heads however, are sometimes intolerant of their "whittering on". Headteachers will also opt in and out of facilitation depending on changing circumstances and need at specific times.

The longitudinal case records of pilot Talking Heads members found that participation amongst this group had changed, although all still logged into Talking Heads. Most reported that they logged on 2-3 times per week in the early period as initially requested. An online time period of between 10 and 30 minutes was suggested for frequent patterns of use. it was observed that an individual's patterns of participation frequently decreased as confidence in their role increased.

One head reflecting on her pattern of use said,

"I used Talking Heads a lot in the early days. My first headship was in a difficult school and I needed the support.... I simply got busy and my use dropped although I visited sometimes. When I got my new headship it was really tough, the area, the school the staff...I found I was back using Talking Heads much more often to talk to colleagues, to get support, reassurance..."
Headteachers comment in a feedback session (February 2002)

There were many reasons for the change in patterns of participation in Talking Heads. An element of the enthusiasm of the pilot initiative had disappeared and the feeling was expressed that it had simply got too big. This original pilot group were new headteachers and in feedback to facilitators some headteachers expressed the view that their need for support in the early days of headship was stronger.

Long term experienced users indicated that they followed a routine and visited the same places each time. One indicated that she often just scanned the "whats new" list at the top of the communities page or the top part of the screen in her communities. If there wasn't anything new there, she would log out. This group also indicated that they would appreciate some advanced user tutorials. For this group, guided tours focusing on new items of interest.

5.12 Strategy Twelve: Organise face-to-face events

It has been found that face-to-face technical training in the use of the communities software is beneficial for people whose learning style relies on "sitting with Sally", and for people entering formal courses, to ensure quick induction and uptake. However, there is little evidence to indicate that technical training increases online community participation. For this reason these events should avoid only focusing on the technical aspects and concentrate on communicating the philosophy of community.

face-to-face events are very useful to support identification with a group, and to generate ownership of a community once it has been established. This is best accomplished by integrating the use of the software into the work of the meeting.

The assumption that those struggling are the ICT illiterate has not been supported; it is also the ICT literate who struggle most with the online community software and ethos.

Face-to-face events are also useful in identifying potential champions.

5.13 Strategy Thirteen: Ensure questions are answered

Although questions often gain quick responses from colleagues, it is not uncommon for questions to go unanswered when there is a lull in participation, the question is too technical, or is asked in a small community. Although the facilitators will attempt to answer these questions, they are not always successful, especially when they are too specific or technical. Also, as a member points out, people may be using Talking Heads inappropriately.

"Some people have jumped on hobby horses - myself included and others have asked questions when they should have found the answer elsewhere. It should not become a replacement for a professional association or a legal guide for example, as this will clutter it and frustrate those who are looking for good ideas to improve standards." (2001 Questionnaire)

Not having questions answered is potentially very demotivating to members. Providing fewer places where questions can be asked and linking to previous answers helps members. Having champions or enthusiasts available to quickly answer questions and take forward conversations ensures that members remain motivated.

5.14 Strategy Fourteen: Encourage ownership and appropriation

Although there is a strong ethos underlying the project of empowering ownership by headteachers with facilitators frequently choosing a low profile, it is recognised that there remains a need to actively manage the environment to retain cohesion. It is therefore inevitable that there is a balance to be struck especially in the large communities. This is frequently achieved by the provision of "self publishing" pages provided behind the facilitator-maintained front page of the large communities. In the words of a headteacher,

"When I found out I could edit a page, I was worried about upsetting the facilitators by changing their layout, because I perceived it was not my page to edit. That I should seek permission maybe. It was only when the facilitator contacted me and thanked me, that I realised that I could edit pages whenever I needed. First time you participate, you wonder if you've done the right thing, and it was the same here, pushing out the boundary about what can and can't be done."
A Talking Heads member

As the Headteachers Focus Group emphasised, headteachers often don't have the desire or the time to take over the facilitation of the Talking Heads communities. Ownership is primarily expressed in initiating and publishing items, modelling effective online practise and by headteachers working alongside the facilitators to implement new tasks, topics and initiatives as they emerge from their conversations. Facilitators mostly publish these on headteachers behalf in the large community information spaces, as there is a need to preserve some coherence within the structure.

5.15 Strategy Fifteen: Use tools innovatively
Facilitators have the opportunity to innovate within the software and community design. This will add a dynamic and interesting element to working online, as well as continual improvement. Facilitators should therefore take a leading edge role, helping to move the community from the textual to the multimedia and experimenting with online activities.

Members should alos be offered the opportunity to innovate. One long running Talking Heads discussion showed that members greatly enjoyed showing their prowess with html and teaching each other skills such as scrolling text.

5.16 Strategy Sixteen: Hold hotseats and online events with prominent guests
Hotseats have been used extensively in Talking Heads to allow headteachers to talk to policy makers and practitioners. This has enabled the sharing of best practice and the voice of the headteacher to be heard within the DfES. The importance of this should not be underestimated.

However, not all guests will necessarily engender participation. Guests need to be either have a reputation for expertise, to have respect as a practitioner colleague, or to be presenting a key topic. It is essential that the purpose of the hotseat is clear and that the stimulus of the starter article and hotseat introduction are relevant, topical and/ or controversial enough to provoke responses. Potential questioners should not be daunted by over-complex statements at the outset. Where simple provocations are made, supported by an article, there will often be a good response, and the argument may be developed. Where a starter item does not invite response, or where it is unclear what sort of question is expected of community members, there is likely to be less response. Where a hotseat guest has failed to attract sufficient participation it was generally because they were seeking information from the headteachers that was not of key interest to their audience, or because their topic addressed a minority audience.

Talking Heads has experimented with a number of longer run, innovative online events. Three examples of these are an online conference on Thinking Skill, an Emotional Literacy Month and a Challenges Now event. The Thinking Skills conference required members to pre-register, featured three hotseats running at the same time, the main guest being Edward de Bono, and a series of breakout conversations where discussion on the hotseat topics took place. The Emotional Literacy Month featured a series of resource links and two practitioners of emotional literacy programmes discussing their schools practices in an open forum. The Challenges Now event was run at the beginning of the school year, and invited a group of active members to participate in a two week dialogue outlining key issues for the coming year.

Although all these events were successful in attracting both readers and contributors, it should be noted that events on one part of the site or in event-specific communities can draw participation from other communities and so facilitators should plan accordingly.

5.17 Strategy Seventeen: Ensure each new community created has a clear purpose

No new community should be established unless the purpose is clear and an understanding established with the membership over the level of participation expected.

Purpose is more important than the size of the membership. A community with a very small membership can be sustained and vibrant and we have noted that there is no clear relationship between the size of the community and success (as measured by participation). Purposes that can sustain a community can include: to allow a group to share problems arising in their daily work; to engage in dialogue on specific issues; to give emotional support in isolated circumstances; to continue conversations between meetings; to work on specific tasks and to support a specific community of practice. The centrality and transparency of information sharing eg agendas and meeting notes, can also be a powerful administrative support, but is insufficient in itself to sustain a community.

Once purpose is agreed within the group, it is important that members of the community commit to participate at a relevant level. Depending on the purpose of the community, this may vary from: an intense time limited period, regular daily participation, twice weekly logins, logging in during agreed periods such as the first week of the month.

5.18 Strategy Eighteen: Foster networking and online practice

Fostering Networking can occur at a number of levels . One example might be pulling together headteachers who have similar interests to create a small community, for example Pupil Behaviour Management, to allow a group to work together on a common interest to hone policy and share best practice. Networking can also be achieved by supporting a pre-existing group of headteachers who may benefit from continuing their work online as Local Working Groups.

The development of natural communities has taken a significant amount of effort from some of the facilitation team and in many cases the impetus has come from two or three headteachers. This has mostly not been enough to sustain the community. Therefore new natural communities should not be created without a clear purpose, and commitment to participation.

5.19 Strategy Nineteen: Frame questions to ensure participation
Not only is innovation with the tools important in increasing participation, but whichever tool is used what is equally important is what is asked and how it is asked. From an examination of questions asked, looking specifically at those which have achieved a large number of contributions, ULTRALAB has developed an understanding of the type of question likely to encourage responses.

The facilitation team needs to advise headteachers where and how to post discussion starters to ensure the best chance of an answer. Questions left unanswered lead to disillusionment and decreased participation. It is therefore essential that best advice is given to enable headteachers to gain answers to their questions.

Online discussions taken from large Talking Heads communities, that had either no responses or more than fifteen answers, were analysed. Online discussions taken from small communities were also analysed, where there were either no responses or more than nine answers.

Most successful questions in large communities were general, clear, concise, open, seeking specific information and of a topical nature. Successful specific questions tend to be topical, contain a single question, and are initiated by headteachers. Successful general questions tend to be accessible and open (more than a yes/ no response). It is likely that emotional expression, combined with topicality is likely to generate a response . Discussion starters that required people to go to another web page seemed to get less response.

In small communities, successful discussions tend to be generalised and short. Very specific and topical questions were less likely to be successful, probably because the audience is smaller and topical issues are better covered in the larger communities. Unanswered questions tended to share a profile of length, complexity, and asking more than one question in a discussion starter

5.20 Strategy Twenty: Keep knowledge current
There is a necessity for facilitators to sustain their own current knowledge by keeping in contact with issues, reading relevant publications and working with headteachers face-to-face.

Full-time facilitators increasingly loose touch with the practical realities facing the membership of the community. This is inevitable as they must be full time facilitators in order to hone their facilitators role. This means that facilitators need to keep in touch to understand the issues facing their membership. A number of

strategies have been employed by Talking Heads to encourage facilitators to keep their knowledge current. These include work shadowing of headteachers, face-to-face events, focus groups of headteachers and keeping their educational roles active (school governor activities, inspection service, education organisation memberships).

Section Six: Evidence of Impact of Talking Heads

6.0 Changing Paradigms
Talking Heads has had an impact on headteachers in England. It has reduced isolation, enabled headteachers to share best practice and provided them with much needed support. There has been a considerable improvement in ICT uses as a by-product of headteachers using Talking Heads communities. ULTRALAB have also noted clear evidence of learning in communities as sharing of best practice has developed a body of knowledge, providing for new headteachers professional development opportunities. In addition, there has been a desirable and fruitful connection made between headteachers and policy makers. The development of the Talking Heads online communities has been the essential element in achieving these aims.

Despite the overwhelming evidence outlined below we are aware that much of the impact of Talking Heads remains invisible as it occurs via one to one communication between headteachers, and, at best, only a partial record of thoughts and reflections of headteachers are recorded.   Other effects are subtle, such as when it involves shifting habitual frames of reference.

6.1 Building community by reducing isolation
Evidence was sought which indicates a feel of community or ownership. This may be headteachers agreeing with each other, mentioning each other by name, initiating the discussion, arranging to share information, suggesting further collaboration, initiating discussions, lobbying, or headteachers driving the discussion without need for facilitators to intervene.

In response to the question whether participating in Talking Heads reduced their isolation 43% of the 2000 Questionnaire respondents stated yes. 51% of the 2001 Questionnaire respondents stated yes to this question. One elaborated suggesting that the value of Talking Heads is "Communicating with others in dark moments", again reinforcing these aspects of community.   One of the key objectives of the DfES in establishing the project was to reduce the isolation, prevalent in all headteachers but especially those new in post. As one put it "(Talking Heads was) reducing that awful feeling of isolation Heads can feel, what an inspiration and comfort to know there are others 'out there' feeling and worrying and thinking the same." Others referred to the comfort brought through knowing that they were able to share problems whenever they arose.

Headteachers also mention the encouragement experienced from knowing that others are struggling with similar issues. One said,

"Hearing that other people have similar problems, are weighed down by paperwork, it makes me feel that perhaps it is not just me being useless!!" (2000 Questionnaire)

Along with a reduction of isolation comes the confidence in knowing that one is not alone. Respondents reflected that discussing issues in Talking Heads allowed

them to be more certain in their decision-making and assured that they can bring about changes through comparing their own context to that of others.

"I am becoming more confident in my decisions through discussions on talking heads, such as TA, making me realise I'm not the only one feeling as I do sometimes."
(2000 Questionnaire)

In response to the question in the 2001 questionnaire regarding whether Talking Heads helped them feel a sense of community 52% of total respondents said yes.

"Quick and easy way of scanning the horizon for new ideas, very clever way of establishing sense of community - remarkable sense of unity and conformity about some central ideas." (2001 Questionnaire)

Evidence was also sought in an analysis of 467 discussions for Talking Heads indicators that members feel a sense of community or ownership. This was found in headteachers agreeing with each other, mentioning each other by name, social exchanges, arranging to share information, suggesting further collaboration, initiating discussions, lobbying, and humour, providing informal mentoring or headteachers driving the discussion without need for facilitators to intervene.

One example of humour is;
"Thanks (head's first name) P.S. What is a lad with a good highland name doing in Kent rather than being at the foot of Ben Nevis with the rest of our clan??"
(Online community conversation)

One example of lobbying is;
"Wonderful news - but will we actually get it? My LEA is supposed to be receiving £95,000 - divided between 5 nursery schools and at least 12 nursery units!! Is it going to be ring fenced for Nursery schools only? Start asking questions NOW - send your C.E.O. or Early Years Advisor a copy from this site - highlighted. " (Online community conversation)

One example of collaboration is;
"Good points from both S and T and I agree with both. I also want an online community to enable me to interact with other school leaders (or not) at a time which is convenient to me. Between us we probably have thousands of years of experience. By sharing, we all benefit from this huge wealth of expertise. Let's get it right and use it well."
(Online community conversation)

Less prevalent but still apparent is mentoring. Examples include;
"Is this your first year as a Head? ... I ask because the first year is more demanding than anyone of us would have ever believed. Life in 'the seat' is hard: challenging, demanding and can be lonely. The only way to cope is to believe, really believe YOU CAN. Then start thinking how to work hard, play hard - having time for yourself and your family, prioritise, be realistic in your expectations of what can be achieved

day to day..... Do you enjoy your job? I'm sure you do..... THE ISSUE is how the demands are impacting on you - emotionally and time wise - take more control. GOOD LUCK."
(Online community conversation)

"positive comments by colleagues about my school practice encouragement to carry onwards." (2000 Questionnaire)

6.1.1 Community and belonging
One measure of 'community' builds upon a sense of identity, relevance and a sense of belonging to something that is worthwhile. The initial pilot phase ran until autumn 2000. At that stage, a decision had to be made as to the continuation of the project. Headteachers were vociferous in defending the need for the communities to continue. They commented on their sense of community and belonging, with fellow headteachers providing mutuality and support in their professional context. One headteacher commented on the value of community supporting the continued development beyond the first year of headship.

"Its small community feeling all have incredibly similar experiences. The sense of humour and a realisation that there is more to life than the job" (2000 Questionnaire)

During the lifetime of the pilot, headteachers had begun to feel a sense of ownership and belonging. They commented on the 'family feeling' engendered with the original membership and the need to open this up to a wider group of headteachers once the pilot had been completed and moved into the substantive Talking Heads project. They recognised, however, that there were dangers in the growth in size. These were balanced by the possibility of a larger community having more influence on policy makers. The comments often used 'we' – a true reflection of the sense of belonging and an indication of a movement to stage 4.

"We could be really ambitious and extend to an international community of school leaders. I recently attended a European Conference in Sweden, which was really interesting and motivating." (2000 Questionnaire)

There are numbers of examples of headteachers expressing appreciation of the fact that they can talk openly outside of their LEA. Certainly the privacy afforded by restricting the audience to Headteachers, contributes to the development of community. As one headteacher put it:

"Security for heads to talk about what they want in the language and tone that they want - this is partly therapeutic but also important in showing scale of feeling and importance attached to issues.." (2001 Questionnaire)

6.2 From Sharing of Best Practice to Professional Development
Talking Heads was built on the understanding that professional development is inherent in peer exchange.

"Much of the expertise most valuable to you has been hard won by your peers."
(Pilot Tutorial Introduction Feb 2000)

The development of professional practice has been apparent since the project outset.

"I have the opportunity to increase my ICT skills; become involved in discussion groups or simply make a note of other people's views; have a direct link to the people who set the agenda in the Hotseats; share experiences and challenges with Headteachers in a similar setting and use my facilitator to offload any grievances I may have about the system - or admit I need help to master another skill. I don't need to read so much paperwork - I can access articles I am interested in without having to read the whole paper, I can find out about global issues without always having to watch or listen to the news and I can chat to other professionals who I may not otherwise ever have made contact with"
(2001 Questionnaire- How is Talking Heads meeting your needs?)

There is substantial evidence that Headteachers use Talking Heads to access a wide range of advice, ideas, experience and information. This is used to deal with issues arising in their schools and to assist them to effectively implement new government initiatives.

In an informal learning environment the sharing of best practise, knowledge and experience, occurs spontaneously and is very characteristic of this type of learning community. As Wenger (2002) states this involves active construction and reconstruction of ideas, reflection on problems, active thinking, and the challenge of working with old ideas to create new perspectives.

The following extracts from Talking Heads online community discussions demonstrate the impact on professional practise.

"Reply to (headteachers full name) - thanks for the idea – I guess that's the answer, try to limit the focus of attention at any one time. Now I shall just have to convince the adviser…"

"Haven't seen this before, I think it is brilliant…" "I've just stumbled on the 'Current Discussions - Full List' bit. That's definitely helpful: a step in the right direction. Thanks."

"Following (headteachers full name) comments, I too attended this conference and found it to be excellent - mainly because it was led by Headteachers who were able to offer very practical advice and keep things in perspective. I have signed up with the same provider who will work with me in school on my own agenda and provide real value for money. Thoroughly recommended........"
"So .... a week later I finally found the diabetic child discussion (assisted by (facilitator's first name)) (thank you –(name)) posted my info (email from someone else) - and then realised the discussion ended that day! Vital research - wasted. However, I did learn lots in the process of discussing it and found all the different

views very stimulating so not entirely wasted."

"I put a bid in for the small school funding, and ended up with £2,500!! I can apparently spend it on almost anything I want to (according to our Standard Fund small print) I will probably spend it on computers, and allow parents to work on them in an after school class. I did not know about this grant, until another head told me to "throw a bid in!!"

"The ability to share those difficult moments and to read what situations others have dealt with before it hits me - I've had an opportunity to think it through. SEN is not the place for it(continuing this discussion) as we in mainstream have plenty of sticky moments and extreme though rare, we all hope, events of violence and abuse."
(All from online community conversations)

In response to the 2001 questionnaire which asked Head Teacher's to identify "How is TH increasing (your) effectiveness, 44% mentioned one or more of the following in descending order:
"Puts things in perspective/exposed me to other points of view"
"Provides information/current issues/saves time"
"Clarification/learning/reflection"
"Getting and giving advice/help/help with change"
"Share ideas/views/solutions"
"Share good/current: practice/policy/schemes of work"

There is also clear evidence that reading about the experience of others without contributing to the conversation has benefited numbers of members.

6.2.1 Topicality
Headteachers are especially grateful to be able to gain access to topical and current information. This is achieved through the community conversations and also via private emails.

"Gaining information from others in similar situations regarding the implementation of Curriculum 2000"

"Getting information about performance management, from both the horses mouth and from other heads"

Headteachers also gave examples of increased knowledge on specific current issues e.g.Threshold:

"More up to date info on Threshold, for example, today reading guidance on how to proceed, I know what are the expectations instead of responding to staff with don't know…waiting for the NAHT to phone back etc." (2000 Questionnaire) *"Drawing on ideas from threshold discussion to share good practice and pitfalls with other staff "* (2000 Questionnaire)

"I was able to find out about a premises issue affecting VA schools which would

have taken me a long time through other methods" (2001 Questionnaire)

"Access to information which would otherwise take days or weeks to find"
"Advice on Premises issues gained simply from another Aided School
Headteacher. This saved me hours of research on my own" (2001 Questionnaire)

"Shared ideas on policies /schemes of work have saved an enormous amount of
admin time. I can therefore devote more time to the development of teaching and
learning"
(2001 Questionnaire)

Case record - The School Improvement Awards
Discussion - July 2001
A discussion lasting seven days occurred in Talking Heads shortly after the School
Improvement awards were announced. The conversation generated vigorous
Participation and led to clarification on how to distribute windfall funding to staff in a
manner that would not de-motivate them.

6.2.2 Learning new skills and knowledge
There are also many examples of Headteachers learning skills that impact on their
leadership. The following are from community discussions.

"I have learnt new management skills relating to budget planning, policy formation
and new approaches to behaviour."
"Gives me knowledge about things I have a little experience of or training for"
"Being more knowledgeable about other systems in place elsewhere"

6.2.3 Clarification or confirmation of action
Talking Heads also provides an opportunity for Headteachers to clarify issues that
require action. The following are examples from the online questionnaires.

"Often a decision I was hesitating over has been confirmed or discarded by seeing
other heads ways of dealing with issues e.g. managing an uncooperative member
of SMT"
(2001 Questionnaire)
"I have been able to demonstrate to my SMT where our practice links into the
national picture and how important it is for us, as a school, to be more proactive and
dynamic."
(2000 Questionnaire)
"*It has helped when 'new issues' have come on board to ask other headteachers*
the stupid naff questions and realise that I'm not the only one that hasn't
understood!"
(2001 Questionnaire)
"I had a problem with justifying PM to myself, through reading the dialogues and
discussion I got it sorted out in my own mind before presenting it to staff." (2000
Questionnaire)
"How to help a Deputy get on has been smoothed by confirmation of my own
thoughts on the subject"

"Debating new initiatives and gaining a greater understanding of the implications from fellow heads has enabled me to implement some policies more effectively, by being aware of some of the pitfalls others have faced."

6.2.4 Using the Experience of Other Headteachers
Headteachers use Talking Heads to exchange experience. The following examples are from the 2001 online questionnaire and the online conversations:

"Thanks (headteachers' first name), yes the system makes performance management very easy and gave us good evidence to use in a variety of ways. We find the use of standardised test in conjunction with good teacher and test assessment helps us to really understand the spread of skills a child has and ensure s/he reaches potential and beyond. Staff find this easy to use but even so I give them time to analyse their data and reflect upon next steps" (online conversation)

"I asked for information on mixed age range classes and received a few experienced headteachers' curricula."

"Problems over capability proceedings, by "chatting" to another headteacher, helped me to put everything into perspective and found useful tips"

"One idea that I will be developing is moving to a set period of time where we spend a week dedicated to cross curricular work and incorporate our Literacy, Numeracy and Science into it, instead of the other way round. One Head had tried this and said how successful it was." (2001 Questionnaire)

"I have 3 autistic pupils in our reception and had no prior experience, nor had the staff. I have been able to access support and advice from other colleagues and other sites that have enabled me to support my staff, keep morale higher, and begin to meet the needs of all the pupils in this class, although we still have a lot of learning to do!" (2001 Questionnaire)

"I was searching for examples of anti -bullying policies and a head not only sent me hers but a copy of her behaviour policy too. I have also down loaded other policies that helped me to get started on mine. I have used loads of things that have been available" (2000 Questionnaire)

Case record- HIV student discussion – March 2002

Another example of the richness of the combined thinking of headteachers occurred with the rapid response to a question raised by a headteacher who has an HIV positive child in their school. This child has EBD and frequently tried to bite staff and students. The parents threatened to sue the teacher if their health status

was revealed. One facilitator provided a link to the DfES information page. A summary of the advice from headteachers follows.

• All students are potential infectious disease carriers (e.g. HIV and hepatitis) and therefore every student should treated the same way
• Following from this, school needs to establish clear policies and procedures for first aid and sterile procedure e.g. dealing with bodily fluids
• Reassure and train staff to de-escalate volatile situations, and to use self-protection such as long sleeved clothing and holding techniques
• Consult all interested parties i.e. LEA, unions re H&S and legal issues, without revealing the child's identity
• Inform the parents of the school's policies and explain that the child is there within those parameters
• Enlist the support of the parents in developing the protocols, reassuring them their child isn't being singled out
• Don't put your staff or students at risk

6.2.5 Reflection on Practice
Professional development also occurs through having ones personal frames of reference challenged by colleagues. An example is the Head Teacher of a nursery school who stated at a face-to-face training event that "no-one over thirty at my school can use a computer". She was invited into the "Nursery and Early Years" community in Talking Heads to discuss issues of low enrolment by a Nursery colleague whose staff all use computers. In a number of instances the online conversation provided valuable opportunities for reflective practice as the following quotes from the online questionnaires further illustrate:

"The ability to look at other people's points of view on current issues, particularly before a recent Ofsted inspection at the end of my first year" (2001 Questionnaire)

"Through the sharing of strategies to deal with a bullying incident in school it is allowing me to sound out others before deciding on a particular course of action." (2001 Questionnaire)

"Contacts and ideas e.g. thinking skill, also other points of view and debate get me thinking and questioning my practise which is good." (2001 Questionnaire)
"The contact with other people who face similar challenges has been very helpful, but more importantly, I can 'benchmark' my ideas against the opinions of other professionals, and so have a relative measure of how I am doing." (2000 Questionnaire)

6.2.6 Researching Colleagues Views
As headteachers start to appropriate the technology, they are beginning to understand how to implement it to develop their own professional practice. The latter example shows how headteachers set up their own research data collection conversation within Talking Heads.

"I value it as a research tool, more than anything else, enabling me to discover what others are thinking…" (2001 Questionnaire)

"I have found the debate tool very useful, particularly when researching attitudes towards writing, in the NLS, and the deployment of teaching assistants." (2001 Questionnaire)

Another example of a headteacher using Talking Heads for research was one headteacher who was interested in researching colleagues' views on Teaching Assistants. He created a lively debate in Talking Heads and summarised the key findings for his audience. He then presented his findings at a conference and reported the conference back to his colleagues in Talking Heads.

6.2.7 Talking Heads and the Contribution to 'School Improvement'
The introduction and context of this work emphasised the place of Talking Heads in a school improvement agenda dating back 30 years. This agenda defined improvement as more than changes or effective practice. Instead it framed school improvement as; building capacity for continuous change to improve the achievements of children. Key concepts of professional development, creating learning organisations and developing distributed leadership were discussed

6.2.8 Impact of participation on schools and stakeholders
In response to the 2001 question "What ideas, drawn from T.H. have you been able to develop in your school?" 33% of the respondents gave 76 specific examples of ideas implemented, including policies, behaviour management, performance management, and dealing with specific issues of racism, spirituality, ICT, assessment, including:

"Ways of dealing with behaviour issues during lunch breaks; how to address the Able Child issue; examples of policies have given us a starting point to formulate our own; shared experiences about Threshold with other headteachers and used them to get it right for my own staff; shared ideas about PSHE and how best to deliver it and improved my ICT skills which has enabled me to work with my ICT Manager to improve ICT with the staff and pupils." (2001 Questionnaire)

"Sharing the expertise of staff across a cluster or pair of schools"
"Mixed age range class curriculum"
"Development of services to early years community, advice about SCITT trainees and managing them, debate about new Foundation Stage guidance etc"
"I've been very interested in the various pages of advice for turning round schools in difficult circumstances which not only provide some fresh ideas but which affirm policies and procedures we are operating in our own school."
"Developing a school mission statement"

1. How to respond to the NY/Washington terrorist attacks with pupils
2. Developing a multi-racial policy
3. Anticipating White Paper issues in school policy"
"I realized how easy online publishing can be without html, so that the school now has a web site."
(all from the 2001 Questionnaire)

6.2.9 .Increased professionalism

In response to the question in the 2001 questionnaire regarding whether participating in Talking Heads had led directly to school improvement, 39% of respondents answered yes. Some examples of how this is occurring follow:

"I can converse with the Governing Body about educational issues and be able to quote actual examples of how issues have been dealt with in other schools around the country – not just locally. I actually made the Talking Heads my Personal Professional Development Target last year for Performance Management."
"Making me think and focus more on my professional role, rather than just reacting to everyday school life."
"Developing a more open-minded approach to managing the constraints of a small budget in a small school"
"Opportunity to share SIDP information with others in other LEAs to compare priorities"
(all from the 2001 Questionnaire)

6.2.10 Flow of information to colleagues

Headteachers also report that participating in Talking Heads has helped them to have access to current and timely knowledge that they can disseminate to staff.

"…. It has also allowed me to share my views with a wider field, thus bringing other ideas into school strategy".
(2001 Questionnaire)

"Being able to bring a range of ideas to discussions with staff "
(2001 Questionnaire)

"I was able locate information from colleagues about an assessment package I'd heard of."
(2000 Questionnaire)

"How to help a Deputy get on has been smoothed by confirmation of my own thoughts on the subject"
(2001 Questionnaire)

This can also lead to dissemination of best practice:
"I can attend meetings, especially with representatives of professional associations, armed with examples of practice in other schools" (2001 Questionnaire)

6.2.11 Building capacity through local groups

One aspect of building capacity is through building local networks of headteachers who engage in the kind of community that Talking Heads is, but at a local level and dealing with local issues.

Talking Heads is working collaboratively to develop a number of local working groups in Shropshire, Essex, Stoke and the West Country. In some instances, this

has full backing and support from the LEAs.

6.2.12 Building Connections between Research and Practice
The possibilities of using online community tools in the effort to extend best practice in schools are tremendous. An excellent example of this can be demonstrated through the three hot seats set up for the Thinking Skills Conference. Three highly respected specialists, Dr Edward de Bono, Professor Robert Fisher and Dr Vivienne Baumfield interacted with a large online audience. As an outcome, there is a planned face-to-face one day seminar for between 60 and 100 of the Thinking Skills Conference members to meet and work with Professor Fisher.

The lead-in to the seminar will be supported with preparatory online activities. In the weeks after, the online community will host discussions aimed at taking the face-to-face work and supporting the implementation of thinking skills in schools. Two headteachers are being appointed to the NCSL Research Associate Programme with the aim of further supporting this work in the online community to lessen the gap between educational research and classroom practice.

6.3 Producing a generation of 'wired' headteachers
The DfES's bold initiative to provide laptops and a context for their use through Talking Heads to new headteachers is an initiative clearly designed to impact upon the use of ICT in schools. There is substantive evidence that the initiative is impacting on headteachers and their schools. As stated in the Longitudinal case study (see appendix 2.1.1):

"Overwhelmingly, the pilots reported a transforming effect on the way they thought about, and used ICT. Even when most heads had begun to use the site less often, they described an increase in confidence and proficiency with ICT, and saw their involvement with Talking Heads a beneficial addition to their professional life, and to the wider life of the school."
(Longitudinal case study)

ICT skills levels amongst headteachers are widely divergent, from starters to expert. For the former, learning a simple ICT task is a major victory leading to confidence and further gains. Our face-to-face training reports indicate that there are still many who remain tentative users however. The following quotes from the 2001 questionnaire indicate the range of progression apparent in participants.
"I am now an active advocate of computer use - in fact the change has been unbelievable to those who know me. Rather than avoiding computers if at all possible, I seek uses and particularly value the online support and advice of colleagues. What remains significantly is to further my keyboard skills."
"Setting up of Consortium website"
"I didn't know I was going to increase my ICT skills to the extent that I have in such areas as being able to drop graphics into articles and send attachments with notes."
"For the first time ever I made a PowerPoint presentation on Investors in People, using clips from web etc. Very, very impressive INSET for a cluster of schools, highly effective and it inspired every one there. Mostly-I was able to do this at home…"

*"I recently attended a training day as a senior member of staff
in the LEA Behaviour Support Service. We set ourselves the task of redrafting
Referrals, Admissions and Outreach Policy and I was able to DTP the amendments
as we discussed them."*

The quotes above also suggest that changes in a headteachers skill level innately
helps to set a different frame of reference and higher standards of productivity
amongst their colleagues.

The 2000 questionnaire asked headteachers if participating in
Talking Heads had increased their effectiveness in the use of ICT. 52% or
respondents answered yes.

Although this question wasn't asked in the 2001 questionnaire, the question "What
ICT development has / might occur in members schools as a result of using
Talking Heads?" was used to elicit more detailed responses. In reply to this
question, 33% mentioned increased headteacher / staff / pupil ICT use and or
training, and 14% mentioned ideas for future projects. 12% mentioned
implementing specific applications or tools (databases, video, e-mail, whiteboard
etc) including 3 reports of schools adopting the use of think.com for staff and
students. Some of their accounts of this are detailed below.

*"All staff currently undertaking NOFTI training so I am confident in my use & am
able to offer (limited) support"*
"Use of systems by management team"
"Increases in use of interactive whiteboard technology"
*"I will think about developing the use of video after today's course, greater use of
laptops for pupils"*
*"Use of video on our web site (following (facilitator's name) visit), use of think.com
as a school"*
"Email now in common usage amongst Admin staff "
"Greater use of laptops for pupils"
"Network in place with ISDN line"
"Encouraging staff to use teacher's debates online."
*"Parent & Community Training for ICT, further staff ICT Training
& Development."*
*"We are hoping to develop a school web site and to place a wide range of
information to support parents, staff and pupils"*
*"As my knowledge and skills of using the internet increases I am able to develop
the systems in school for my staff and my pupils."*
*"I will certainly push harder to get my colleagues to use the internal e-mail system
and I am working with (facilitator's name) on a local user group and a North Region
TC user group - so I suppose this is strong proof that I think there is a good and
useful future for these ventures."*
*"When Broadband is implemented by the LEA we will be able to remain online as a
Team and fully utilise intranet and external E mail."*
"Involvement of the school in Think.com both for challenge to able children and as

a front page for our networked computers"
"Developed ICT skills and knowledge, it has also allowed me to share my views with a wider field, thus bringing other ideas into school strategy."
(All from the 2001 Questionnaire)

6.3.1 Future ICT planning
As headteachers begin to understand how to use ICT they are also incorporating plans for its implementation in their schools and regions.

"Have moved forward in getting Internet Access for both staff and pupils"
"Greater urgency in getting all staff access to ICT for admin without fighting over the staff room computer"
"I will certainly push harder to get my colleagues to use the internal e-mail system and I am working with (facilitator's name) on a local user group and a North Region TC user group
- so I suppose this is strong proof that I think there is a good
and useful future for these ventures."
"I would like to set up a city wide on line chat area for schools involved in the healthy schools project..."
(All fro m the 2001 Questionnaire)

The quote below was sent in an email to one of the facilitators. It illustrates how some headteachers have integrated Talking Heads into their working practice, and are benefiting under all of the categories once understanding the opportunities participation opens up to them.

"Yes I have a new job. In September, 2002, I am taking over a new beacon school so it should be quite a challenge. …. However, I shall be sorry to leave my present consortium as with the help of (facilitator's name) we have established our own website and are sharing information etc online. I must take what I have learnt and spread the word. Oh, I eventually completed my research MA into writing - remember that debate and I also gained an SEN qualification after that other debate into the deployment of teaching assistants. Talking Heads has proved very useful and I think it is going to be even more valuable in the future. I'll try to put together an interesting story for your collection." (Email to facilitator)

6.4 Edging towards systemic change

6.4.1 Access to DfES and NCSL decision makers
The collaborative gains made by the project partners on developing a relevant hotseat schedule are evident from the questionnaires. Whereas 26% of headteachers indicated they valued communication with the DfES and policy makers in the 2000 questionnaire, 58% indicate that they do so in the 2001 questionnaire.
"Having access to senior leaders in education and reading their views on education issues."
"To be involved and have access to NCSL at the start is exciting and for me it keeps the interest and passion for doing

the job and therefore being effective, hopefully, well OFSTED seemed to think so."
"Debates / hotseat discussions - good to hear what government 'gurus' think and be able to contribute"
"The Hotseats and availability to those who make the governmental decisions"
"Debate on recent DFES documents and initiatives"
"Some of the DFES Hotseats have been excellent in the quality of the debate."
"Its discussions and debates on areas of leadership and with the DfES"
(All from the 2001 Questionnaire

6.4.2 Impact on policy
As the case studies of the DfES hotseats show, the hotseats are having an indisputable impact on policy design. As the responses above show, DfES hotseats in particular are having a significant impact on headteachers. The hotseat case studies also provide the evidence that hotseats are also allowing policymakers access to a very specific "key informant" group and are extending their understanding of their policy impact. However, the response from one headteacher suggests that
DfES may benefit from giving publicity to the fact that their hotseats are having an impact on policy design.

"I am not convinced that DfES officials understand the complexities impacting on schools each day. Consultation/discussion is one thing but there is a significant difference between hearing and listening. Hotseat elements will only be seen to be effective if Heads see DfES officials CHANGING their ideas/initiatives. When will Talking Heads give Headteachers the chance to communicate with the Minister for Education and/or the Secretary of State?"
(2001 Questionnaire)

Having said that, the DfES is to be congratulated for its foresight and vision in funding Talking Heads, the vision of online learning communities is gaining momentum. There is sufficient evidence to suggest that their integration into daily practise will become ubiquitous to headteachers and schools over the next three years. Policy makers, headteachers and all educational stakeholders will participate with increasing transparency and openness in the dialogue committed to increasing excellence, creativity and lightening the load. This will be based on a methodology that has been honed collaboratively with participants and NCSL to provide a robust and agile community environment that participants can tailor to their needs. ULTRALAB is very proud indeed to be playing a key role in this work.