

Cloudlearn Methodology

Introduction

The ability of new technology to transform structure has impacted on everything from middle eastern politics to the way we buy and sell second hand good. The way that ICT in learning has moved forward, similarly, has moved from the the top-down dictate of quangos and ministerial departments to the the congruent enthusiasms of young teachers and energetic communities of practice.

This has led to an increasing disconnect between often out of touch and over cautious advice from the top and the effective, grounded, evidence based policy exchanges of practitioners. Of course, in a world that already recognises the diversity of strategies need to differentiate and personalise learning, it is clear that there is, and never will be, a one-size-fits-all solution to any new challenge. Schools vary in their cultural and contextual specificity. A solution that works well in urban, employment challenged, Knowsley would be different from that in rural, agrarian coastal, Norfolk. But in each unique context the tested ingredients of good practice might be discerned, and aggregated to provide bespoke recipes - safe and authentic starting points for new practice in any school.

New technologies have provided schools with new challenges. Students are clearly enamored by the seductive charms of social networking, of pocketable smart technologies, of user generated media, of the sheer scale of pervasive technologies. The Cloudlearn research project started from the premise that those pervasive technologies might be at the heart of a new methodological approach too.

The initial premise was that Cloudlearn advice sheets might be best developed if they were initially crowd sourced from education practitioners, and then tested against the understandings of education organisations and views of learners and teachers. Hearing the authentic voice of experienced learning practitioners, who already had effective strategies in hand, was fundamental to the authenticity of the advice to be aggregated.

The methodology adopted in the Cloudlearn research project drew on, and built from, work done by the project team between 1999 - 2005 with the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) in the ground breaking Talking Heads and Virtual Heads on-line communities of practice¹.

Discussions groups were formulated. They were:

- divided into five subject areas,
- entirely online,
- to contain only currently practicing teachers,
- each led by their experienced, innovative, respected, educational peers.

and of course the technologies that were the focus of the policy and practice debate were the same technologies used as a vehicle for these discussions.

¹ A project run for DfES and novated to NCSL, which built online communities for existing and aspiring head teachers to offer support and share attitudes, views and experiences, and to disseminate these views to DfES officials and ministers

There were significant challenges

1. Time

Any online group which is to run for a period of time needs to fit in with the rhythm of the work year of its participants. In the case of Cloudlearn this is the academic year, building the timeline around school events and holidays. Even in the developmental stage the project was designed to fit in with that school year, allowing participants time to participate and lead facilitators time to write up the advice contained in the discussion groups. The project team already knew, and the Cloudlearn project confirmed, that online discussion groups work best for busy people where timetables allow for long-term commitment and engagement.

2. Finding appropriate lead facilitators

In previous work with NCSL (see footnote 1) the Cloudlearn project leaders learnt that participants need to respect and empathise with those who lead the group. Group leaders need to be authentic and to hold the esteem of their communities. A necessary condition is that they are practicing, and have a respected reputation for their work in the area. As the project was investigating social media it was preferable they were highly visible in the online world. For Cloudlearn this meant that our lead facilitators needed to be education practitioners who were already active and respected contributors in education social media groups. Rather than advertising blindly, we approached them specifically.

3. Managing and facilitating online discussions

Leading an online group is a precise skill. In the past this project team has designed, managed and run professional development courses for NCSL, for the university sector and for many others, on leading and facilitating online groups; many such courses are now commercially available too².

Time limitations prevented running a longitudinal course in the case of Cloudlearn. To confirm that the lead facilitators had at least a common platform of skills and competencies in this area the project team designed and ran a group three weeks prior to, and alongside, the social media discussion groups. This pre-engagement group not only enabled lead facilitators to gain support throughout the process, but also allowed the project team to 'model' effective, tested practice in formal online facilitation. For example long running online discussion groups, even where contributions run at a high initial level, can often wane. To counteract this, the lead facilitators need to clearly demarcate start and end points to discussions, they need to ensure that they are omnipresent in the group, establishing a sense of esteem for contributors, summarising the discussion, and encouraging contributions where gaps emerge.

4. Building trust to develop honesty

It was made clear from the start that the discussion groups would be private: no participants would be identified, all participants would represent themselves and not their schools, all participants would be practicing educators rather than education consultants, press, representatives of education organisations, or local authorities, and that all comments to be used in the final advice sheets would be anonymised. These proven terms of engagement, and the length of time the groups were to run for, aimed

² see for example http://www.tap-training.com/page/courses/elearning_facilitation.html, <http://archive.e-learningcentre.co.uk/eclipse/Resources/facilitating.htm>, http://www.ifets.info/journals/6_2/8.html

to build trust within the group and capture practice used, both good and bad, which was authentic and grounded rather than school / LA authorised.

5. Hearing the voice of the ‘nay-sayers’

By definition those who contributed to the online groups were those who were on a continuum from broadly interested in using social media in the classroom to those who were enthusiastic and experienced practitioners, already with a history of involvement in social media projects with their learners. Few had negative contributions and most were already pushing, or attempting to push their School Management Teams (SMTs) into further freeing up their school networks, on the basis of their own effective practice. To access those who had negative views the lead facilitators used their existing membership of other forums (for example ‘Teacher Talk’, a TES forum) to phrase questions regarding social media, monitor answers and bring responses back to their online groups for consideration and discussion.

Lead facilitators

Identifying lead facilitators

Identifying lead facilitators was key to the success of Cloudlearn. The quality and continuity of the discussion was dependent on the activity of the lead facilitators. It was essential that they be well regarded by their peers in this field, but that they were sympathetic with those struggling to implement change.

To cover a broad spectrum of the profession Cloudlearn sought five facilitators who would represent both genders as well as the primary and secondary sectors.

The lead facilitators were selected by the project through:

- monitoring those proactive on social media sites (for example the Twitter stream, #ukedchat) and forums;
- looking at those prominent in the news and conferences for their involvement in social media projects;
- holding discussions with educational journalists and consultants about what innovative practice they had seen in schools;
- the project teams own experience of schools and their practice gained at Heppell.net

Initially, after considerable work, seven practitioners were identified and approached; five of the seven accepted. All lead facilitators have been paid for their time and effort. All five are working as individuals and are not participating in Cloudlearn as representatives of their schools.

Challenges in identifying our lead facilitators

1. Gender

In line with the experience of many ICT projects finding females who were conspicuously leading in this field was challenging. Many are active, but as we see in forums like the TeachMeets, there is a gender bias in who "puts themselves forward". The project was delighted with the calibre of the two female teachers it sourced - both were active in other education forums too, with their advice sought by others from the current education minister to the BBC. Obviously, there are many female classroom teachers who are really pushing boundaries (as opposed to working on one project) across the field of social media - and this was particularly clear in our international audience - but a methodology that relies on looking for those who "push their heads above the parapet", so to speak, will face some tough challenges in attaining a fair gender representation without pro-active intervention.

It should be noted that both female teachers are in London, in challenging, although excellent (as judged by Ofsted), schools. It is not appropriate to generalise from such tiny numbers, but we might hypothesise that the specific combination of circumstances (ethnic mix, social deprivation, challenging behaviour) made London - and other places like it - a more fertile ground for this type of initial classroom innovation.

2. Position in the school

Seeking classroom teachers who were creative and innovative in using social media meant seeking those who are able to push against imposed boundaries in network access (those barriers coming from a variety of sources including SMTs, school network managers, local grids for learning). These classroom teachers needed some authority to make change happen, which meant that in secondary schools the ideal candidate for

lead facilitator would be a department head who had the ability and autonomy to innovate within their department. In primary this meant a senior teacher. Hence all five lead facilitators were in a position of some authority in the school hierarchy, but not so senior as to nervously discourage absolute honesty developing in the online discussion groups.

Methodologically, this proved to be an essential, and very fine line in building authenticity combined with honesty and trust. On reflection, this aspect was even more important than our first judgements led us to believe.

3. Age range taught

Our initial list of names of possible lead facilitators contained far more primary teachers than secondary. This is important to note; the use of social media is commonly perceived as the domain at best of secondary schools. The internet is of course heavily used by secondary schools who often have faster access.

In addition the fact that many social media websites (Facebook, MySpace) theoretically prevent access under 13 years (teen Second Life has just been closed down) has enhanced this view. In practice though, many aspects of social media (blogging, Skype, video and audio diaries etc) are heavily used by innovative primary teachers. There are a number of social media discussion sites specifically designed for the primary age group, for example ScuttlePad, Yoursphere, Franktown Rocks, WhatsWhat.me. Even with the current curriculum restraints there is arguably more space in the primary curriculum for project work and innovation, which may in part explain the number of primary teachers active in the social media space. Interestingly most of these are males in positions of authority, which, given the number of females in primary classrooms, also heavily weighted the gender differences mentioned above.

Profile of the five lead facilitators

The lead facilitation group contains two female and three male facilitators.

The lead facilitators are;

- a secondary Head of History from a large London comprehensive,
- a Head of Citizenship and PHSE at a West London Academy,
- an Assistant Head and Head of Science at a Community School in Cornwall,
- a Deputy Head at a primary school in Bolton,
- a Deputy Head of a primary school in Essex.

Between them the lead facilitators have many years experience of classroom teaching. Three have won awards for their project work. One of the group had also formerly taught at a special school, bringing this practice to the group.

Online discussion group participants

Identifying participants

Cloudlearn developed an online database as part of the Cloudlearn website (www.cloudlearn.net) to encourage those interested to express that interest by registering for either participation in the project or the email project updates. The database was accessible from the first week of January and was extensively advertised, alongside the project, at the annual BETT show from 12 - 15 January. Nearly 1,000 postcards were distributed during the BETT show and two presentations were made every day advertising Cloudlearn and encouraging contributions to the database. BETT is an educational ICT show and the audience is heavily weighted towards those involved in classroom ICT.

Alongside the database the project was announced at a significant number of events and conferences held between January and March (as a measure of the diversity of these events, they included the annual Warrington primary conference, Dorset head teachers conference, a national 21st century learning conference, the substantial BSEC conference, a Coventry school improvement advisory group and an NAHT ICT conference). Following each of these and other conferences the numbers registering on the database increased. In addition, obviously, the social media themselves were used effectively as a viral announcement conduit.

The final method used to identify participants was managed by the lead facilitators and involved their putting out 'calls for participation' via the specific social media groups (including Twitter) that they were active in.

Not all those registering on the database were asked to participate. The database requested that those interested add some comments about themselves. In line with the project design, only those who mentioned they were currently practicing teachers were approached to contribute.

Those identified were split into five groups, dependent on their area of interest/ involvement, providing as much as was possible a cross section of male/female, primary/ secondary/ higher, UK/ international for each group. The email invite to participate was made by the lead facilitators of each group and initially a limited number, 92, of registered participants were approached. In the event, as anticipated, a number of these had either left teaching in the last three months, or were not full time classroom teachers (e.g. were LA officers) so did not qualify. This was not clear cut; one name approached was in fact an educational consultants currently engaged in supply teaching. A very few did not respond to the request to participate, or no longer wished to be involved - almost always due to time constraints.

We limited the final total of participants to 75 and comfortably achieved this selection.

Profile of participants

Chart 1 demonstrates that gender split of participants is weighted towards males (see discussion above).

The importance of adding the international totals is that the the number of international females balances the heavy gender bias of the UK sample as the international sample is flatter, although still skewed towards men.

It is not within the scope of this project to question why international gender totals might be flatter, but it is of interest and worthy of further investigation.

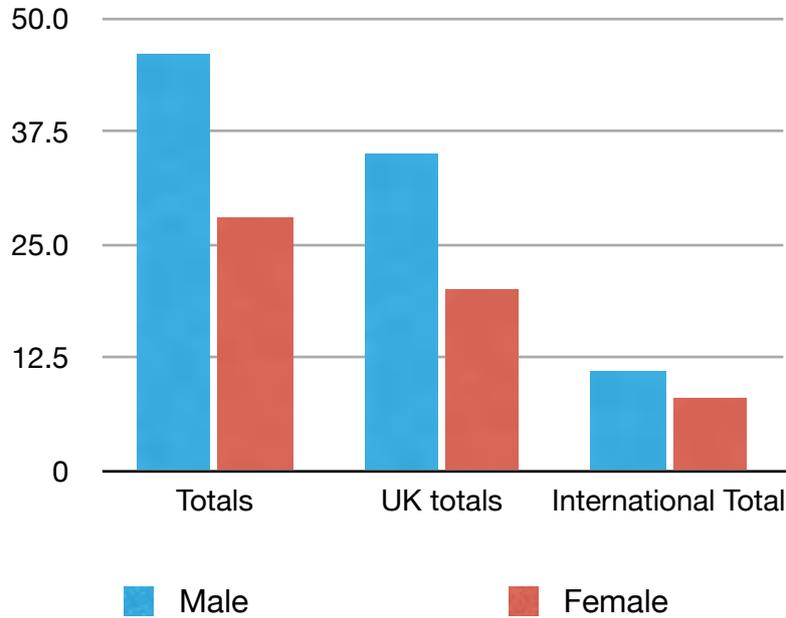


Chart 1: Gender Split

Chart 2 shows the type of institutions our UK participants taught in. As is shown the participation is weighted towards secondary. Although many primary teachers are heavily involved in social media activities (see above) those both registering as interested and being prepared to participate were limited. This may well be related to gender issues: primary contains more female teachers but those registering interest and participating were weighted towards male teachers.

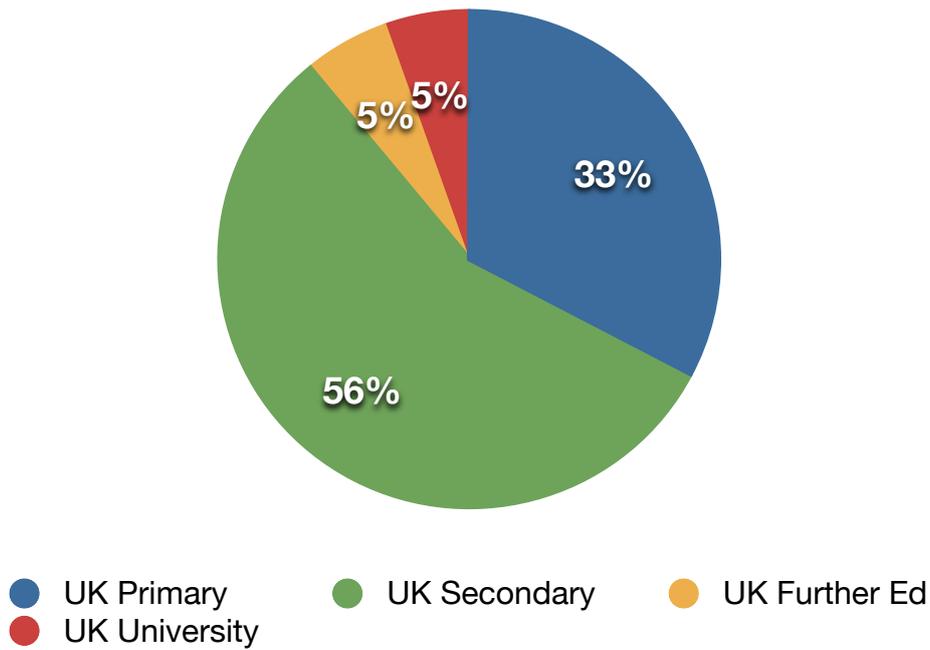


Chart 2: UK participants by schools type

Chart 3 shows the type of school split for international participants. Interestingly the split is very similar to the UK split, with the absence of any further education group.

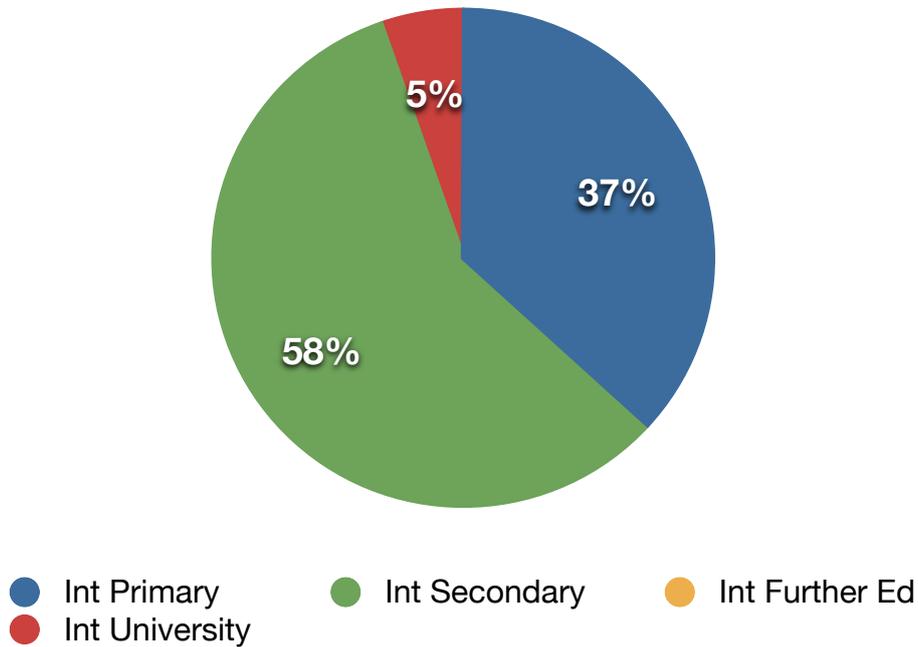


Chart 3: International participants by school type

Chart 4 shows the number of UK participants compared to the number of international participants. International participants have been drawn from France, Spain, Norway, Denmark, USA, Australia, New Zealand and China.

In practice there were a very large number of international participants who wished to be part of the project but, for now at least, international numbers were limited by the project team. A useful project extension would be to fully embrace their valuable contributions

more fully. Whilst the experience of the international group is important and lessons can be learnt from their experiences phase one of Cloudlearn is a UK project - hence the participants were UK weighted.

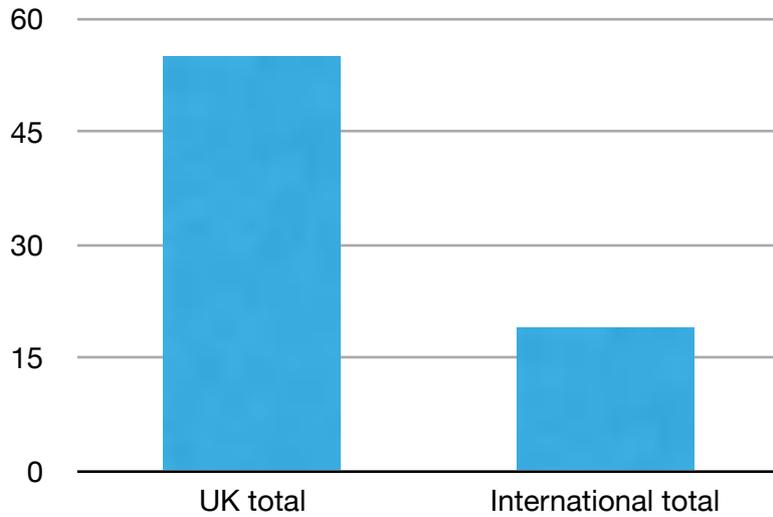


Chart 4: Total UK and international participants

Conclusion

We are very satisfied with the processes adopted. The selection process outlined above ran over three months, from January to April 2011. Identifying lead facilitators and online group participants was crucial to the success of Cloudlearn and its use of a crowd sourced methodology.

Initial indications from the five online discussions groups demonstrate a high quality of discussion and reflection. Participants were prepared to share experiences, case studies and policies. Of most value was the fact that a number of participants were willing to disclose practice that had been tried and failed, as well as practice which circumvented LA or school directives. These posts demonstrate the success of the method used within Cloudlearn; lead facilitators managed to engender honesty and trust within their online communities.

Alongside the process outlined above has also been a series of focussed groups with learners to gain their views and opinions. This is the subject of another report. The main points raised in these learner groups will be fed into the lead facilitation group for discussion and consideration.

The conclusions of the discussion groups are due in the advice papers to be distributed for further consideration in September 2011.