Talking Heads:
Two Year
Research Reflections

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ULTRALAB – NCSL ONLINE FACILITATION TEAM

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Executive Summary

Ultralab has a long track record, reaching back into the 1980s, of building and evolving online learning communities. It is far from straightforward to do so successfully, but this document gives some clear guidance as to what is needed for success at the current stage of technological development.

The initial decision by the then Department for Education and Employment (DfEE) to commission and develop Talking Heads as a virtual online community of headteachers has been shown to be brave but absolutely right and the online role of the newly emerged National College of School Leadership, now our partners in this exciting work, is enormously significant in progressing school standards and in cementing a real sense of community and involvement amongst school leaders.

Developing Talking Heads has been a complex and iterative task. As an action research project it has clarified much during the journey, but perhaps nothing more so than the emerging certainties that the headteachers are an important source of collective wisdom and experience both for themselves and for policy makers, that online facilitation is a complex and fundamental full time task and that online professional development is not a diminution of the face to face experience but an expansion.

That busy headteachers professionals find time, in many cases considerable time, to invest their ideas, their professional development and their faith in an online community of their peers is encouraging; that so many do it with both passion and commitment sends out a signal that should not be ignored and across other professions, from Health to Culture. This works.

However, there are many scoundrels currently entering e-learning. They would suggest that simple online courses can "deliver" knowledge, can "manage" learning and that "content is king". Our certainty and our evidence is that this is not so, although proactive facilitation, careful preparation and the archiving of contributions to form content for future cohorts is a clear requirement. Talking Heads is an organic, complex, facilitated, dynamic, social, evolving community that is nevertheless progressing the professional development of headteachers effectively. However this in not a one way conduit of development. Throughout Talking Heads our hotseat guests and other experts have reported the considerable value of their participation as the flow of wisdom and experience back to themselves largely pays them for their time and their commitment.

A significant part of Talking Heads' success has stemmed from the complex granularity of discourse and conversation types offered by their online environment with brainstorms, hotseats, conversations, debates and more on offer to build a diverse and, at times, compelling experience. As new and mobile technologies become increasingly a part of professionals' lives it is clear that the evolution of these online tools is underinvested at the national level. Talking Heads confirms that the investment must be, and will continue to be, necessary.

No one involved in the genesis and iterative development of Talking Heads ever promised that the work would be simple, without wrong turns or easy. However, two years of hard work and research by a skilled team with considerable experience has confirmed that building Talking Heads was worthwhile and scaleable.

This document contains many valuable insights. It deserves a close reading by those seeking to harness and enjoy the new power of online communities.

Stephen Heppell

Key Findings

Overarching

- Online communities can be valuable, welcome and effective.

- Informal online communities reduce headteacher isolation successfully; but to make them successful is a complex task with many cycles of iteration. It is easy to underestimate this complexity.

- It is possible to generate a vibrant and relevant 'Online Community' that also enables headteachers to generate and exchange insights regarding their practice, considerably assisting in building capacity for school improvement.

- The online community environment has created increased and valued understanding between policy makers and practitioners, that has been mutually valuable. This has also been true of the understanding between researchers and practitioners.

- Talking Heads has made a major contribution to the use of ICT by Heads and their understanding of its contribution to learning and school management.

- The internal expertise of the community of headteachers is a valuable resource for progressing school improvement; an online community has been an effective way to exchange and archive that expertise.

Participation in Talking Heads

- Headteachers, and all participants, need to clearly understand the philosophy and value of online community as well as understanding the practical time implications for effective membership.

- To sustain new communities requires clear planning and design, as well as a purpose statement and commitment to participation by its members.

- Clear navigation and a simple structure is a key factor to ensure re-participation.

- The overriding factor behind building commitment and purposeful activity is the role and activities of the facilitator, who has professional educational knowledge and builds personable and purposeful relationships with headteachers. Facilitation is a complex, skilled, full time, professional task.

- Relevance and topicality of large community conversations are key.

- The development of online relationships between headteachers is key to building participative communities.

- By working with, and alongside headteachers, facilitators are able to define and evolve an environment which is seductive and delightful.

- Online community participation requires a willingness to embrace collaborative and transparent ways of working.

- Headteacher champions provide authentic peer facilitation within the Talking Heads communities. They respond very positively to time limited, specific tasks and opportunities for professional development.

- To accommodate the growth of numbers, facilitation needs to focus on individuals within communities (e.g. champions) rather than on blanket facilitation of all heads.

- Hotseats are an effective and popular tool to facilitate a variety of expert/ headteacher interactions. They need to be scheduled and promoted in advance with careful closure and summary.

- A significant amount of useful participation is not immediately apparent; members read without contributing, and communicate with each other via email and stickies. This does not diminish their sense of ownership of, or identity with, the communities.

Architecture and Structure of Talking Heads

- Careful structuring of questions and conversation starters is likely to increase participation.

- Identifying purpose, clarifying commitment and planning community development are central to resolving questions of architecture and structure.

- All headteachers require quick access to a spectrum of perspectives on key topical issues. The large cohort communities provide an excellent environment for this.

- The small communities provide an excellent support environment, especially when commitment to participation is embedded into the community's purpose and development.

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Section One: Talking Heads - An Online Community For Headteachers

1. Introduction

Talking Heads is an online community for headteachers established as a pilot project by the DfES in February 2000, developed into a working model and placed under the remit of the National College of School Leadership (NCSL) in August 2000. From its inception through to the current date, Talking Heads has been a research and development project based at ULTRALAB. The project has focused on developing an engaging and informal online learning community through active facilitation by educational professionals.

With the development of the NCSL in 2001, a more explicit remit for Talking Heads was developed that included the view that:

> *"Talking Heads is the private community area of NCSL Online. It facilitates discussion and networking, and provides opportunities to share common problems with other school leaders...The aim is to generate a virtual community of school leaders where community members actively engage in productive online activities at a time that is convenient to them. There are opportunities to participate in online conversations with leading UK and international professionals and DfES policy makers".*

<div align="right">(Contract for the Talking Heads Research Project)</div>

The original pilot project began with over 1300 members, and developed into a phased introduction to large-scale use from 2001 onwards. At the time of writing membership of Talking Heads is approaching 7000.

The role of ULTRALAB has been to pilot and trial a variety of strategies to create Talking Heads as a vibrant and useful online community for headteachers with the purpose of reducing isolation and enabling headteachers to share good practice.

In addition to this work in the online community of Talking Heads, ULTRALAB has been central to developing the online components of programmes such as the National Professional Qualification for Head Teachers (NPQH) in an environment called 'Virtual Heads'. There are, at the time of writing a further 6000 members of Virtual Heads, who are on a tutor led programme in preparation for Headship. Other programmes include the online element of the Leadership Programme for Serving Headteachers (LPSH) and smaller programmes such as New Visions and Leadership in ICT. Also, there have been further developments with an online community for Bursars.

Purpose and structure of the report

The purpose of this report is to document the research findings of the Talking Heads project team over the period 2000-2002. The account is in four sections. Firstly, there is a discussion of terms and concepts related to what an online community for headteachers might aim achieve. This discussion outlines the reasons why Talking Heads was established and how its success might be measured. Key definitions are discussed including what is meant by the term 'online community'. The section places the Talking Heads project within the wider educational project of raising standards, through developing leadership and 'school improvement'.

In section two, there is an account of the trials, experiments and pilot projects within Talking Heads focused upon the key question of how to encourage participation. The section looks at a number of strategies including, the role of the facilitator in the online community and the impact of training on participation.

In the third section, the account turns to questions of structure and architecture for a community of potentially 24,000 Headteachers. Building such a structure is not merely a technical problem of exploring ways in which the technology can handle mass use. Rather it is more a question of how to retain of intimacy, support and confidentiality inherent in the philosophy of community. The section is a historical account of how the architecture and the use of the think.com tools were developed by the team.

Section four provides an account of the impact of Talking Heads. Looking back at two and a half years of development, this account looks at what has been achieved.

1.1 Defining Talking Heads; Its Aims And Aspirations

Talking Heads is an informal online community of headteachers. The pilot project in the year 2000 was established specifically to reduce isolation amongst new headteachers, to promote the sharing of good practice, and to offer emotional and professional support. As intended, the project has had a significant impact on headteachers' ICT skills (see section 4.3). Since the pilot and the inception of NCSL, the aspiration of the project has increasingly moved towards developing headteachers' leadership skills. Online community is the vehicle used to achieve these aims and aspirations.

1.2 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.

Learning	For Work	At Work	Through Work
Behaviourism (Skinner)	Priming (Stimulus-Response)	Training	Guiding
Cognitivist (Gagné, Ausubel)	Engaging	Enriching	Problem Solving
Constructivism (Piaget, Vygotski, Bruner)	Reflecting	Enquiry	Immersing
Social Practice (Wenger)	Networking	Participation	Team Work

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

Clearly, from what has been said about the historical concern for measured outcomes, and planned professional development there are tensions here with the more open ended aspects of learning through networking, participation and working with teams. It is also clearly apparent that for networked learning the outcomes must be measured against the learning needs identified by each individual and, therefore, the skills of the cohort in identifying what they need to know and learn becomes an important variable. This has been shown by many authors to be the case including Harasim et al (1997), Palloff and Pratt (2001), Stephenson (2001).

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.

Online Distance Learning	Online Learning Programmes	Online Learning Communities
Web-Based Training	Supported Online Learning	Informal Learning
Instructor Centred	Learner Centred	Community Centred
Content Focus	Process Focus/Led	Practice Led/Focused
Individual	Small Group	Organisational
Minimal Interaction between participants	Tutor led Interaction	Participation of the whole group
No collaboration	Interaction with other learners	Participants are both learners and tutors

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

Tools for learning

The think.com technologies, co-designed by Oracle with ULTRALAB specifically aim to engender participative (Heppell, 1994) learning. The notion of mind tools has been described extensively in the literature

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 that Papert (1993a; Jonassen, 1994; Jonassen, Campbell, & Davidson, 1994) have spoken of, 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.

1.3   The Development of Online Communities

Networking and community

The idea of a community as a social network is not new. The work of Stenhouse in the 1970s, and the development of the Collaborative Action Research Network, based at CARE, and the Teacher Centre movement in the 1980's (Goddard cited in Goddard and Leask 1992) are two such network based developments.

'At its most abstract a network is simply a set of nodes or points connected by lines or links...In social networks the nodes are persons, groups or organisations. The things that travel between nodes are socially relevant. They are usually objects, labour affect, evaluations, knowledge, prescriptions, opinion, influence and power. So a network is a connected set of social actors exchanging socially relevant material" (Miles 1978 cited by Goddard and Leask 1992:78).

In passing, it is worth noting that Beresford and Goddard (cited by Goddard and Leask 1992:132) identified six major characteristics of networking as long ago as 1981.

- The task of a network reflects a perception of need identified by its members.
- The membership of a network often reflects a similarity of role of function.
- Networks are by definition, not in control of organisations.
- Networks link and use a variety of human and physical resources.
- They extend the professionalism of their members.
- Relationships within a network tend to reflect the quality and the contributions made by an individual rather than their formal status.

Online Learning and Professional Development.

Yet a further aspect of community, in an online context is 'learning'. 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 intelligences. This is a learning community."

Another view might be that learning enhances vision building. *"One of the means by which vision is acquired and shared is through the conscious application of networking both outside and within the school."* (Goddard and Leask 1992:78).

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

The 'training' model of professional development has largely dominated CPD for teachers over the past 10 years following the concern for raising standards and value for money. Joyce and Showers (1988) demonstrated that training programmes that involved exposition, demonstration, observation and coaching were by far the superior model in terms of the adoption of practice. The work of AST's, Beacon School's, and Literacy and Numeracy trainers is evidence of this emphasis on 'delivery'.

A second strand has been a focus upon school based and school focused development through whole school collaborative learning and development. Hopkins reviewed Staff development in 1988 and concluded as much, quoting Fullan, Bolam and Joyce and Showers. (Hopkins 1988).

Towards a definition of Online community

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. However, there is a political sense as in the term 'commune' or in the notion of 'collective'. 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 4.2).

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).

Numerous writers have specifically focused on defining the concept of community. Lazlo, A, and Lazlo, K (1997) describe community as "a group of two or more individuals with a shared identity and a common purpose committed to the joint creation of meaning." Peck (1987) states that "If we are going to use the word (community) meaningfully we must restrict it to a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to rejoice together, mourn together," and to "delight in each other, make others' conditions our own."

Rheingold (1984) suggests that the more society fragments, the more people have the need to seek kindred minds with whom to extend their understanding and share their experiences. Simultaneously the new web technologies are providing unprecedented opportunities for communication, yet this must be built on an uncommon foundation of flexibility and responsiveness (Davis, S.M., Meyer, C., 1998).

How this flexibility might be mobilised is described in the growing body of literature on systems theory and learning organisations (Marcquardt, 1996; Senge, 1994; Senge et al, 1994). Integrated into this literature is the understanding that 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.

Preece (2000) stresses the importance of designing online community software to support sociability, and Lazlo, A, and Lazlo, K (1997) emphasise the evolutionary nature of online communities.

We also accept that for genuine online community to evolve headteachers must be supported to develop a sense of ownership of the environment.

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).

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. The result is that different communities within Talking Heads have different purposes in terms of online learning community of practitioners. Put simply, a community of 10 might not be viable for online discussions of national policy with policy makers. 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. More of these issues are discussed in section 3 on Structure and Architecture.

Communities of Practice
These influence opinion through collective wisdom, extension of knowledge of members and sharing of experience of individual communities across the wider membership. These exist to facilitate groups of headteachers who have identified a particular subject they wish to discuss or work on with a degree of privacy. A typically small membership is committed to working in a well-defined area or on a definite problem and sharing of resources, practice and concerns e.g. Pupil Behaviour Management community.

National Discussion
Members 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 a s the Numeracy Strategy. Both experts and members value the resultant two-way flow of information. E.g. DfES in Dialogue community,

Affinity communities
A community whose members share a common educational context. For example a phase or project. E.g. Primary Schools community, Small schools community, Excellence in Cities community.

Home Community
A small community that allows members to explore the facilities of think.com through a facilitated environment. Allows members to "dip a toe" into online expression without fear of becoming too exposed by any errors made and make new online contacts.

Topic Community
A community whose members are addressing overarching and generic topics such as school development needs, items on the national educational agenda or a perceived crisis point in the life of a school or group of schools.
E.g. Managing Staff Performance and Development, OfSTED, ICT in the Curriculum.

Cohort
A combination of large topic and affinity communities. E.g. Cohort One Community

Local Working Groups
Local working groups tend to be small communities that originate from regional groups, however they have an agreed purpose and commitment for their participation.

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

Previous online community research findings

ULTRALAB's pioneering work in online learning communities carried out in the late 80's and 90's, 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 other's 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.

- Computer hardware and software familiarisation needs to ensure successful online connection and computer use. This informed the Talking Heads tutorial guide and helpline support.
- Active and productive participation in the process of learning through online communication heralds a progression from the initial generally more impersonal messages. Collaboration and fluency increase as online communication skills develop and informal and anecdotal narrative begins to flourish. Therefore, the Talking Heads facilitators modeled desired

practice such as disclosure, openness, brevity, and questioning.

- Effective use and appropriation of the technology becomes evident as participants begin to delight in initiating various collaborative experiments. Empowering headteachers to use the technology for their own purposes became a central tenet for Talking Heads.

- Rights, responsibilities and community closure, should be pinpointed overtly from the outset so that participants are clear about what they can realistically expect. This led to the provision of a Code for Practice for participants within Talking Heads.

- Discussions develop in "slow motion". This supports deeper reflection, but delay frequently causes a loss of momentum. In Talking Heads, newsletters, emails and stickies are used to inform members regarding new developments.

- Posting messages is a public act. This provides an audience and hones skills in communication. Some people however, feel vulnerable to an unseen and potentially critical audience. This led to the establishment of home communities during the Talking Heads pilot, as well as audience statements and active encouragement to contribute.

- Passivity and isolation are still deeply ingrained in an environment where active participation provides most rewards. Many people read but don't contribute in Talking Heads, despite continuing emphasis on reciprocity.

- Discussion can become tangled and fragmented and central themes easily become lost. This was one of the elements, which led to the design of think.com with Oracle.

- Online conferencing and chat are currently still primarily text based. This allows communication to flourish amongst verbally oriented people and the implementation of audio and visual technologies is still in its infancy. This led to early experimentation with video and text in Talking Heads.

In a major review of the field, Cuttance (forthcoming) confirmed our understanding of a number of factors that contribute to the development of online communities.

- Time independence - the asynchronous nature of many forms of computer mediated communication allows participants to enter the discussions whenever convenient, rather than scheduling availability as with more traditional forms of professional development (Hawkes, 2000; Dillon, 2000). The downside of time independence is that participants need to be highly motivated to make the time to engage in the virtual network.

- Interactivity - Harasim (1993) points out "posting a comment or question in the network invites response and feedback, often generating consultation and multiple perspectives on a topic" (Harasim 1993). This contrasts with the passivity of broadcast technologies.

- Place independence - computer mediated communication eliminates the need for a physical meeting place and the time and costs associated with travel. It does not rely on physical proximity, and allows for the inclusion of people who would otherwise not be accessible - experts, resource people (Harasim, 1995; Hawkes, 2000; Dillon, 2000)

- Storage and retrievability - threads of discussion may be revisited reviewed (Hawkes, 2000; Bodzin & Park 2000). However, this makes it more difficult to retract or refine a position (Hammond, 1998).

- Text orientation - language is generally more precise, better structured, and received with greater attention than with verbal messages. (Harasim, 1990, Hawkes 2000,). Yet the lack of non-verbal communication can lead to misinterpretation of the intended tone of the text (Hammond, 1998).

It is difficult to find in the literature however, 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.

1.4 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)

Berge (1996) classifies the facilitator's role (see section 2.2 for ULTRALAB's development of this model). The importance of the facilitator in Talking Heads is a continual thread that runs throughout this report.

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. It was they who provided the finance. 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)

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. The model is discussed in detail below.

Stage 1 - Access, training and induction
This continuum progresses through Computer and ICT connection, to Software orientation, to successful Navigation. This stage is primarily concerned with induction and orientation, but difficulties connecting online to a school network can still not be underestimated for headteachers.

Facilitation: A 'Quick Start Up Guide' is sent to new members to support initial logging in and navigation. The NCSL helpdesk provides technical support. Following consultation with headteachers navigation has been re-designed for ease of access. Facilitators design induction activities and welcome new members via stickies and emails.

Stage 2 - Participation
Members benefit from reading, initiating questions and become comfortable with responding as they realise that they can receive and contribute answers to questions. Some members remain invisible, reading to acquire relevant information.

Facilitation: Relevant topics are posted on behalf of headteachers or by headteachers after training. Headteachers are directed to related topics and encouraged to respond. Hotseats, online events and calendaring ensure a rhythm for participation. Monthly email newsletters inform members of forthcoming events, current issues and innovations. Three cohort communities provide a rich variety of topics, with indexes for quick access to the growing knowledge base.

Stage 3 - Communication and community
Sociability leads to openness through identification and engagement. As members develop a routine of participation, they begin to look out for specific members' contributions and/or to monitor developments within a particular community or conversations. There is increasing sociability and openness, and for many, a re-invigorated sense of professional identity. Members increasingly use the word "we".

Facilitation: Members specific needs are identified and headteachers are introduced to the various small communities. The facilitators support sociability through modelling where appropriate. Headteachers are encouraged and supported to use the software tools and to influence the design of the community.
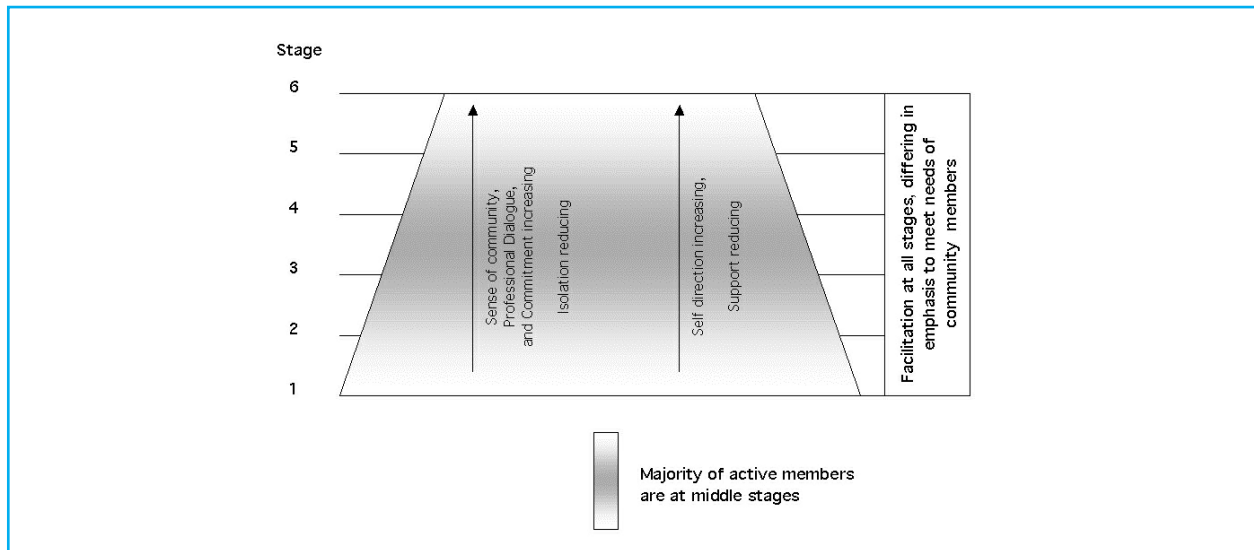
Stage 4 - Ownership
Collaboration leads to exploration of the technology (playing with the tools) which can lead to them appropriating them, or applying them, in their own context. Members begin to understand the philosophy ("hey this does work"), and experience generating new ideas through dialogue-like moments (asynchronous conversations rarely generate sufficient flow for sustained dialogue). Opportunities are seized to work collaboratively to develop new policies or strategies.

Facilitation: The facilitators assist headteachers to implement their ideas for example, to establish a page focused on curriculum redevelopment. Members are encouraged to 'bend' the software tools to meet specific needs. Champions are identified and trained to support specific communities or events.

Stage 5 - Sustainability
As members initiate new communities and take responsibility for stewarding them, they may become self-sustaining. As members realise the opportunities to support their work practices and existing groups, increasing numbers request new communities for their established networks.

Facilitation: Facilitators act as online community consultants and assist in the design of the new online communities for established groups and provide initial but decreasing support (see section 2.6). Champions or the groups' paid co-ordinator are trained as online facilitators (see section 2.5).

Stage 6 - Expansion
As models of success become apparent, it becomes easier to replicate these, thereby providing a sustainable model for massification. Increasing requests for new communities by existing networks of headteachers suggests that participant-led communities provide inspiring models for others.

Facilitation: At this stage, facilitation is provided from the group's resources. Co-ordination aims to ensure that the lessons learnt

fuel continual improvement. This is seen as the model for robust massification where headteachers have ownership and individualisation is preserved. This stage initially takes considerable time and support to materialise, as members are busy and the vision is not immediately seen. Once evidence becomes clearly visible however, proliferation is expected to escalate.

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 'Lexden headteachers' 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-familiarize 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 disappear when there is insufficient response from their peers..

1.5 Setting Talking Heads In A Context Of Headteacher Development

Professional development opportunities for teachers have only a relatively recent history. Tomlinson (2001) reports that until the mid-seventies few teachers did any formal study beyond their initial training. Tomlinson and Brundrett regard the watershed as the publication of the James Report, Teacher Education and Training (DES 1972), which brought 'an enormous expansion of INSET (In-service Education and Training)' (Tomlinson 2001).

The 1980's were marked by a number of initiatives and financial arrangements that sought to strengthen, manage and focus INSET activities. These initiatives included Local Education Authority Training Grants (LEATGs), Education Support Grant (ESG) and Grant for Education Support and Training (GEST) funding regimes, and the establishment of the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) in 1994. A major feature of this bodies work was the establishment of national standards for headteachers, as well as newly qualified teachers, expert teachers, subject leaders and special educational needs co-ordinators (SENCOs).

These initiatives in funding were carried out alongside the development of specific headship programmes. The first was Headlamp, which began in 1994. The School management Task force recommendations were implemented and based the

programme on headteachers analysing their needs, setting targets, considering and planning appropriate forms of learning, and evaluating the outcomes.

The LPSH programme, which started in 1998, has provided a slightly more structured experience. An assessment tool provides '360' degree individualised feedback for headteachers and a support programme based upon models of organisational and leadership effectiveness and further diagnostic tools leads to the establishment of targets for development. These are reviewed at a training day a year after the initial four-day experience. An additional component has been some activity in the use of ICT for leadership. However, a review in 2001 suggested that this has neither been a strong or a particularly successful component. (Collarbone 2001)

The NPQH programme, developed from 1997, delivers a programme based upon the core purpose, key tasks, professional knowledge and understanding and skills and attributes of five key areas of headship.

The 30 year period in question has been notable in a concern for systematically planned targeted and evaluated professional development activities, not least to show 'value for money'. A TTA/ MORI survey of 1995 suggested that CPD was often ad hoc, and not linked to school development plans, appraisal or personal development planning. Kinder, Harland and Wootten report for the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) found similar patterns. Brown Edmonds and Lee (2001) in another NFER report called for LEA and school level strategies of planning, co-ordination and evaluation. However, another theme has been increasing central control and determination of training programmes. A central focus of these developments has been leadership and management of schools.

The James report (DES 1972) called for headteacher preparation, and advocated a form of apprenticeship under experienced headteachers. In 1990 a School Management Task Force was established to look into training for headteachers and senior staff. Brundrett reports on the offshoot development, 'School Management South' that emphasised school based training on a series of 'competences' based upon an NVQ model of strategic leadership for education. This led directly, according to Tomlinson (2001), to the TTA standards. Leadership and management are the major focus and the first of eight priorities of the TTA.

This movement has not been without its critics. Tomlinson suggests that the standards reflect a ' rational and bureaucratic view of the headteachers role rather than an inspirational artist or moral leader' and expresses concerns for lack of attention on 'the spiritual, aesthetic and ethical dimensions of the role' (Tomlinson 2001).

Gunter, Smith and Tomlinson (1999 cited by Tomlinson 2001) challenge the presentation of the notion of leadership as consensus as opposed to leadership as a professional relationship in which dilemmas and contradictions are revealed. They oppose the dominance of 'effectiveness' norms rather than building upon the day to day experiences of headteachers and see an emphasis on a deficit model. The authors argue for a model of headship that recognises the social and political contexts of headship, rather than an overemphasis on rational management techniques to overcome those contexts.

The establishment of the NCSL in 2000 marks a further potential shift in headteacher leadership training and support. The NCSL Think Tank report emphasises a new direction, one that focuses upon the moral leadership and values driven aspect of leadership. Active powerful learning is encouraged and focused upon, emphasising the school as a learning community. Significantly the Think Tank calls for distributed leadership rather than a hierarchical one. Following a tradition of 'school improvement' (after Hopkins et al 1994, 1997 and 1999 and Fullan 1981, 1991) the Think Tank emphasises 'capacity building' and learning how to change to meet the demand of a rapidly changing world. Lifelong learning, discourse and capacity building are central to this view.

So, within this context Talking Heads was established as a pilot project in 2000 and extended to all headteachers in 2001. The focus of which is upon a community of headteachers using new technology to build discussion between headteachers and with policy makers

1.6   School Improvement, School Effectiveness and School Leadership

The headteacher development discourse has been part of, and run parallel to, a developing discourse on school improvement. This discourse has had three distinct strands. First, there were the early school effectiveness models that challenged the widespread dictum based upon Bernstein (1976) that 'schools cannot compensate for society'. Mortimore (1981), Rutter and others established that in fact 'Schools Matter' and that some schools did better than others in terms of the achievements of their students. A key ingredient of effective schools was seen to be the leadership of the headteacher (Mortimore et al 1988).

The work of Fullan (1981), Dalin (2000) and Hopkins (1994) followed a rather different model based upon the notion of continuous school improvement to raise the achievement of all pupils (Hopkins 1994). The focus of this movement has been to build the capacity of schools to take on change.

A third phase is just emerging, in which the capacity building of networks of schools, in collaboration with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and other agencies is just emerging. In this the interconnections of agencies and society are more fully recognised.

The core concepts of this school improvement movement are based upon creating the conditions for improvement. In any enquiry, evidence, involvement of stakeholders, staff

development and distributed leadership are central.

There are strong connections between the NCSL view of leadership for school improvement and the Talking Heads project. For example, the strength of Talking Heads lies in its ability to facilitate 'professional collaboration and exchange' (NCSL Think Tank Report 14) and to focus upon the centrality of 'leadership that demonstrates beliefs and values', for these are the mainstay of the online dialogue seen in Talking Heads and quoted throughout this document.

According to NCSL, "School leadership must promote an active view of leadership" (NCSL Think Tank 2001). They argue that:

"Basing school leadership development on experiential and innovative methodologies implies:
 • An increasing emphasis on an applied knowledge base, on problem framing and solving, with on the job or field based focus, often involving team learning, and a responsiveness to need and stage of development.

• The most valued expertise about school leadership will increasingly reside in the leaders of the profession itself, so by promoting shared learning and innovation and creativity." (NCSL Think Tank Report 2000:14)

In these two aspects Talking Heads has been a major force by encouraging shared problem solving strategies, learning and fostering creativity in school leaders.

In the NCSL Leadership development Framework (page 3) it is argued that, "the teaching profession should be encouraged to take responsibility for its own development." Talking Heads fits within this expectation. The aspirations of the Talking Heads project are broadly in line with the notion of improvement and the National College's approach to improvement, leadership and learning.

1.7 The Research Methodology, Methods And Evidence Base

This report is the result of the collaborative research of the team of 24 facilitators who supported the development of Talking Heads. The research and development was planned through a 'development plan' that identified a number of projects, initiatives, trials and pilots to be conducted within Talking Heads.

A collaborative electronic online research community was established, which employed many research journal techniques for collaboratively collecting, analysis and discussing the data listed below.
• Archives of online conversations
• Individual facilitator's records of e-mails, phone calls, stickies
• Data from team initiated surveys
• Transcripts of headteacher focus groups and facilitators' discussions
• Facilitators feedback from face to face events
• Documentation recording decisions made or discussed with key stake holders
• Analysis of the acceptance of community invitations within think.com by facilitators
• A numeric and discourse analysis of three large and four small communities discussions
• An analysis of question formats and responses
• Web archives of the development of the communities
• Manual collation of hits and contributions data
• Online feedback forms embedded in each community front page
• Oracle statistics March-June 2002
• Telephone interviews with headteachers
• Verbal accounts by facilitators
• A transcript of a facilitator discussion May 2002

Data was also collected through three major surveys:
• 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)

Further evidence was obtained from:
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)

The results from the initiatives were reported back to the whole facilitation team at face-to-face conferences, providing an opportunity to discuss and further analyse findings. The engaging and challenging debate enabled one form of verification. This final report then is a summation of the main features of those initiatives, collated by co-ordinators and finally edited by the central management team of the project. This final version has been verified by an external research consultant, Dr Mark Brundrett of Leicester University who has acted as critical friend to the process.

In a specific initiative some 17 participants of the pilot, who completed all three questionnaires in 2000 and 2001 were

selected for a longitudinal study. Their responses were documented and supplemented by records of their participation and semi structured telephone interviews. These were written up by facilitators as case records and developed into a summary longitudinal case study. The notion of a case record collection was first outlined by Stenhouse (xxxx) and Ruddock (xxxx).

We have outlined the essential research and development problem of building a new online environment with progressively more members over a period of two and a half years, while researching how this could be done.

Bassey (Research Intelligence 35) uses Stenhouse's definition that: -

"Research entails systematic, critical and self-critical enquiry, which aims to contribute to the advancement of knowledge." (Stenhouse cited by Bassey RI35 Summer XX:35)

In this research this has been achieved through the systematic collection and analysis of data focused upon a variety of trials, pilots and experiments in building a successful participative community of 'Talking Heads'.

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 participants headteachers. We accept and handle the multiple perspectives, the complexities and "embrace the paradoxes" (Simons in Bassey 1998)

Philosophically ULTRALAB are advocates for headteachers. As Green (2000) states:
".... advocacy as the promotion of some interests over others is unavoidable in contemporary social program evaluations. There are just too many stakeholders with too many varied interests for any single evaluation to address all their concerns fairly and justly." (Greene in Denzin and Lincoln 2000:991)

This research is not an evaluation of the idea of online learning communities or even simply Talking Heads but of how we might make that idea work in practice and what impact it might have, if we were to sustain the development over sufficient time. This is in line with a research and development project of this kind whose main feature is the advancement of our knowledge about how a major development like Talking Heads might work.

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).

Punch (1998) lists the characteristics of 'qualitative research' as working with 'case studies' and within 'bounded systems'. Multiple sources of data collection are used. This form of research, for Punch, leads to generalisation being made through conceptualisation and by developing propositions.

Denzin and Lincoln describe interpretative research as, capturing the individual's point of view, examining the constraints of everyday life, and securing rich descriptions. They argue that, "The qualitative researcher may take on many and gendered images" and use the terms "bricoleur" and "quiltmaker" to describe the naturalistic researcher (Denzin and Lincoln 2001):

"The qualitative researcher, according to Punch (1998) uses the terms "discover", "seek to understand", "explore a process" and "describe the experiences". The qualitative researcher, prefers and works in a context where unfolding and loosely designed research is carried out, which deals with data which is revealed."

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.

In the pursuit of Bassey's, genuine enquiry one would expect that the research findings would be correct, sound, cogent, conclusive, reasoned, logical, relevant, pertinent, and consistent.

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

Other judgements might be used concerning validity, that is, does the story look as though it reports what it purports to be reporting (after McCormick and James, date?). Hence the research has a form of validity testing through sharing findings with key informants and stakeholders.

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.

The imperative is for the research to have practical application,

and that has been the case since day one of the project. Patton says, 'I use the term evaluation quite broadly to include any effort to increase human effectiveness through systematic data based enquiry (Patton 1990:11) and later refers to Argyris et al 1985 work in determining that "Evaluation is applied research", or type of "action science". According to Patton,

"The practice of evaluation involves the systematic collection of information about the activities, characteristics and outcomes of programs, personnel and products for use by specific people to reduce uncertainties, improve effectiveness, and make decisions with regard to what those programs, personnel or products are doing and affecting." (Patton 1982:15)

However, Greene makes reference to the political nature and the emphasis on values in evaluative research.

"Social programme evaluation is a field of applied social inquiry distinguished by its explicit value dimension of its knowledge claims, by the overt political character of its contexts, and by the inevitable pluralism and polyvocality of its actor." (In Denzin and Lincoln 2000:981)

Alkin, (In Murphy and Torrance 1987) discusses 'Evaluation as Research' and outlines some key characteristics that underpin utility of evaluative research, including attention to appropriate goals, technical credibility, report comprehensibility, report timeliness, the scope of recommendations, and effective evaluator-subject relationships.

Robson (1993) argues for utility, feasibility, propriety and technical adequacy. The tensions in evaluation between technical quality and utility are clearly stated for this research method and the emphasis upon utility and action is arguably stronger for practical research such as this.

Lincoln and Guba (1985 cited by Greene in Denzin and Lincoln 2000:991) suggest that for naturalistic evaluation, the criteria of credibility, applicability, dependability, and confirmability, should replace the criteria for traditional evaluation of internal validity, external validity, reliability and neutrality.

Robson, following House (1993) lists eleven types of evaluation. In retaining the qualitative methodology and inductive analysis and naturalistic enquiry this research best fits the notion of 'Illuminative evaluation', first proposed by Parlett and Hamilton cited in Murphy and Torrance 1987. The key aspects of this approach involve working in the complexity of the 'learning milieu', 'observing, enquiring, and seeking to explain', the ways that an online community of headteachers might be developed.

'Talking Heads' is a research and development project carried out between 2000 and August 2002. This report is an account therefore of the findings of the research team in the numerous initiatives that they have taken in developing strategies for developing an online community for headteachers.

Section Two: Participation - Winning Headteachers' Hearts and Minds.

2. Introduction

There is a wealth of rich experience to be found in Talking Heads, and the conversations 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 hotseat. At other times current government initiatives or other topics of key relevance steal the limelight and members express appreciation for being able to keep an overview of what is happening in other parts of the country. It is clear however, that sustaining participation requires pro-active facilitation, as many demands compete for the headteachers time and the collaborative, reciprocal, and transparent nature of online communities is still a new philosophy for many. To win the hearts and minds of headteachers requires that access is easy, navigation simple, relevance high, topicality ensured, a rhythm for events and use is established, and that an informal and sociable tone lightens the professional focus.

Section 1 of this work has placed the Talking Heads initiative within the context of facilitated online community, the professional development framework and the context of support of headteachers in their leadership of schools. The idea of 'networking' is not new, but fits within a tradition of school improvement and professional development.

The following section presents the analysis of the participation data collected during the Talking Heads project.

2.1.1 Qualitative Analysis Of Participation In Talking Heads: Case Studies

ULTRALAB facilitators receive regular communications from headteachers involved in Talking Heads. Many of these communications, emails, stickies, feedback forms and community discussions, provide facilitators with information regarding participation and general use of the Talking Heads communities. Without this invaluable feedback the project would have little information on patterns of use and the value of different activities. This rich source of data, coming as it does in the headteachers' own words, gives us indications as to how headteachers use the communities and the difficulty of getting them to participate openly in community discussions. Members value this 'hidden' and one-to one communication.

" 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!"

"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."

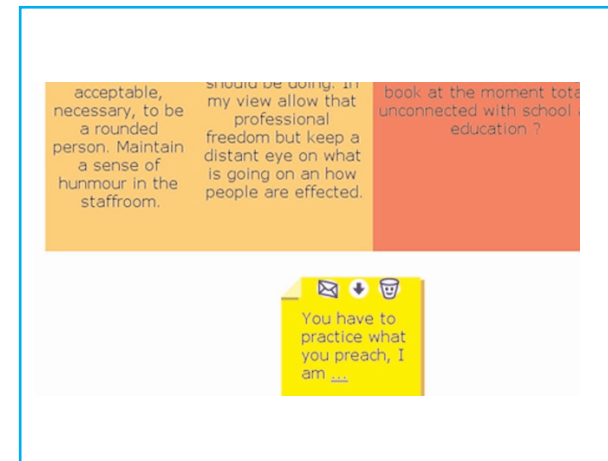Email feedback to ULTRALAB facilitators (April 2002)

Image 2.1 feedback to facilitator on a sticky

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 1.4.

Feedback to facilitators also indicates that a large number of headteachers use the communities to gain information and read in detail many of the discussions.

"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)

Although unquantifiable, this feedback is valuable for participants and, as the quotes above demonstrate, impacts on their practice.

A series of case studies (appendix 2.1.1) were carried out with headteachers who had been members since the pilot stage. Amongst this group, the most frequent participation was as a reader, browsing through communities that the headteachers'

had an interest in. One visited Special Educational Needs (SEN), Multi-cultural and OfSTED communities. Another SEN, Small Schools, and Faith communities. 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 area to visit for most headteachers. In particular, hotseats were seen as useful areas to visit.

In the pilot project, there was the opportunity to contribute in synchronous chats. Several of the case study records referred to participation in this form of activity and its usefulness in developing a sense of community.

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. There was a small group in the case studies who were still 'active' users and would contribute regularly to discussions.
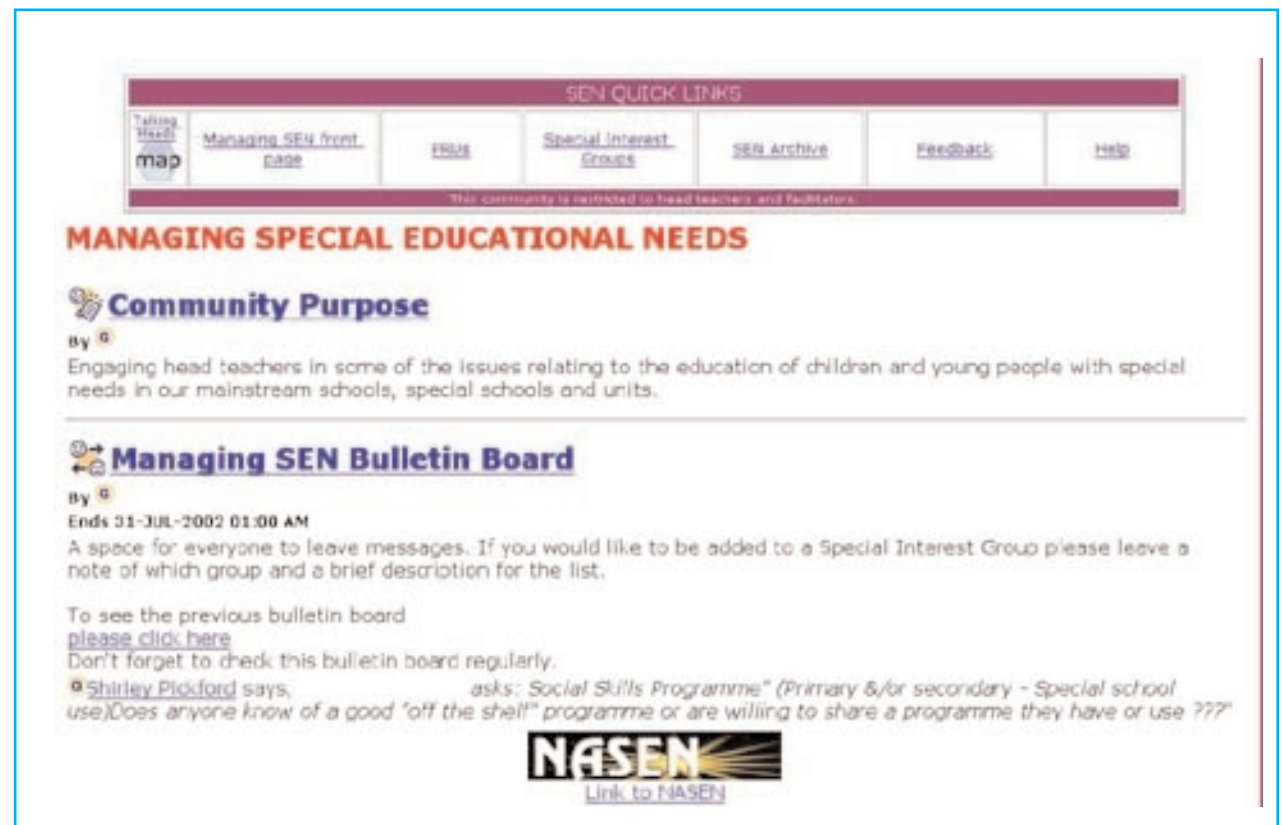

Image 2.2 SEN community

A common theme in the case records was that participation amongst this longest serving group of headteachers had changed, although all still logged in. Most reported that they logged on 2-3 times per week in the early period. Examples of individual's patterns of participation included from once a fortnight or a couple of times per month, and in one case one-hour long session each month. An online time period of between 10 and 30 minutes was suggested as a frequent pattern of use.

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. This was reinforced in a discussion with one head, who 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)

2.1.2 Quantitative Analysis Of Participation In Talking Heads
During the lifetime of the Project, the team have been collecting data on Talking Heads with a view to:
* Highlighting the current position so that decisions are taken on sound information
* Illustrating a useful way for the collection and analysis of project statistics
* Measuring the relationships between times, participation and contributions
* Illuminating best times for Talking Heads events to take place
* Supplementing qualitative data through an analysis of statistical data

Data collection of this kind is determined by the design of the software. Hits (the number of times a page is accessed) were available in version 1 of think. This facility became available again in March 2002. Hits derived from this software relate to the number of visits to a page each session. We do, however, view this data with suspicion. Hits may, or may not, correspond to members reading a page, as users may pass through pages and not reading any of the content. Hit numbers also contain facilitators' activity while they are working online. Hits then are a very blunt instrument with which to measure participation and do not inform us about impact.
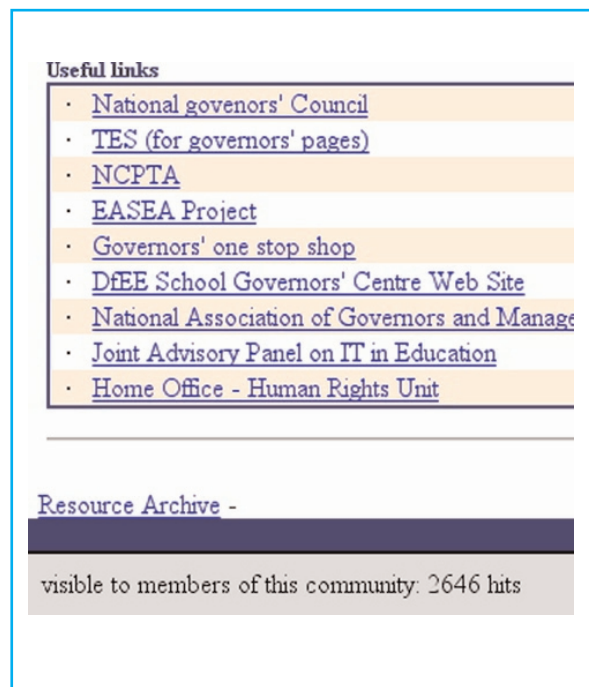
Image 2.3 hits counter

Statistical analysis
With the above proviso in mind a summary of Talking Heads statistics follows.

Visits
The total of visits to Talking Heads for each month was as follows:

March	April	May	June
65,544	62,756	50,019	35,416

Table 2.1: total visits per month 2002

It must be noted that visits don't specify the actual number of people logging in as one person might log on a number of times in a day. The statistics are influenced by the fact that the new headteachers were being trained in the New Heads Welcome community in April and Welsh headteachers in the Pen I Ben community in March. The statistics show the usual drop in activity explained the end of the school year. An additional factor was a Thinking Skills conference community held within the NCSL community drew a large amount of participation in June, and headteachers' limited time was spent in this community.

Figure 2.1 shows the number of hits (or page views) in the main communities in Talking Heads.

5 Most Hit Communities. Number of Hits Charted Over 4 Months

	March	April	May	June	Total
New Heads Welcome	5571	18696	9180	5895	39342
Com of Talking Heads	9208	10372	8385	5310	33275
Cohort 1 (The Core)	13085	6642	6972	3587	30286
PEN-I-BEN	10697	4170	6187	4358	25412
Cohort 2 (Indigo)	6323	5837	3533	2797	18490
mean	8976.8	9143.4	6851.4	4389.4	

Month (2002)

The peak in the New Heads Welcome community coincides with the peak in training. The high number of hits on the Community of Talking Heads probably reflects the fact that it provides a map to facilitate navigation.

Of interest here is the range of hits. Small Schools where the hits are against the general downward trend is discussed later. Worthy of note is that the Lexden community only has 6 members, but these members have taken ownership of their community and are using it in their daily practice.

Figure 2.1: The five most "hit" communities in Talking Heads

Figure 2.2 shows contributions to the community. The trustworthiness of these statistics has not been confirmed. Doubt was cast on their accuracy when it was noted that one very quiet community had an invalid amount of contribution attributed to it. It was eliminated from the data.

7 Next Most Hit Communities. Number of Hits Charted Over 4 Months

	march	april	may	june
Managing S.E.N	1820	938	1456	745
Small Schools	580	815	1430	2126
P.B.M	606	1749	1436	746
Lexden-Colchester	660	1349	1726	642
Faith - SUMMER ..	1123	748	1092	652
Go-a-Heads (LPSH)	1669	551	602	680
Nursery and Early Years	350	484	700	1056
mean	972.57	947.71	1206.00	949.57

Month 2002
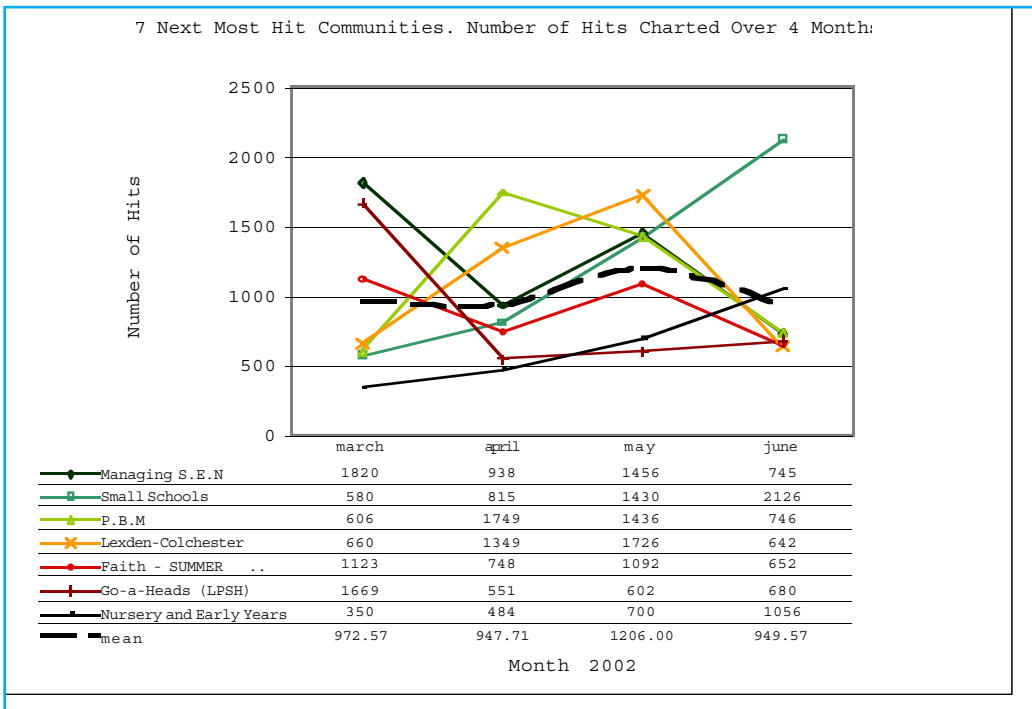
Figure 2.2: Small community "hits" over four months

5 Most Contributed to Communities. Number of Contributions Charted Over 4 Months

	March	April	May	June
New Heads Welcome	535	809	302	112
PEN-I-BEN	873	156	341	180
Cohort 1 (The Core)	173	134	91	68
Lexden-Colchester	42	106	128	81
Cohort 2 (Indigo)	33	89	37	46
mean	331.2	258.8	179.8	97.4

Month (2002)

10 Next Most Contributed to Com's. Number of Contributions in 4 Months

	March	April	May	June	total
Com Talking Heads	49	31	43	19	142
P.B.M.	9	43	30	13	95
Small Schools	8	13	9	29	59
Y Cynulliad yn Trafod	0	2	53	3	58
Go-a-Heads (LPSH)	39	2	4	8	53
Networked Learning Communities and Practitioner Action Enquiry	4	0	40	4	48
Managing S.E.N.	12	7	14	10	43
BEC-Billericay	26	3	9	4	42
Colne Valley	3	15	18	6	42
Nursery and Early Years	3	3	14	12	32
mean	15.3	11.9	23.4	10.8	

As mentioned before, the training of new headteachers and Welsh headteachers caused the two high peaks in figure 2.3, as all members attending the training were required to contribute. The Cohort one and two communities show a truer reflection of activity within the Cohort communities. To sustain active participation within these communities pro-active facilitation is required.

The Community of Talking Heads primarily serves as a (fig. 2.4) navigation centre, and also provides a monthly hotseat.

Time of log in

	7-9am	9am-3pm	3-5pm	After 5pm	Weekends
2001	3%	29%	14%	56%	Not known
2002	10%	52%	15%	15%	19%

Table 2.2: Comparison of login time between 2001 and 2002

There appears to be a change in the pattern of log in time for members using Talking Heads. A survey held early in 2001 found that 43% of headteachers were logging in between 9am and 5pm, while 54% of members were accessing Talking Heads after 5pm. Oracle figures for May 2002 indicate that 67% of log ins occurred between 9am and 5pm. This may suggest that Talking Heads is becoming more widely accepted as a professional workplace tool.

Regular participants

As Oracle statistics for individuals' logging in is not available, an opportunity to determine this arose in February 2002 when Oracle changed the members' status to Guest (G) from Teacher (T). All new accounts were created with this prefix from January, but from February 11th all established members changed status

from T to G only after they logged in. For this reason, all G's were counted in the membership list of the first cohort community (n 3710 Headteachers), as there were no new accounts in this group and it contains members from the pilot.

Date	25th February	14th May	1st July
Number			
of members	438	832	939
Percentage	12%	22%	25%

Table 2.3: Numbers of members who logged into Cohort one since February 11th.

It is not possible to establish how regularly members logged in from these figures as the data only captures the initial login.

Patterns of use

The only available quantitative data on patterns of use comes from the online questionnaires, which primarily sampled active users.

How often do you login?	Dec 2001 (r 166)	Sept 2000 (r=125)
Never	7%	2%
One to three times per month	38%	10%
One to three times per week	38%	41%
More than three times per week	17%	47%

Table 2.4: Frequency of login comparison 2000-2001

This shows a drift from usage three times a week, to monthly usage, an issue discussed at more length in section 2.1.3 on establishing expectations for participation.

Data on contributions can be identified manually although, again, classification of the quality of the contribution is more important than the number. A number of interesting points may be revealed about the patterns of participation.

Comparison of hits 2000 to 2002

To gain a very rough comparison between the successful 2000 pilot to the current day, statistics were compared with those from the 2000 Talking Heads report for the DfES. The statistics collected were for April - July 2000 and March - June 2002. The 2000 figures were multiplied by 2.8 to allow for increased membership. The Cohort 1 2002 hits are 1496 higher than the 2000 figure. The April-July 2000 figures were 10282 hits. When factored by 2.8 this totals 28790. The Cohort 1 March – June 2002 figures were 30,286. The 2002 hit count is higher despite the fact that the DfES hotseats have grown in popularity and are attracting good participation, and that the Thinking Skills conference in the NCSL community attracted a record number of hits in June 2002.

Although the hit counter is recognised by all team members to be a crude measure of participation, it gives some comparative data regarding the relevance and popularity of topics and an indication of the presence of readers.

General Levels of Hit Activity

There are some statistics available over the period between the pilot and the current year. Figure 2..5 shows statitistics from a hit count of The Community of Talking Heads kept from November 2000 to July 2001. There is clearly a steady increase in activity.

When viewed in percentage terms with the November figure as a base measure a healthy growth rate is demonstrated.

While DfES in Dialogue and NCSL in Dialogue both have additional membership primarily through NPQH tutors and candidates, the growth of the Community of Talking Heads is not influenced by NPQH membership.
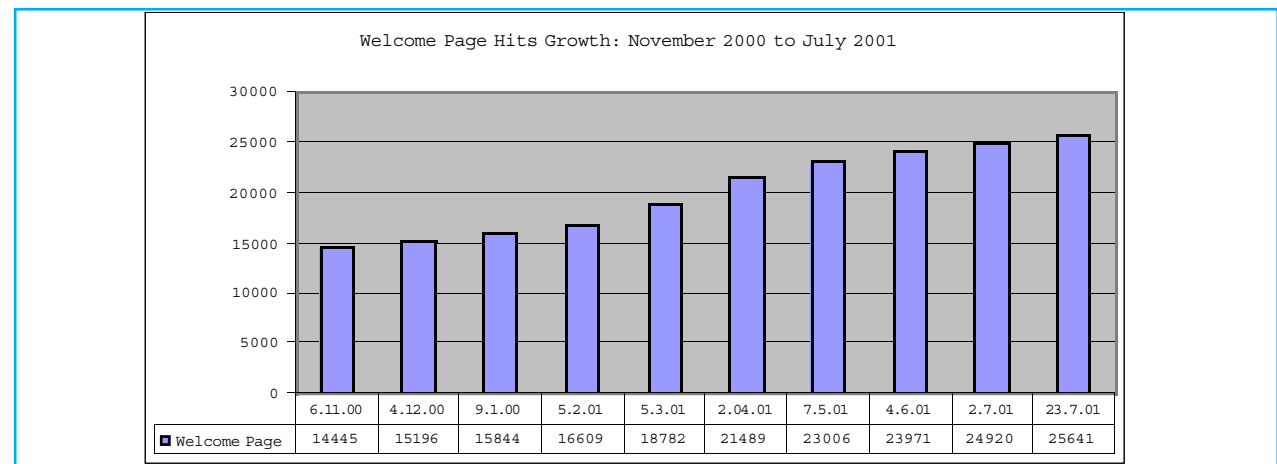

Figure 2.5: Welcome Page Hits

The Weekly Pattern of Hits

By analysing data collected on Monday am and Friday pm during February and March 2001 it was possible to get some idea of community usage over weekends and weekdays (fig 2.6).

Despite the reservations concerning the reliability of this data the statistics do reveal something about patterns of use, and they do provide a form of base line measurement. Logging on and hit rates do not represent community participation in anything but a crude surrogate form and little is revealed about the means of building community participation or the impact of Talking Heads.

2.1.3 Motivating Participation-Lessons Learnt

Many headteachers work long hours and 97% report that time is the greatest barrier to participation. This is followed by unfamiliarity with the technology (41%), inability to connect the laptop to the school network (50%), and difficulty finding information (28%) were the four most frequently cited barriers to participation mentioned in the 2000 questionnaire.

Although the 2001 questionnaire did not ask the same question quantitatively, in explaining their response to the question "What is the worst feature of Talking Heads?", the top four issues mentioned were time (40 mentions), complexity (33), navigation (27) and under-use by other headteachers (16). Technical / slow connection issues were fifth on the list and received fifteen mentions.

Reasons given for low or non participation from the 2001 questionnaire, included 8 respondents (4%) who 'prefer something else' (mostly longer established networks), and 10 who reported being concerned about the lack of other headteacher participants.

Of the nine respondents to a questionnaire sent to fifty non-participants in the September 2000 questionnaire, all reported being extremely busy. Two stated they were very interested and would appreciate support when things were quieter, two couldn't access Talking Heads via the school system, and one had an alternate network that was adequate. One didn't receive a laptop and therefore wasn't interested, and one didn't see anything of relevance.

From this data, it is seen that time is perceived as a major barrier in both sets of respondents. We argue, however, that if community members perceive more purpose in visiting an online community that is, they realise how they can optimise their use of time, they are more likely to find time to visit it.

"The pooling of ideas. If everyone were to use it the constant repetition of mundane tasks and ill thought initiatives would become less stressful. There is too much waste in terms of time repeating problems and responses." (2000 Questionnaire).

Of more urgent concern was the number of respondents reporting difficulties of navigation and access. In response to this data the project undertook a consultation process with the focus group headteachers mentioned below, resulting in the subsequent redesign of navigation aids (see appendix 3.1). The data below is presented within the framework of the facilitation/participation continuum, presented in section 1.4.

Access – stages one and two

Despite these barriers or hurdles to participation a number of strategies have been identified that overcome these, they include:
* Establishing expectations for participation
* Developing skills with ICT
* Building Purpose- Information and support.
* Ensuring Topicality and Relevance

CoTH Page Hits by Week/Weekend Feb-March

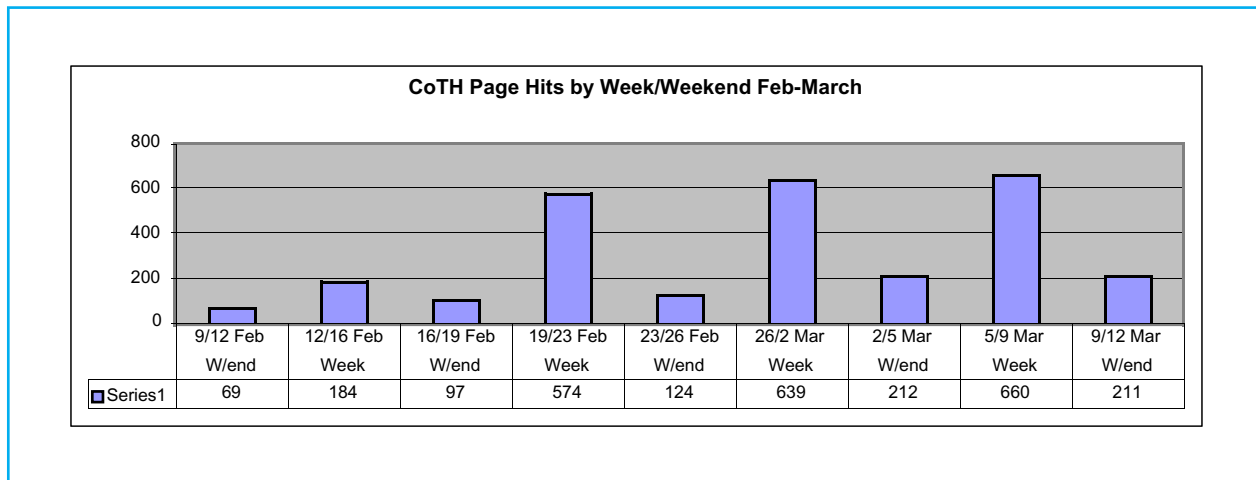|	9/12 Feb W/end	12/16 Feb Week	16/19 Feb W/end	19/23 Feb Week	23/26 Feb W/end	26/2 Mar Week	2/5 Mar W/end	5/9 Mar Week	9/12 Mar W/end
Series1	69	184	97	574	124	639	212	660	211

Figure 2.6: CoTH page hits

- Matching the school calendar.
- Active Facilitation
- Expertise- answering questions
- Sense of audience - visibility

Establishing expectations for participation

Optimal benefit is gained from participation in Talking Heads through establishing a routine of logging on regularly. During the pilot, headteachers were asked by the DfES to log on three times a week for 20 minutes at a time. Following this request, 19% of the 2000 questionnaire respondents mentioned that they felt pressured by this.

"I feel guilty if I have not logged on at least three times during a working week - I can only use it at home - often late at night".

One active participant reported, however, that it was this requirement that encouraged him to develop a routine of participation, to familiarise himself with the layout and navigation, and to follow conversations over time.

This routine of participation is no longer an explicit requirement. The current welcome letter states,

"To get the most benefit out of Talking Heads please expect to log on at least once a week and to contribute your experience. Sharing is the heart of community."

The table in the qualitative data suggests that the change in expectations may have had an impact as the 2001 questionnaire indicates that frequency of participation has decreased.

The evidence and logic suggests that where regular patterns of use are not established, passwords are forgotten and the time required to reorient to the environment is prohibitive to participation.
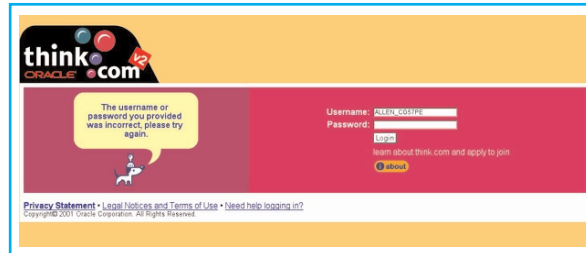

Image 2.4 password error

Developing skills with ICT

At the start of the pilot, 84% of headteachers indicated that increasing their ICT skills was of medium to high importance to them, and the September 2000 report (DfEE 2000) indicates that 58% found that increasing their ICT skills was an unexpected benefit from participating in Talking Heads.

Face to face events organised by the facilitation team however, flushed out a lot of people who were struggling with the technology. Sometimes it is the ICT literate people who struggle the most with the online community software and ethos.

"It seems very complex to use and none of the operating systems bear any resemblance to what I would call standard windows screen actions. There is no drag and drop - no WYSIWYG - this has meant a learning which I have not had time undertake.

"As my area was not working when I first signed on I have received no training and no user manuals."

"I use my Microsoft Outlook for communication between fellow head teachers and my staff. We exchange minutes; policies; photographs; data tracking documents and other docs without me needing to use the talking heads facility. What is there for me?"
2001 Questionnaire

Reports of technical difficulties are now directed to the NCSL helpdesk. By far the most common enquiries they receive are how to log in and forgotten passwords, (NCSL helpdesk conversation 10/07/02). The 2001 questionnaire data also suggest that ICT skills in schools are generally improving (see Section 4.3).

Building Purpose- Information and support

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%, discuss current issues with DfES and policymakers 56%.

The conversations in Talking Heads have ranged over almost every possible professional topic, generating a rich knowledge bank greatly valued by colleagues. One headteacher reported that,

"A library of relevant information which has the potential to solve any problems causing concern" and " I have already stumbled upon interesting and useful information that I had not strictly been looking for, but which will be to my advantage" (new member, 2001 Questionnaire).

Support is seen in many guises,

"There are specific issues which are only relevant to teaching Heads and to schools with 4 or less full time teaching staff. We can raise a discussion between ourselves and air views which would not necessarily be shared by colleagues in larger schools. It is also very reassuring to find that there are other Heads out there facing the same problems - and sometimes in an even worse situation than you are. It has certainly made me reconsider my own situation from time to time." (2000 Questionnaire)

Ensuring Topicality and Relevance

Topicality and the opportunity to discuss new DfES initiatives is an important factor motivating participation. Headteachers share the need to access relevant information quickly, and to discuss and clarify issues as they arise.

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.

Matching the school calendar

The school calendar influences activity. Where activities are set in the context of the school year, it is de facto more relevant and, hence, more likely to attract participants.

September is usually a lull period, as headteachers face the many tasks of the new school year. For example, on Sept 25 2001, 154 headteachers of Cohort 2 (19%) had logged on, and only two contributions had been made, with zero items created by headteachers. By December 3rd, 641 headteachers (53%) of the cohort had logged on, 184 contributions had been made and 45 items had been created by headteachers. Holiday periods are also very quiet. Key management issues, with their own cycle, also dictate topics of interest, such as budgeting, recruitment, and the introduction of performance thresholds.

Active facilitation

The Oracle data was used to compare and contrast two communities within Talking Heads, one a large Cohort community, the other the Small schools community, to illustrate the effect of facilitation.

	April	May	June
Hits	13085	6642	3587
Contributions	173	134	68

Table 2.5: Cohort 1 hits and contributions April- June

In April, Cohort 1 facilitators ran a hotseat with Jenny Mosley (see case study in section 2.2), but figures tail off steadily as the busy end of the year approaches and the Thinking Skills conference becomes the focus of attention at the end of June.

	April	May	June
Hits	580	815	2126
Contributions	8	13	29

Table 2.6: Small schools hits and contributions April – June

The Small Schools community was very quiet during April and May as the main facilitator was very busy with the face-to-face training and designing presentation materials for NCSL. In June, several members of the team put a concerted effort into the community, contacting headteachers and setting up a hotseat for Small Schools Week. Despite the end of year trend in decreasing participation within other Talking Heads communities, they succeeded in generating increased participation although not entirely commensurate with their effort.
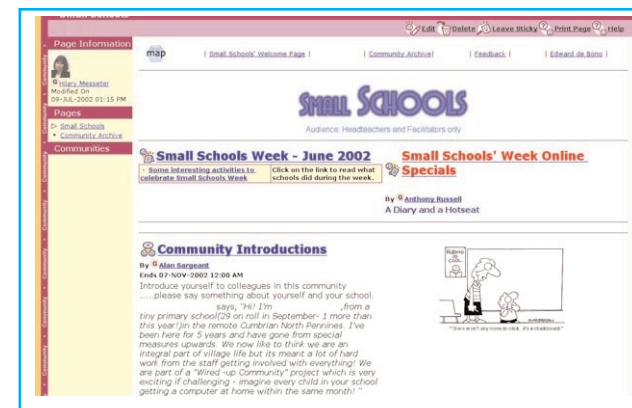

Image 2.5 small schools community

Expertise- answering questions

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. Not having questions answered is potentially very de-motivating to members. 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)

Sense of audience- visibility

It is accepted that at many face-to-face public events, more people listen than talk. Participation is essential however for online communities to flourish.

The Oracle hits to contribution ratios along with feedback to facilitators indicates that many headteachers benefit from reading others' conversations but don't post. One saying, *"I spend a lot of time reading the comments and concerns of other head teachers..."* (2001 Questionnaire).

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 f2f 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!"*

> *"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 additional knowledge of heads outside the immediate LEA"*

However this isn't always easy, as the following response to the question "What is the worst feature of Talking Heads?" indicates.

> *"The unedifying human response of envy I have when I read about heads who actually have the time to really get stuck into school improvement projects, rather than what has been the pattern with us lately which is largely firefighting in difficult circumstances with a dysfunctional LEA."* (2001 Questionnaire)

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 is and a Code of Practise statement is posted on the NCSL website, although arguably this isn't seen by many members.

Image 2.6 audience statement

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 (Feb 2002) indicated

that they would not consider discussing litigious issues online.

Commitment- stages three and four

The issues related to these stages are discussed under the following headings:
• Informality and sociability
• A community of likeminded others
• Ownership and appropriation

Informality and sociability

Informality is recognised to be an essential element to generating the rapport and disclosure fundamental to the sharing of uncertainties. It has been found in Talking Heads that there is a strong and fairly constant ratio between social and task focused messages across seven communities (4 small, 3 large). 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. As the figures below indicate, sociability isn't restricted to the small communities it also flourishes in some of the large communities.

Message focus	SC1%	SC2%	SC3%	SC4%	LC1%	LC2%	LC3%
Task	54	53	54	61	62	54	48
Social/ emotional	23	24	24	21	22	26	33
Both task & social/ emotional	23	23	22	18	16	20	19

Table 2.7: a collation of task and social/ emotional messages in four small and three large communities – July 2001

A Community of likeminded others

The questionnaire surveys reveal that headteachers appreciate the opportunity to speak to others in similar circumstances. For example, there were thirty-two references to the notion of likeminded others in response to the question that asked people to identify what they like about their favourite community.

Ownership and appropriation

Although there is a strong ethos underlying the project, of empowering ownership by headteachers, 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. 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 working alongside the facilitators to implement new tasks, topics and initiatives as they emerge from the headteachers conversations. Although headteachers are encouraged to create items in the Cohort communities, facilitators mostly publish these on their behalf, as there is a need to preserve some coherence within the structure. There is more scope for headteachers taking the initiative in the

smaller communities. However, the Managing Special Needs community was adopted by a group of headteachers who took over the facilitation and redesigned it. In the medium to long term, however, they were unable to sustain the time input required to keep the community active. True ownership is, therefore, preserved for communities established by headteachers, and early evidence suggests that the champion frequently needs to be resourced to have the time to facilitate the group. There is no guarantee that the champion will share the ideal of ownership of course.

Participation- Key Findings

- To win the hearts and minds of headteachers to online community participation, requires a clear philosophy, easy access and navigation, direct relevance, topicality, time saving, collegiality, and testimonies from colleagues of effective practise
- There are two primary motivators for participation, quick access to topical discussion and the need for support and community. For this reason, the option to only belong to topic communities will be made more explicit in future. Members seeking support will be given the option for joining the small communities after induction with the request they participate an agreed minimal amount
- Generating clear expectations at registration and induction regarding the benefits and the various levels of commitment required is essential
- Key topic discussions need to be scheduled in advance to fit the school calendar and to allow headteachers to plan their participation
- Rollout is best timed for quieter periods of the year, e.g. January
- Sociability is a key factor in generating a sense of community
- Online community etiquette such as thanking others needs to be made explicit
- Active use of the tools in think by members needs to be balanced with an awareness of their impact on the community

- Items in the communities need to be created for 'readers' to express their interest and appreciation eg an item named 'footprints in the sand' is now being used in one community for this purpose
- Audience and security statements need to be explicit
- Pro-active and sustained facilitation of the communities needs to be a priority if the communities are to thrive

Recommendations

- If the NCSL and the DfES wish to encourage a genuine adoption of online participative communication for headteachers, they are advised to use think.com systematically to communicate with members.
- Enlisting specialist services of a headteacher or agency to answer technical questions should be explored.
- To ensure full participation, topical issues and events should be advertised via external e-newsletters and hardcopy.

2.2   Active Facilitation -The Role Of The Facilitator

ULTRALAB's research indicates that the role of the facilitator is essential if online communities are to thrive. They provide the 'oil' in lubricating online community participation. Since the inception of the pilot project, the term facilitator has been adopted for the senior educationalists who work with the Talking Heads communities. As explained in the model for participation and facilitation (section 1.4), the facilitators work hard behind the scenes to ensure the vibrancy of the communities.

This section aims to identify and describe the role of a Talking Heads Facilitator. We have developed a model based on the experiences of the facilitators in the Talking Heads project, feedback collected from headteachers belonging to the community, and a review of relevant literature.

Image 2.7 facilitators online presence

Developing practice

The facilitation team self-manages using a community in think.com set up for this purpose. Most of the communications are via a 'bulletin board' and it is here that facilitation practice is actively developed through relating experiences and discussing their implications for facilitation in the Talking Heads communities.

Online facilitation

In seeking to develop a facilitation model for Talking Heads, categories developed by Berge (Berge, Z.L. (2000) were seen to provide an appropriate starting point. Berge's four categories have been developed to apply to the unique circumstances of

the Talking Heads communities.

Berge's model was initially adapted using feedback gathered through online discussions of facilitator's experiences of working in the Talking Heads communities. A questionnaire was used to collect more specific feedback from facilitators who were asked to identify the five most important features of facilitation. The feedback was analysed and used to further develop the model of Talking Heads facilitation.

The online questionnaires used to collect feedback from headteachers included the following two questions on the role of the facilitator:

- "What do facilitators bring to the Talking Heads experience?"
- "What else would you like your facilitator to provide?"

The data collected in response to these questions was also used to further inform and test the model detailed below. The role of a Talking Heads Facilitator can be divided up into four categories or aspects. Appendix 2.2.1 gives detailed descriptions of the behaviors of the facilitators built around the aspects identified.

Learning - This aspect of the role concentrates on the educational aspects of facilitation:

- encouraging, supporting and enabling headteachers to share their learning
- forming discussions using well-crafted questions
- raising awareness through variety of communications with headteachers (signposting)
- helping headteachers to set up discussions (scaffolding)
- reading headteachers contributions to stay abreast of issues and needs.
- summarising, closing and archiving where appropriate
- responding to queries within 24 hours (48 hrs max)
- keeping up-to-date with current educational issues as to initiate appropriate topics and initiatives

Community - This aspect of the role concentrates on the social aspects of facilitation:

- The facilitator creates and maintains a friendly environment or community in which headteachers feel comfortable about participating in discussion, sharing information and publishing their own items.
- Maintaining and stimulating the cohort community
- Offering headteachers direct contact opportunities (at their instigation)
- Finding out what issues headteachers want to discuss (market research)
- Contacting headteachers regularly (with focus on communal communication)
- Making individual contact where necessary
- Pursuing opportunities to enroll natural communities
- Encouraging and empowering headteachers to host/participate in online communities (acting as a catalyst)
- Building trust and relationships

• Fostering a non-threatening environment

Administration - This aspect of the role concentrates on the organisational or procedural aspects of facilitation. The facilitator manages the induction process, conveys expectations and models good practice:
• Making sure headteachers complete expected activities (about section, emails etc.).
• Conveying to headteachers understanding of code of practice (netiquette)
• Modeling good practice
• Managing registration of new headteachers
• Working with other stakeholders and other facilitators
• Managing own cpd (particularly with regard to online community/ e-learning etc.)
• Engaging in research collecting feedback, key witnesses etc. With a view to ongoing development of talking heads

Support - This aspect of the role concentrates on support aspects of facilitation. The facilitator aims to make the headteachers comfortable with the software and the Talking Heads environment by providing technical support and where appropriate, encouragement and reassurance:
• Supporting Talking Heads tutorial and FAQ Helping headteachers with technical problems where appropriate
• Reassuring headteachers when problems arise
• Updating headteachers on Think.com developments

To these categories, the team has added
Research
• Research and development of effective online communities and their facilitation
• Planning initiatives and pilots
• Collecting and analysing evaluative data
• Creating effective activities and communities
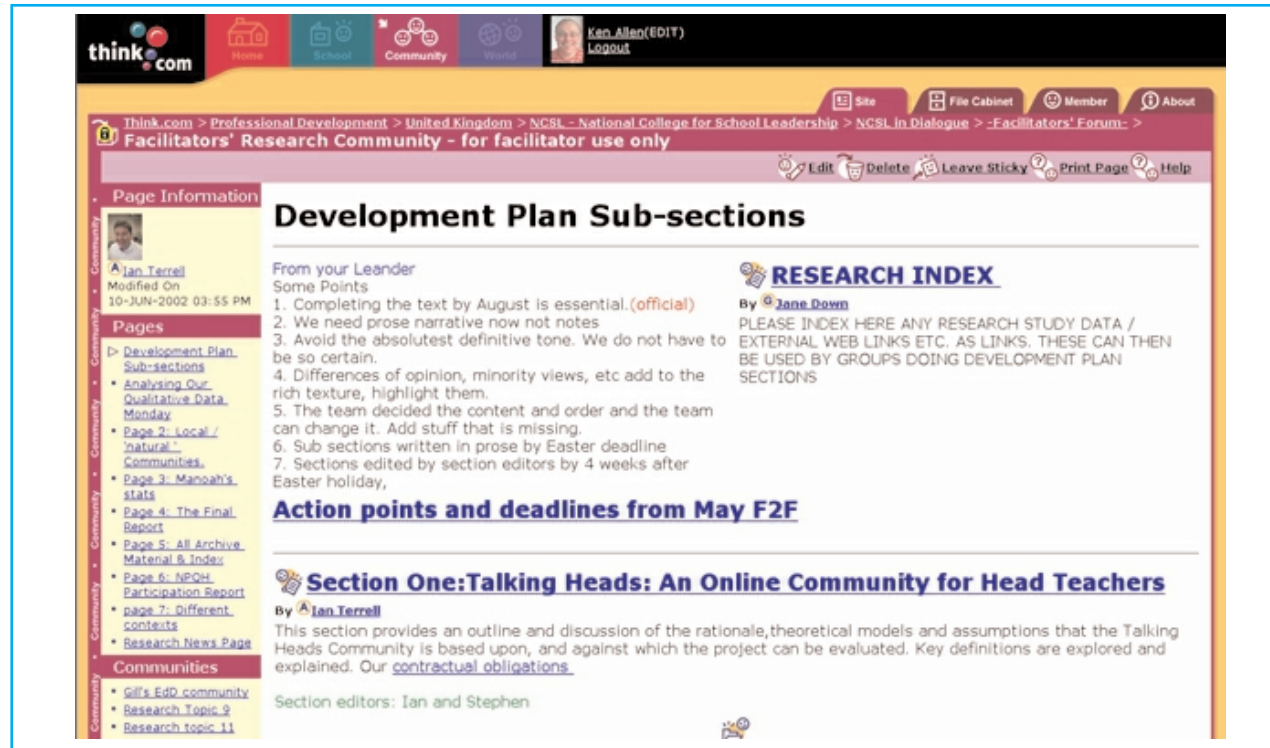• Writing research reports
• Implementing research findings

Image 2.8 facilitators' research

Pilot facilitation

During the pilot, each facilitator was allocated approximately 110 headteachers to facilitate. To allow for easy recognition of their own headteachers online, the team agreed to divide the pilot group up by surname. The facilitators welcomed each member when they first logged on with emails and stickies, provided a home community (see section 3.1 on community structure and architecture for more detail), and sought to cater for the specific needs of the members in their group through pro-active and regular online contact. They provided the "backbone" for participation by generating loyalty and interest through their tireless support.

Moving from the pilot

The 'Mid Project Questionnaire Evaluation Report' (July 2000) gives some quantitative evidence as to the impact of the facilitators.

68% of headteachers rated the overall quality of the facilitation support highly and only 10% rated the support as low. 45% of headteachers said their participation in Talking Heads would have been either significantly reduced or non-existent if a facilitator had not been available to them.

By the time of the 2001 Online Survey, registrations had increased to beyond 3,000 and facilitation ratios had increased. Results indicated that 67% respondents were satisfied with the amount of contact they had with their facilitators. Of the 105

qualitative responses 60 % were very positive. However, the remaining 40 % stated that they either didn't know what the facilitator does or lacked contact with their facilitator. As the project has expanded from the pilot to this more substantive phase, the very personalised level of individual support could no longer be sustained due to the high ratio of headteachers to facilitators.

General themes expressed as useful by headteachers included an appreciation of the social/emotional contact with facilitators, advice/help (general and technical), the ability to "Catalyse Participation", providing "direction and sign-posting", and even, in some instances, mentoring,

"I f the government wanted to extend their role they could be brilliant mentors for new heads!" (2000 Questionnaire)

"Please don't the ever take them away, they are crucial to the success of this project. Like the cement holding the bricks together and making everything stronger!!" (2000 Questionnaire)

In the 2001 questionnaire, headteachers identified the following as some of the important interventions from facilitators.

"My facilitator has been there for me right from the beginning - he guided us all carefully through the maze of options in order to help us produce our very own article for our front page. He has always been available at the end of the 'phone or via the email. … - in fact, there have been so many instances where he has either supported, bailed me out, reassured me, encouraged me - that I could go on ad nauseum!"

"Very helpful when I wanted to explore online a situation very personal to the school and wished to be discreet. Helpful in how to go about this. Also their emails were incredibly encouraging and rewarding when referring to frequent contributions. It was nice to feel that there was a personal touch as well as feedback."

"Speedy solution of difficulties. An answer within a very short time to ANY question! Willingness to persist until the problem is solved. Real support in accessing areas of the site or technical worries. I have "acquired" a facilitator in, who has managed to keep me in the system despite numerous blips!"

"Professional and human support to overcome technical difficulties"

"My facilitator is great! I really like the way she worked away at getting me involved without being too intrusive. Most of all, now, I like the fact that she is an additional professional resource. If I am stuck on something, she is likely to know someone who can help sort out a problem or access knowledge. I'd feel less secure as a participant if she was not only a sticky away!"

"Help in setting up the consortium directory of schools is a perfect example of facilitator help. I was also given considerable assistance when setting up my first debate into the attitude of teachers towards Key Stage 1/2 achievement in writing during the Literacy Hour."

"A personal point of reference, and the belief that there is someone there who will support you in times of difficulty...an example of this is my search for information about autism...I was responded to promptly, and the reply was very helpful in locating some resources."

"She is very good. If I have a query, she answers very rapidly and responds very positively."

Facilitator contact

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 contact with headteachers. However, the present drive to substantially increase membership of Talking Heads means that the team will be facilitating communities rather than headteachers allocated to them.

"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)

Facilitation practise - Case studies

The most important aspects of facilitation are not necessarily the most tangible nor visible, but rather flowing out of the professional experience of the facilitators and the relationship built with headteachers within the community. These are highly individualistic, as each facilitator develops his or her own style. The following case study accounts describe something of the complexity and interventions required by the facilitator role.

Guests in Cohort 1 Community – case study

A Talking Heads facilitator tells the story of the innovation of inviting guests into a closed and private community; the dialogue with headteachers, and negotiations with the community guest.

"The role of the facilitators in organising the event was critical, with a team of facilitators deciding to organise the event. The idea to approach Jenny as a possible hotseat guest came from facilitators' detailed knowledge of headteachers' discussions and interests both on the central theme of Jenny's work and her suitability as a guest that headteachers would want to engage with. In order to invite her into the Cohort 1 community it was necessary to break the existing restriction on membership being for only headteachers and facilitators, and this 'intrusion' could have potentially damaged the community. This needed to be approached with tact and sensitivity in consultation with

headteachers by professional people the headteachers could identify with. Facilitators set up a consultative discussion entitled 'Shall we invite special guests into Cohort 1?' The headteachers who participated in the discussion with the facilitators were in universal agreement that guests should be invited in.

The initial contact with Jenny was by letter carefully drafted by facilitators. Potentially difficult negotiations regarding any fee and the advertising of Jenny's commercial activities had to be handled with tact. In point of fact no fee was charged and the sensitive management of publicity and advertising mitigated any conflict of interest such as objections to using the community for advertising within the community. A facilitator worked remotely with both Jenny and her PA in teaching them how to use the software and setting up a demonstration page.

Prior to this special event facilitators contacted headteachers through a variety of means including notices in Talking Heads, e-mail, stickies, phone conversations and face to face. The event was well publicised and a number of headteachers expressed interest. The importance of 'gathering momentum' for successful hotseats lead facilitators to target and contact potential contributors using their detailed knowledge concerning headteachers who would be most likely to contribute. Past contributors were contacted and key headteachers that were influential in groupings of headteachers were particularly targeted. The importance of previously developed relationships between facilitators and headteachers cannot be underestimated in this process.

Facilitators were responsible for constructing the special guest page. They used their knowledge of successful layout and community page architecture to meet the needs of both Jenny and the headteachers who accessed the page. Crucial to this was the design of the activity with regards to stimulus articles and the phrasing of the hotseat 'provocation'.

During the two weeks twenty five questions were asked by headteachers on circle time issues. The ethos of the hotseat was informative, warm and supportive. A number of headteachers who had been absent from the community returned and were active not only in the hotseat but other parts of the community as well. During this time it was important that facilitators kept in close contact with Jenny and participants to ensure that the hotseat functioned smoothly. As the hotseat progressed the relationship between Jenny and the facilitators deepened, as did her confidence and enthusiasm for using the Talking Heads software, bearing in mind Jenny started out with little liking or experience of ICT.

Jenny's impressions of the community are revealing, "I liked being in a space which was purely for headteachers…it was great that people could ask difficult questions, reflect on failures and strengths…and cheer each other on with news of successes. Even though I did not meet that many people during these two weeks – I enjoyed the openness, trust and respect. The ethos of valuing others' opinions and the spirit of helpfulness and the space just to reflect…is very close to the heart of circle time. It too, if handled by a skilled facilitator capable of building emotional safety, can create an explicit space where people can bring hopes and fears without being judged. There are very few places you can go now where it is safe enough just to 'flop' and have a moan surrounded by supportive people. Obviously I am passionate about the circle because it gives people eye contact and a chance to 'read' body language…but this internet space is definitely the next best thing."
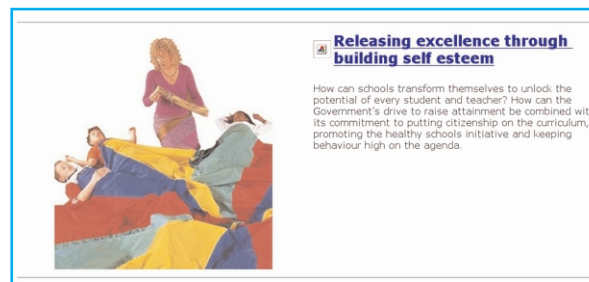

Image 2.9 guests in the community

Talking Heads facilitators respond to a variety of messages through telephone email or through using the think.com 'sticky' tool. The following is a snapshot of facilitation in Talking Heads communities – a facilitator's typical day's 'stickies'!

"I have left stickies for Celia and Chris on their pages hope this is useful

> *This message was in reply to my request for support for colleagues asking for advice in the Pupil Behaviour Management community. I replied, thanking him for giving this 1:1 support, but suggesting that he also contributes to the community discussions*

Do you know of anyone who has shared a Racial Equality policy which I could look at?

> *I replied with a link and a reminder of the discussion and resource area in the New Heads Welcome, having checked that this Head is a member of that community.*

Could I please have access to Managing Pupil Behaviour thanks.

> *I assigned this Head to the PBM community and sent back a sticky saying "You are now a member of the Pupil Behaviour Management, welcome. Do come in and introduce yourself and take part in our discussions."*

Dear (name), I was wondering if you could help a colleague of mine. She joined TH with me in Cohort 1 but has lost her password. Her name is (name) and her login code is (code). What can she do to gain access to TH again?? Many thanks

> *I replied with the telephone number of the helpdesk and the reassurance that the password can be reset very quickly. I also offered more facilitation support to her colleague*

Yes, Peter certainly has an influence in the village. A lot of our parents work at Real World Studios and it does give the village something of its arty flavour. Quite unique! On the subject of a New Heads discussion - yes please. An opportunity to exchange views would be welcome. Here are my thoughts on an intro: Failing schools often make the headlines and the efforts of all those who are improving them deserve to be celebrated. What about if you have taken over a 'Good' school and want to make it 'Excellent' or 'Outstanding'? Let's take the chance to share ideas and make our schools even better. Best wishes

This was a reply to a 'new' Head who had asked me to help him set up a discussion within the New Heads Welcome community. I noticed from his home page that his school is in the village where a famous rockstar has his studio, so I mentioned that in my communication with him, as well as asking him to 'phrase the question' for the discussion item. I then published his discussion, which received 2 contributions within a couple of days. This Head then came in and thanked the contributors, adding his own thoughts.

Thanks for the note, I've been rather sidetracked as my daughter is hospital and my budget wont balance, try to give some time next week.

This was from a member of the PBM community who had recently received helpful advice from colleagues on a difficult situation he is facing in his school – I had asked him if he could advise other colleagues who had just posted new problems. I replied with sympathy.

Visit was superb lots to tell. What would you like me to do??? What's PBM???

This is from a Head who has just enjoyed a 3 day visit from a civil servant in DfES – part of the Immersion project. She is keen to share her experiences with other members of Talking Heads and possibly all members of DfES in Dialogue community, but we are waiting for the DfES members to agree on the format.

I replied suggesting that she write a report for us to publish in CoTH (Community of Talking Heads) for the time being. The 'what's PBM' reminded me to be careful with acronyms that are familiar within the team, but not necessarily to Heads! I explained about the Pupil Behaviour Management community having new discussion items that I felt she would have expertise in.

PFI (Private Funding Initiatives) Outline uploaded. Does it need any more work? Cheers

This is from a Head (one of my 'pilot' Cohort) who is currently negotiating for PFI money to rebuild a substantial part of his school. He had told me about it when we met at the SHA conference. He has uploaded a Powerpoint presentation into the Cohort 1 community. I replied suggesting that he 'puts himself in the hotseat' to answer his colleagues' questions about the PFI procedures and benefits. I designed a hotseat layout for him to take a look at."
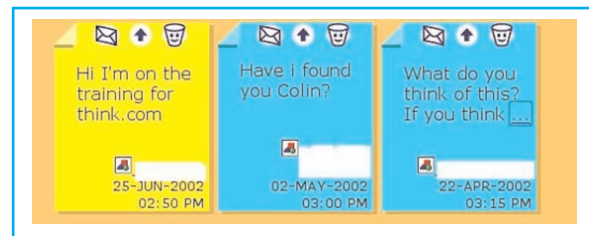

Image 2.10 stickies

The Facilitation Role In Extending A Community From A Face-To-Face Environment To An Online One – case study

The development of natural communities has taken a significant amount of effort from some of the facilitation team. This is one facilitator's account of the process of working with a natural community.

''The headteacher had experienced First Class and valued the conversations he had with colleagues brought together by their LPSH course. When the course finished the group lost its purpose and slowly atrophied. Talking Heads and Think offered an opportunity to start a community formed around a natural community already in existence.

The facilitator who adopted this community knew two of the group already and was familiar with their challenges, LEA structure and local politics. Most of the group described themselves as computer illiterate, one even as computer phobic. They attended their first training session and were told that for their community to succeed they must log-on every day and have a computer on their desk connected to the Internet at all times. The facilitator was able to point out the support the LEA may offer, and advise on overcoming connection problems generally. It was stressed that they needed to change the way they worked if the online community was to be a benefit rather than a burden. More than one conversation with members of the group confirmed that the facilitator's background in education and personal reputation had an impact on their acceptance of the points conveyed.

During the course of the next few months the group faltered and struggled to gain momentum as they overcame difficulties with their limited skills, Internet connection and adapting their way of working.

The facilitator's local knowledge allowed the community to begin with a links box of URL's specific to their area and the activities. They continually referred to the LEA communication systems, software and support systems which the facilitator knew well and was able to explain how they could be exploited to the benefit of the community. More than that, the facilitator's knowledge of national issues, their timing and impact allowed him to propose sources of information and how they could be disseminated throughout the group.

One member wanted to scan a document for the others to read. The facilitator did that as an example but was also able to

offer guidance on how it could be arranged in school, reminding them that the scanner must be capable of being networked if they wanted to use it that way.

Within a few months the group had gained confidence and a realisation that ICT could be a powerful tool. They have begun working collaboratively, sharing information to improve facilities in the schools in their community. One claimed Talking Heads had enlightened them to the power of the 'C' in ICT. They began to take a closer interest in ICT and wanted to visit a Beacon school to expand their knowledge and vision. The facilitator was able to contact another facilitator with knowledge of a nearby LEA. He advised them on which one would be best. They were delighted with the result and shared information with their members and it was posted within their community of for all the other LEA group membership to see.

They are now in contact with another local working group and intend to share expertise with them. The facilitator has ensured that the linkage is possible, as he is aware that the LEA has other fledgling groups. That overview and link with the LEA has enabled the structure to support a vision of future developments."
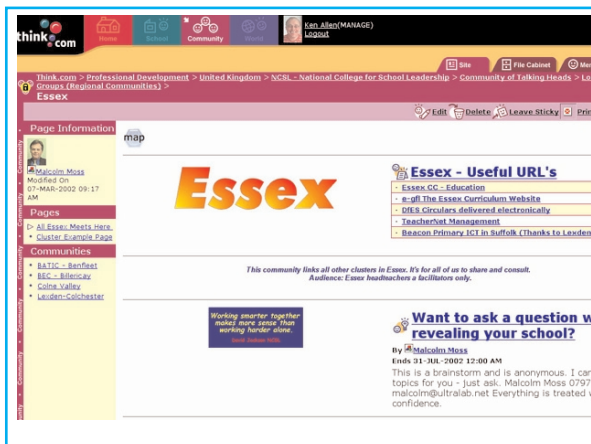

Image 2.11 natural communities

These case studies serve to give a descriptive account of some of the daily work accomplished by the facilitation team. Many other accounts can be given.

Facilitation – Key Findings

- Many headteachers find the facilitators a valuable resource
- Not everyone wants to be facilitated
- Headteachers opt in and out of facilitation depending on changing circumstances
- Many headteachers are still unclear about the facilitators role
- Facilitators have made valuable professional relationships with headteachers
- The social and emotional support offered by facilitators is highly valued
- The role of the facilitator is essential for the success of online communities
- Facilitators perform highly varied duties, and adapt their role constantly
- Headteachers' satisfaction with their facilitator is higher when the communities are smaller and there is a stronger feeling of personal connection
- Each facilitator has a highly individual style which has contributed to, rather than detracted from, the success of the community
- When communities are less actively facilitated, activity drops off

Recommendations for facilitators

They should:
- Build a professional relationship with community members
- Build on their personal style and strengths
- Engage in dialogue with headteachers about the philosophy of online learning communities
- Have an understanding of the key topics that will impact upon headteachers
- Sustain their own current knowledge by keeping in contact

with issues by reading relevant publications and working with headteachers face to face
- Work with headteachers to develop communities in line with the purpose identified by the headteachers

2.3   Hotseats

"Hotseats" allow the expert to answer any question directly under the question, in effect allowing threaded web discussions. This powerful tool has been a key feature within Talking Heads since the first Hotseat was run within the DfEE community at the beginning of the pilot. Since then it has been a prime feature in the NCSL in Dialogue community, and has also been adopted within Talking Heads as a vehicle for peer to peer hotseats. For a discussion on how this tool is best used please see section 3.4. This section presents a number of case studies.

Hotseats in the DfES community

The Talking Heads communities have now been established for over two years. During that time 30 guests have been in the DfES hotseat, 3 being re-invited to lead a discussion. The ability to discuss issues of policy with members of the department and highly regarded educational figures has been an important and popular aspect of Talking Heads.

answers your questions on the White Paper.

This popular hotseat has become quite long and a new one has been created above. P questions in there.

You can of course still access and read this one which contains many useful insights int White Paper and the proposed developments.

Will it ever be the case that LEAs can have a role in directing that schools will take had to take, say 10% of the more difficult and needy children, they wouldn't all end schools which 'sink' under the weight. If, conversely, a school was entitled to expect children, it would change the balance for everyone concerned.

As you know, Government policy is to reflect parental preference for schools as course does not fit with this sort of 'quota system'. The White Paper confirms t that the forthcoming Education Bill should clarify the law on parental preferenc proposals for co-ordinating the admissions process and place allocation in each

Image 2.12 hotseats

Interviewees in the longitudinal case studies (appendix 2.1.1) have commented as follows,

"... values the dialogue with hotseat guests"

"...the recent Hotseat attracted her most and she has planned an in-service day with her staff to develop the practices discussed there – she asked no questions but had clearly read through all the comments passed"

"hotseats are seen as very useful..."

"... is drawn into events such as hotseats and very much enjoyed the recent one"

She finds useful information in the dialogue with hotseat guests, feels it encourages discussion and networking between heads...."
Interviews carried out with Talking Heads users (May 2002)

At the same time the importance of the hotseat as a means of getting direct feedback is recognised by policy makers. Following the experience of the hotseat in March 2000 Michael Barber commented as follows in the TES,

I think this will turn out to be a radical and effective means of keeping policy in touch with the reality of teaching.
Professor Michael Barber

The following hotseats have taken place within the DfES in Dialogue community.

Name	Start date	Duration (days)	Contributions
Michael Barber	20/3/00	10	26
Stephen Heppell	15/4/00	20	9
Tim Brighouse	15/5/00	46	11
Ralph Tabberer	4/7/00	68	27
Taylor & Sleep	20/6/00	18	15
Colin Hurd	11/5/00	24	6
Val Candy	29/3/00	62	3
Pat Collarbone	25/9/00	68	19
Richard Harrison	18/9/00	43	2
Vijay Puri	25/9/00	28	13
Colin Hurd	7/11/00	18	7
Tim Dracup	13/11/00	11	3
Ian Whitehouse	12/7/00	50	3
Colin Hurd (2)	11/5/00	23	6
Peter Matthews	11/12/00	70	41
David Normington	16/2/01	27	34
Lynda Lawrence	2/3/01	15	21
Sheena Evans	19/3/01	11	24
Vicki Philips	31/3/01	16	18
Pat Collarbone(2)	23/4/01	38	21
Vijay Puri (2)	21/5/01	39	41
Jon Coles	15/10/01	10	49
Tomlinson & Scales	21/11/01	15	55
David Smart	29/11/01	18	14
Peter Housden	31/12/01	22	69
Shaw & Hargreaves.	1/3/02	17	24
Phil Snell.	21/3/02	15	30
Guthrie & Doughty	4/4/02	18	115
Wendy Violentano	17/4/02	23	22

Table 2.8: DfES Hotseat Guests

The number of contributions is detailed above, but there is no way to measure the number of readers of these discussions, although increasing 'hit' counts on archived hotseats do indicate that the discussions continue to attract attention long after the hotseat is finished and archived.

The two case studies below show the impact of hotseats on national policy makers and show the learning points identified by the running the hotseats.

Michael Barber on Middle Years of Schooling, March 2000 – case study

Michael Barber was our first guest to sit in a hotseat for the DfEE in Dialogue community. The hotseat was open for ten days and the audience was the first Cohort of headteachers so the potential audience was 1,200 but many had not logged on at his time. The starter article, in the form of an essay, discussed the problems of the middle years of schooling, in particular the transition from key stage 2 to key stage 3.

The headteachers then asked questions about:
• the need for meaningful liaison and more interaction between KS2 and KS3;
• the recognition by both primary and secondary schools of the need to use the time after Y6 SATs for meaningful activities and projects linked to the secondary school;
• the importance of primary school data to ensure that expectations are not lowered in the transition to the secondary phase;
• the achievements of the teachers in Primary schools who are getting more pupils to Level 4 and thus making a difference to the pupils when they reach secondary school;
• concerns over the discrepancies between funding for primary and secondary pupils and between LEAs;
• the desirability of funding for liaison and joint training events and whether this should be allocated through specific grants or should be paid for from school budgets;
• what might be the most efficient way of teaching year 7?

As a result of the hotseat it was said: The level of debate in Talking Heads has been raised and enabled headteachers to view the wider picture. Secondary Headteachers have been challenged. For example, Primary teachers are leading pedagogical change in this country and understand teaching and learning in greater depth than secondary colleagues, though of course there are many exceptions to this rule. Michael asked for further thoughts on the role of Special Schools and would welcome practical suggestions as to how we might draw on their expertise.

After the event, Prof Barber commented, It all worked well and I really enjoyed it. Also, In general, I think this will turn out to be a radical and effective means of keeping policy in touch with the reality of teaching.

Mike Tomlinson and Sheila Scales on Improving Inspection, Improving Schools – case study

In November 2001 Mike Tomlinson (HMCI), Sheila Scales (Senior OfSTED Official), led a Talking Heads Hotseat and Margaret Gill (HMI) as part of the national consultation on the future of school inspection called Improving Inspection, Improving Schools', November 2001

Background

A short article set the context and posed a few questions linked to the latest thinking on Improving Inspection, Improving Schools. The hotseat was held for a two week period and had 55 questions and comments from headteachers. A summary was posted after the event.

When the outcomes of the consultation was published in February 2002 a member of Talking Heads contacted ULTRALAB to ask a question about the Outcomes Document. The following question was asked by the facilitation team running the hot seat for the OfSTED team.

"We have a question from one of our active heads who is also a qualified inspector re sections of the 'Improving Schools Improving Inspection' outcomes. This head was involved in asking questions in the Talking Heads hotseat re Issue 7 More serving Teachers and Headteachers on Inspection, which he thinks is very important.

His question is:" what influence did the hotseat discussion have on the final recommendations in the report re the use of headteachers in inspections?" The head is pleased to see a clear reflection of the point he and others were making in the hotseat and wonders how powerful such online dialogue, directly to policy makers such as yourselves and Mike Tomlinson, really is."

The following reply from Sheila Scales, who led the consultation process, is clear evidence of the impact a hotseat has on policy making at a national level and the role it played in that process.

"The answer to your question is that the dialogue with heads via the hotseat and in our meetings around the country was a very powerful input to policy development. The structured questions of the written consultation give us the weight of numbers, but getting underneath issues is much better done in discussion. The full version of the announcement, on our website, draws heavily on that part of the process - and you will recognise more of the Hotseat points. We also had meetings with representative bodies, but to be honest they were a lot less use than the serving headteachers!"

"The most effective bits online were certainly where we had more than just a 'Q and A' exchange and people came back with ideas, which we could feed directly into our thinking. A big
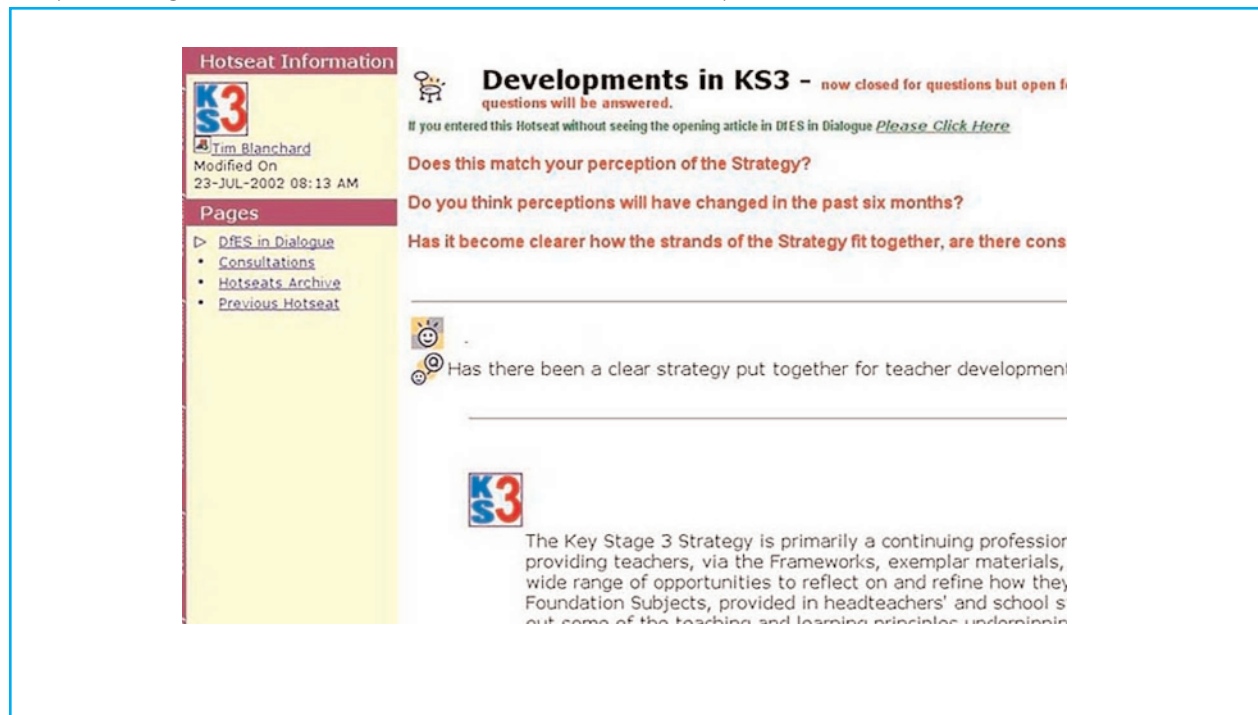
advantage of online dialogue is that we could print it off for others who can get a much better feel for heads' views than you get from reading the notes of a meeting. So those who wrote in reached very directly a much bigger audience than the three of us."

What did the Headteachers learn?

Headteachers learnt they can have a direct impact on national policy through involvement in Talking Heads online dialogue. Headteachers feel this is a place worth returning to.

Feedback was given to the headteacher who raised the question. He was appreciative of the impact Talking Heads had directly on policy and was looking forward to further involvement in Talking Heads.

Headteachers demonstrated positive and challenging professional dialogue directly with those leading policy review.

Both case studies demonstrate the value placed by participants and experts on the experience of the hotseat.

Analysis of a hotseat with DfES personnel:
(Name) was responding to the White Paper in October 2001. The hotseat attracted considerable attention, interestingly many of the question were posted after 8pm and before 8am. A second hotseat was established after the first one became too long to load quickly via a dialup connection. 35 people posted 49 questions in this hotseat and thus engagement was shown by re-participation. 14 questions were asked by females and 21 by males.

The topics covered in this hotseat included:
- private sector involvement in education and "greater choice for the consumers?"
- flexibility and trust
- faith schools

- disparity in funding between schools "not based on need"
- post 16 examinations reform
- standards and progression in secondary schools
- lack of proposals on recruitment and retention
- disparity in performance between boys and girls
- providing time for teachers to plan by providing 'trained supervisors'!

The general tone of the hotseat was one of concern and it also contained elements of adversity and dissatisfaction at the responses in early questions. A moment occurred that must be dreaded by all hotseat guests in such a public forum, when one headteacher became particularly confrontational.

"The questions are challenging, that is why it is called a hotseat. Sadly, the answers are so bland and formulaic, they sound like extracts from Sir Humphrey's script, that they have taken me no further forward. My question, is there any point in continuing with this "dialogue". Sorry to be so cynical, but years of trying to get answers from central government have left the trait deeply ingrained."

However the experts reflective answers and honesty following persistent questioning raised the level of the debate. In one response the expert commented,

"That's the beauty of the format from your perspective – I'm committed to giving answers on each point best I can"

The responses are varied, 14 lengthy and 16 brief replies, 25 replies are informative and 20 appear to be aiming at reassurance, for example initiatives for the future, MP's having discussion, being aware of things even though legislation/statutory guidance hasn't caught up.

Four of the contributions were comments rather than questions. The final hotseat comment began "well done", and ended "All the best".

Access to policy makers has been an invaluable part of the Talking Heads experience. We have noted a shift in attitudes on the part of experts from one of disseminating information to collecting and gathering research and opinions from school leaders. This can only benefit both groups. Informal feedback to facilitators, who worked closely with hotseat guests, confirms that the ability to directly question policy makers has had a real impact on participation in Talking Heads.

Hotseats in other communities

Hotseats have also been influential in the NCSL in Dialogue and Community of Talking Heads communities. Reports on two key events are provided below.

Thinking Skills Conference
(June 2002)- NCSL in Dialogue Community

The Hotseat tool is well established in both Talking Heads and Virtual Heads and operates under different formats. The format "expert to many" is used in NCSL in Dialogue and in DfES in Dialogue, and a "peer to peer" format is used in the Community of Talking Heads.

Although the tool is well used in these formats and is appreciated by headteachers, the opportunity of inviting a high profile education specialist into a hotseat provided the stimulus to add a further dimension to the hotseat tool, with the intention of generating additional interest among community members.

To exploit these possibilities a detailed plan was drawn up to use an online conference format. Dr Edward de Bono, world famous for his work on Thinking Skills, agreed to occupy the hotseat, with the intention of providing a launch pad for developing Thinking Skills in schools.

To make the conference different from the usual hotseat format

a closed community format was set up, with membership being requested by those who expressed an interest. In the conference plan certain key elements were identified:

- The conference was advertised to all NCSL online groups
- Conference participants were required to register so that interest could be gauged
- A conference pack was prepared outlining the conference timetable.
- The conference papers were available to participants by logging on and signing into the conference
- Conference participants were offered the opportunity to have the conference continue as a community of practice for further discussion and debate.
- In order to provide a broad coverage of the subject of thinking skills the conference also included other specialists as online guests. Dr de Bono was the keynote guest with others answering questions on different aspects of thinking skills in which they had a particular interest.

The conference was 'live' for five days with an additional lead-in period when conference papers were available, and a period following the 'live' conference when papers and contributions were still available.

Professor Robert Fisher, Brunel University, and Dr Vivienne Baumfield, Newcastle University, agreed to act as online guests in the Thinking Skills Conference and to answer questions and lead debate on "Leadership Issues surrounding the Improvement of Thinking Skills in Schools" and "Case Studies" respectively.

Thirteen thousand NCSL online members were emailed about the conference. It was also advertised in the TES and a press release was circulated appropriately. It was envisaged that the marketing of the conference would generate interest for online events among school leaders who had not yet registered with NCSL and would also be a showcase for the type of activity that NCSL participants could expect online. In the event 1200 people registered for the conference.

To anticipate the large number of contributions in the conference a number of "breakout" debates was planned so that participants had a space where they could debate in depth the content of the hotseats, and which could also be used as a filter if the questions became too repetitive. The breakout debates were organised as an integral part of the page.

Navigation was essential to the success of the conference. Easy access to the different hotseats, conference papers, case studies and breakout debates was provided by a conference map, the design and wording of which were crucial to the potential success of the conference. Navigation bars at the top and bottom of each page in Talking Heads and Virtual Heads along with the inherent navigation system of the software ensured that conference navigation was as straightforward as possible.

Lessons learned:

- the opportunity to engage with high profile guests in a conference format straight to busy school leaders' desktops excited great interest
- high profile people are willing to give of their time and energy
- the strategy of launching a community of practice from a conference format may have some advantages, building as it does on participants' existing interest
- conference papers do not need to be weighty. The benefits to participants emerge from the conference contributions
- many conference participants seemed to want advice and straightforward answers to immediate practical issues of implementation
- many conference participants shared openly and willingly their experience and resources for the benefit of others
- the format was sufficiently successful to warrant further exploration as a means of increasing participation and communication
- NCSL staff appeared to be very enthusiastic about the conference
- there were 11685 hits to the Thinking Skills Conference by the end of the conference
- the De Bono hotseat, De Bono breakout, Fisher hotseat, Fisher breakout and the what's Next? sections received contributions from 63 different individuals, many contributing more than once, making a total of 131 contributions
- The ratio of contributors (63) to registrations (1200) was approximately 5%, suggesting a high proportion of observers (or 'lurkers') in the conference
- The 63 contributors were recognised as 29 from talking headteachers and 32 from Virtual Heads
- There is clear evidence in the conference contributions that school leaders valued the conference as a sounding board which offered the opportunity to share in everyone else's experiences. Moreover, the access to a wealth of knowledge and approaches that they could never have gathered individually was also valued
- The format of the Baumfield case studies did not attract the interest that was expected. This will need further research to determine reasons why

Last quote
I've had such fun this week exploring think.com and the conference. Lots to think, say and do. Thank you.
(Conference contributor in a Sticky message)

Image 2.14 thinking skills hotseat

Peer-to-Peer Hotseat: Curriculum Design: Now and When? (April 2002)- Community of Talking Heads

This hotseat was one in the series of 'peer-to-peer' hotseats in the Community of Talking Heads, and followed closely on the success of a previous hotseat on ''SATS vs The Enriched Curriculum'' which seemed to strike a chord among a number of headteachers who debated how these two things could co-exist in a primary school curriculum. The hotseat ''Curriculum Design: Now and When?'' came about following a discussion between a headteacher and a facilitator around The Enriched Curriculum hotseat.

The hotseat guest prepared and posted a short paper outlining his position that:-

"what has happened in our primary schools has been the introduction of a secondary timetable. The QCA units have

much to commend them but they have brought with them a view of the curriculum which is fragmented and time prescribed. The trojan horse of discrete subjects has arrived."

As usual, the guest also posted a short personal biography to ensure that readers could identify the things that interested him. The introduction to the hotseat summarised some of the paper's main points and finished with this challenge:-

"Where are we going with the curriculum and where should we go? Who are the power brokers in all this? When did we lose our power to shape the curriculum experience and is it retrievable? Game on for a rethink!"

It was clear from the start that this item had struck a chord with other headteachers, and within a very short time there appeared the first two responses to the guest's challenge. One response said:-

"Game on David! We are at present looking at how we teach, and my biggest worry is that teachers have lost the ability to reflect, to take time, to stand and watch. They need the comfort blanket of a prescribed curriculum. Ironic really as our school aim is to open minds and pursue independence! Children are developing independence but some of the teachers are still afraid. Accountability and lack of belief in their own professionalism are, I believe, two of the biggest culprits. Everyone learns when they are interested and motivated so these must be our aim. I think we as headteachers need to stand up for what we believe in. I'm happy to be given advice from the strategists but only advice, then I will make an informed decision - is this right for my school, my staff, my children and my parents? That's my job as I see it - isn't it?"

The tone of the hotseat was set, and there followed 23 questions over the following month, each being answered by the guest within one working day. The first few of these were generally supportive of the guest's position, with several headteachers returning to enter new questions or comments. Contributors began to explore ways to change the curriculum and to share some of the steps they had themselves taken in their schools, along with the reactions they had meet to those steps. Some indicated that they would like to meet face-to-face to discuss how they might move things forward together.

As the finish of the hotseat approached, the tone of some of the contributions changed. There was almost a sense of relief among some contributors that they had found this hotseat and that they had met like-minded people. The following quotes illustrate this:

"Thank you for this hotseat. Reading and contributing have reminded me of where I want to go!"

"After battling for a long time to reform our school's curriculum I am so excited by what I am reading from you all."

"I have read today for the first time this hotseat discussion, and

I feel enthused and invigorated to find so many headteachers articulating the thoughts and questions which I have in my headteachers about developing the curriculum."

"It does seem a lonely furrow I plough, or it did until I read all this."

The rich debate of this hotseat clearly required deeper exploration, and the hotseat guest was willing to continue the debate. The idea of establishing a community of practice on "Re-modelling the Curriculum" was explored with the intention of enabling the community of practice to be available to a wider group of headteachers.. The contributors to the hotseat confirmed their willingness to continue their discussions in a public forum and the Open Community of Practice was established as a page of the Community of Talking Heads. In doing this all the group's discussions were made accessible to any headteacher who wished to join in. At the same time the space was clearly delineated as a community of practice with its own style and layout.

Since the establishment of the Open Community of Practice members have begun to share experiences and to discuss how they might proceed. There is energy in the group to explore the possibility of NCSL funding to visit each other's schools to begin some collaborative work on changing their curriculum.

Lessons Learned:
- peer-to-peer hotseats can touch community members deeply
- potentially far-reaching change for schools can begin with online encounters such as this
- this hotseat broke down feelings of isolation among headteachers
- facilitation can enable headteachers to form powerful groups to explore change
- creation of an Open Community of Practice is possible within Talking Heads – time will tell if this is sustainable
- facilitators can enable Talking Heads members to form

groups which can take advantage of NCSL resources

Final Quote - on the potential impact of this on children's learning.

"Yes please to a conference, setting up a community and e-mail exchange - I feel less lonely already. HTs have to be the ones to drive this through and give teachers the confidence in their abilities to deliver powerful learning."
(from a hotseat contributor)

Hotseats – Key findings

- Hotseats have been a successful and powerful feature since the beginning of the pilot
- The format allows for a sense of immediacy which keeps momentum high
- Hotseats have branched out from inviting 'experts' to include peer to peer hotseats, which have also been highly successful
- Hotseats provide access to highly profiled educational figures with whom headteachers can communicate easily
- They are a valuable source of direct feedback for policy makers on a local and national level
- Long after the hotseat is finished and archived, the discussions continue to attract attention
- There is evidence that hotseats are having a direct impact on national policy.
- Hotseats have encouraged headteachers to return to the site, which has impacted participation with talking heads in general

Recommendations

- That DfES and NCSL publicise the impact of their hotseats on policy design and decision making.
- That White Papers are always linked to timely hotseats
- That lively hotseat schedules are published four months in advance

- That the schedule also allows for spontaneous and timely guests
- That innovation with the hotseat tool continue
- That peer to peer hotseats schedule is planned well advance and linked to the school calendar
- That a high profile hotseat guest be in one of the hotseats in September to ensure participation is primed for the new term

2.4 Face to Face Training

Face-to-face training was a particular initiative aimed at overcoming some of the difficulties surrounding technical issues that headteachers experience. More importantly, the face-to-face sessions are an opportunity to communicate the philosophy and an understanding of the advantages of online learning communities, as a lack of this background presents a more significant barrier to participation. The face-to-face training also ensures that the facilitation team remains close to headteachers' real needs and can establish increased rapport between members who have been communicating together online. However, there is no conclusive evidence to show that a community needs face-to-face meetings to thrive.

Emphasis on face-to-face training escalated when, from April to July 2002, the facilitators worked with NCSL to train 900 plus New Heads in groups of up to 20 in the use of Talking Heads at venues spread across England.

Face-to-face training events fall into four categories;
- A training event arranged by the DfES;
- One-to-one training sessions;
- Training events arranged by NCSL including 'top up training' and training for new headteachers;
- Training at meetings arranged by Ultralab facilitation teams including think training, and meetings with local working groups and clusters.

restart ■ introduction ■ using talking heads ■ support

Aims of this session

- Gain an understanding of the philosophy and potential of the use of the Talking Heads community as a means of;
  - Communication and professional dialogue
  - Sharing of expertise
  - Mutual support
  - Aiding school improvement
  - Supporting daily professional practice

- Identify your needs and discuss how these might be met using Talking Heads

- Introduce you to the Talking Heads environment in the context of the wider world

Image 2.15 emphasising the philosophy during face-to-face training

Training session arranged by the DfES
At the start of the pilot, a meeting was held, organised by the Birmingham Grid for Learning coordinator on behalf of Birmingham LEA, to give feedback to the DfES regarding Talking Heads. This meeting proved valuable for the facilitators too as it helped them to understand key issues facing headteachers.

One-to-one training sessions
During the pilot phase, individual headteachers were visited following up requests via the online questionnaire and directly to facilitators. These sessions were arranged after prolonged technical support via the phone proved unable to diagnose or

address the issue. The facilitation team provided the help desk at this time. These meetings were valuable for establishing strong relationships with headteachers.

Face-to-face sessions arranged by the facilitators
The first face-to-face event arranged by facilitators was a meeting of members of the Pupil Behaviour Management Community with the aim of sharing ideas to develop the community.

Working teams established in Autumn 2000 led to the establishment of groups of facilitators meeting face-to-face with the headteachers. The teams pioneered an effective method of both delivering training and gaining feedback. These sessions ran at the end of 2001.

The next phase of face-to-face events saw another proliferation in their use. LEA and local groups of headteachers have been visited for the purpose of establishing means of using think.com to support local initiatives. These groups form part of the study of natural communities that may be found in section 2.6 of this document.

Finally, as a result of feedback in the 2001 online questionnaire, a group of headteachers were invited to a meeting in Chelmsford to form a focus group. Their recommendations were amongst the primary evidence for streamlining the navigation and facilitation processes.

NCSL arranged face-to-face training
At the end of last year, NCSL arranged "top up" training sessions to assist headteachers who were disoriented by the interface change in the think.com software during August 2001.

The facilitation team delivered the induction training of new headteachers in the 2002 Cohort for the purposes of the Laptops for Headteachers scheme. In previous years this training had been carried out by hardware providers, but did not focus sufficiently on the use of online communities. ULTRALAB and NCSL have redesigned this training based on best practise developed through previous experience. The sessions were lead by facilitators and supported by NCSL staff and support documentation was distributed.

Effectiveness of training
The objective of running face-to-face events for headteachers is to increase their understanding of Talking Heads and thereby increase their participation.

Evidence of an increase in participation following face-to-face events is difficult to quantify. The 46 respondents to the November training evaluation by NCSL indicate that a clear impact was had.

How often did you log on to Talking Heads before the session?	
Never	12.77%
Once or twice	53.19%
Once a month or more	19.15%
Once a week or more	14.89%
How often do you log on to Talking Heads since the session?	
Never	4.26%
Once or twice	29.79%
Once a month or more	29.79%
Once a week or more	36.17%

Table 2.9 : NCSL impact questions March 2002

Monitoring of headteachers' participation in the communities suggests that typically there is a short-term increase which then tails off. Of 18 headteachers' tracked following a face-to-face we found contributions from 9.

Within two weeks following the London face-to-face, about 50% of those headteachers who attended had contributed somewhere in Talking Heads. This was not maintained beyond the two weeks, but two hotseats were developed from issues raised at the face-to-face.

Data collected from face-to-face tracking exercises

Headteachers attending face-to-face training sessions show that those attending feel that the events are very worthwhile in

F2F training evaluation responses (n 781)	%
Fulfilling your expectations	91
Improving your knowledge	91
Relevance of content	95
Overall level of satisfaction	89
Usefulness of handouts and visual aids	90
Overall standard of delivery	93

Table 2.10: responses from headteachers regarding the quality of the 2002 face to face training

meeting the objectives of developing understanding of the Talking Heads environment.

There were also 291 out of 781 headteachers who responded with additional positive comments.
  "an excellent session - thank you"

  "No (suggestions for improvement) because the help I received gave me the wherewithal to begin using/contributing to think.com today and to gradually build up my confidence and expertise."

  " I am looking forward to taking part in the communities again in the future-- when I get time!!!"

  "Showed us how to get the most out our laptops which is what I thought this session was about."

  "The session was a very satisfactory and a vital introduction to the on-line community. It was a supported environment to acquire 'key skills' to get us going I was unsure and unconfident about my skills before coming on the course but found that the input was extremely helpful and enabling."
Evaluation of laptop 3 training 2002

The 2001 face-to-face training sessions held by the facilitators frequently generated interest in online Local Working Groups amongst the headteachers who see the vision of online communities and request new communities. These communities are mostly short-lived because their purpose and commitments are not clear. For example the community created at the initial Birmingham headteachers training event, the Manchester training community and the Stoke primary headteachers communities have since been closed due to lack of activity. This parallels the experience of champions establishing local communities within Talking Heads without face-to-face events (section 2.6 explores these issues in more depth).

Where a community has a real purpose and a membership with

shared concerns, a face-to-face event can be used to further strengthen these bonds. Such a meeting was held with members of the Pupil Behaviour Management community. It was noticeable that this meeting concentrated on the issues to be discussed in the community and took place without much use of ICT. This led to real activities being set up in the community that was solving members' issues. The use of such real activities and communities is essential.

This is then translated into activity in Talking Heads communities, and in follow up communications with those running the sessions. Data analysed following two such events show that 107 contributions and 20 published items were posted by headteachers in two months. Additionally one facilitator had 16 stickies from those attending. Many of these expressed thanks for continued support.

If dummy or training activities are used the underlying benefit and philosophy of Talking Heads risks being lost, and ICT skills being learnt for their own sake.

  "Many thanks. Help gratefully received."

  "It has been good to meet you today, (name) and it was a very useful training session, thank you. Looking forward to a long and happy relationship with Talking Heads!"
Feedback on stickies to a facilitator, April 2002

Although it is not possible, to know empirically whether this level of communication would have occurred without the face-to-face event, the contributor of the second sticky had shown a level of rapport that is likely to have been a result of having met the facilitator face-to-face.

  "Once you have created an article or conversation how do you publish it? I'm a bit nervous as the last time I did it on our (LEA) headteacher's site I completely took over the front page. So now I'm scared."
Feedback on stickies to a facilitator, April 2002

Of the16 stickies received after the PBM event, 7 asked technical questions. This may indicate that training needs to be very explicit and requires well designed hardcopy tutorial support to take away, or that the benefit of ICT training at face-to-face events only goes so far, and cannot be seen a means for solving all such problems, even trivial ones if they do not occur at the time of the training. It does, however, give the participants a named contact to ask when faced with such problems. It may be, however, that this is detracting from their effective use of the NCSL Helpdesk.

"Is it possible to leave stickies on other participants home pages? I really do know it is, but I can't work out how to do it. How do I reach the pages?"

"I have produced a conversation in the New Heads Welcome community. It is called Helping parents to be positive and supportive. After trying for ages to follow your instructions I couldn't publish it. Please would you save my sanity and publish it for me. Thank you!!!"

"Dear (name) I have be experiencing awful problems with the ISDN connection through (company). Has anyone else? This e-mail is being sent via (company)- analogue! Kind regards" Feedback on stickies to a facilitator, April 2002

An oft-perceived advantage of face-to-face events is that they help to establish a clearer navigation model for the participants. This is substantiated by the data below.

Do you find **Talking Heads** easier to use as a result of the training session?			
Yes	82.98%	No	17.02%

Table 2.11: NCSL November 2001 f2f training evaluation

Face-to-face events have assisted in drawing out 'lurkers', that is those who generally do not contribute. For example, in the One Stop Shop activity, a pilot headteacher who had been dormant for over a year is now active.

This feedback from a headteacher following a session in Reading shows that some technical issues are unlikely to be discovered without face-to-face training.

"I had visited the 'Talking Heads' site many times prior to coming on the face-to-face training, however I found the usefulness of the site limited. Now having gone through the training and discovered I was not in the New Heads community, I am now on course to explore and get the most out of the community. It was reassuring to sit among fellow colleagues and input data and discuss issues."

In their crowded professional life, headteachers' report welcoming the opportunity to create some specific time and space to devote to exploring a new initiative.

"Very helpful. I had already used Think.com as part of my NPQH but not got to grips with all the facilities and creating my own info on my page. Today gave me a chance to review how I am using Think.com and browse some other articles and uses. Today was an ideal timing for me as I already knew some things about NCSL and Think.com but had not had the 'space' to explore other uses or the time to put my own info on to the page. I have also learnt how to put my photo on to the site. Thanks, time well spent."

"This will be the start of something enormously helpful and productive, but like everything in the first year of headship it's another thing to take on board and it will take time and patience to get to grips with."

The face-to-face events generally run for half a day, but experience and feedback has shown that a whole day provides more time to cover the background philosophy and technical skills effectively.
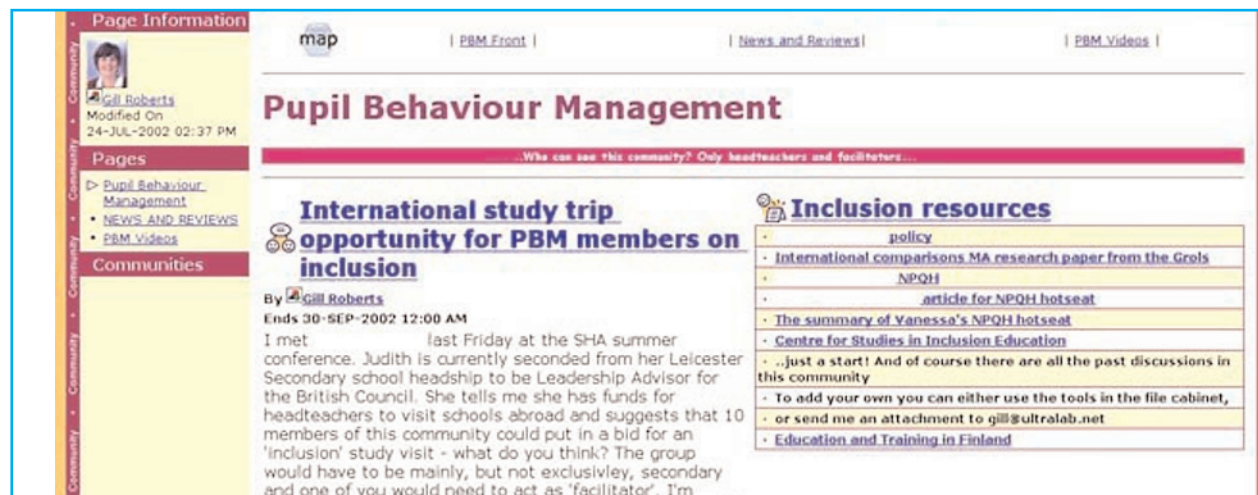

Image 2.16 Pupil Behaviour Mnagement community

Longer day would be better	78
Too fast for people new to ICT	66
Not enough support for new user, click with tutor	40
Time/practice time	37
More info about using the camera wanted	32
Follow up training would be good	19
Too slow for experienced participants	12

Table 2.12 : New Headteachers 2002 half day Face to Face evaluation.

Although there is no clear evidence that headteachers' participate more due to face-to-face training, many have indicated that they prefer 'sitting with sally' (headteacher at Manchester 2001 training) and that they benefit from having time with their colleagues (headteachers Focus Group Feb 2002)

Certainly training remains on the agenda as indicated by the response to the question below.

Do you feel you would benefit from an advanced session?

Yes 57.45%   No 31.91%   12

Table 2.13: request for advanced training session

Image 2.17 New Heads Welcome community

Whether this can be provided using Web conferencing is being explored, but face-to-face training remains popular with headteachers as the following data indicates.

In terms of support in your use of Talking Heads, which of the following would best suit you (you may select more than one option if applicable)?

Contact initiated by a facilitator	19.15%
Contact with facilitator initiated by yourself	14.89%
Phone and/or web tutorial	27.66%
Face to face training	40.43%
E-mail newsletter	48.94%
Hardcopy newsletter	12.77%

Table 2.14: Types of support requested

Face-to-face events – Key findings

- Face-to-face meetings provide opportunities to overcome any technical difficulties; to communicate the philosophy and advantages of on-line communities; and to establish an initial rapport between group members
- Face-to-face events must have a clearly defined purpose
- The participants should inform this purpose
- The purpose should include an exploration of the benefits and potential of online community membership and not just focus on technical skills
- Where face-to-face events are held for other purposes, for example local groups, the introduction of talking heads training must be given enough time
- Face-to-face sessions should be seen as complementary to online training, not a replacement for it
- If possible, facilitators should identify potential champions there and then
- Venues must have appropriate connections, equipment and technical support
- Training at a f2f should utilize existing real online

communities
- Emphasis should be on contributing to current items and not on creating new ones
- During a session the support of a facilitator and BT Helpdesk should be used in the same way as it would when the headteacher is away from f2f e.g. Use of telephone, stickies

Recommendations

- Philosophical content should include where Talking Heads sits in relation to NCSL, DfES, ULTRALAB, Oracle and BT
- Web conferencing to be implemented as an alternate and supplementary way to deliver training, initially for "advanced" members
- Emphasis should be placed on the fact that Talking Heads is essentially an online project with facilitator support and participation is fundamental to its success
- Face-to-face should be used to supplement online contact

2.5 Developing Community Participation through Fostering Champions

This section of the report explores the development of headteachers as 'Champion' facilitators. Champions are school leaders 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. They may also decide to establish a community. Within Talking Heads, champions are generally a headteacher, although in one instance, an educationalist with expertise in a particular area was supported to become a champion in a specific domain. 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.

The research has shown that there is close correlation between the act of becoming a champion facilitator and the opportunities set out in the 'Five Stages of School Leadership' of the NCSL Leadership Development Framework. This correlation is particularly evident in the roles of 'Advanced Leadership' and 'Consultant Leadership.' The Leadership Framework 13.3 (NCSL, 2002) for example states that;

"The range of opportunities open to experienced leaders is likely to grow…. research opportunities, mentoring, coaching, training and consultancy."

The Talking Heads Facilitators formalised their research by setting up seventeen case studies looking at the role of a school leader champion within Talking Heads. These case studies cover a wide range of different options for the role we defined as "Champion Facilitator" and are explored in the body of this report.

Our belief is that school leaders, acting in the role of champion facilitator, will have a productive and positive impact on the level of engagement of other leaders in the use of online communities as a tool for their own professional development and that this involvement brings legitimacy and relevance through the authentic voice of the practitioner on the ground.

There were a number of Talking Heads communities which provided case studies.
- SEN community:
- Pupil Behaviour Management Community
- Natural Communities Case
- Multicultural and Race Community/Issues
- Early Years Community
- Numeracy Champions

Image 2.18 SEN community

Champion facilitators and hotseat guests

It is noted that there is considerable overlap between the role of headteachers as hot seat guests (See section 2.5 of report) and that of Champion Facilitators. A hot seat guest may evolve into a Champion or visa-versa or fulfil both roles at the same time.

Case record of Numeracy Conferences
online community follow up

Following a hotseat discussing the National Numeracy Strategy, a community was set up and champions sought. The role of the champions was set out in the email asking members of the community if they would like "to encourage other heads to participate in discussions primarily by sharing your own experiences of leadership and management of the strategy in the discussions."

Numeracy conference lessons learnt:
- the champions were very enthusiastic and took on their role conscientiously
- they contributed extensively to both the hot seat and the conversations
- their contributions acted as effective "seeds" in the conversations
- they demonstrated good models of contributing; good humoured; short, relevant contributions; inviting responses from others; thanking other contributors

Benefits of becoming a champion facilitator

There are a range of key motivational factors for becoming a champion facilitator. The following summarises the responses of champions, when asked what the motivating factors were for them to get involved as champion facilitators - the 'What is in it for me?':

- It is of personal value to them as a networking and professional development opportunity for discussion and debate (for example the PBM community, see case record extract below)
- It brings professional credibility and opportunity to shine and be valued
- Rapport with others is highly enjoyable, through acting as a host or sharing problems
- It is seen as an important opportunity to pass on knowledge
- It shows a commitment to the profession's wider development, especially beyond a local area
- It is valuable to lead an online community in an area of education, and for some has become a passion
- Talking heads will help all involved to achieve better outcomes for colleagues and children
- It also provides assistance with reaching personal and/or school performance targets, especially the understanding and use of ICT for their school

Case Record - the Pupils Behaviour Management Community (PBM)

The PBM community was built with the support of a group of champions who had initially engaged in a discussion in the Learning and Curriculum Community. They subsequently met at a face-to-face meeting. One of the outcomes was an agreement to be 'editors' of the community conversations, that is taking over the publising of items. The champion headteachers are still keen and are encouraged by the prompt of an alert email or sticky from the facilitator. There is a sense of commitment to each other and the issues. They still work closely with the intervention and support of facilitators. The benefits of having these champions are the speed and reliability with which they provide advice and guidance for other headteachers.

Common Attributes, Expectations and Skills of a Champion Facilitator

In addition to the motivating factors for wanting to be a champion facilitator there are a number of other common features about these school leaders. Most are self-starters, early adopters and open to opportunities for professional development where ever they come from. They find that Talking Heads is a positive and enjoyable way to do this. They are often activists in the wider school leadership communities to which they belong. For example, chairperson of local cluster group of schools or involved in one of the professional associations. The majority are ICT literate, and for those who are not, there is encouragement and support available to ensure the necessary sklills can be learned. They are confident enough to voice their opinions both at face-to-face meetings and online, and have an 'infectious nature' that encourages others to join in.

However, we have seen from our case studies that a potential pitfall is where the role of the 'champion facilitator' is equated to being the 'leader' online. The danger here is that the enthusiasm of the 'champion facilitator' in leadership mode blinds them to the fact that the community members are not following them and the online community flounders as there is not buy-in from colleagues. It is therefore crucial for the supporting facilitator to talk through the role they are taking on as part of the induction process for these champions.

Case Record - the Racial Equality Community (REQ)

"This champion facilitator was initally a school leader chosen because she was an expert in the racial equality field working with an LEA. She had little experience or confidence with ICT. Providing a laptop, as well as face-to-face and over-the-phone support in using the think.com software, empowered her to develop significant skills and made it possible for her to manage the REQ community. She set up and ran a hotseat allowing her to provide key insights and documentation at a time when the Racial Equality Policy had to be implemented nationally. Now a head, this work has given her the confidence to make other significant contributions such as posting thought provoking discussion starters in key hotseats."
(facilitator case study)

Champion Facilitators and 'Natural Communities'

For a detailed view on 'Natural Communities' see section 2.6.

Our research shows that the role of the champion facilitator in partnership with the facilitator is vital to the success of 'natural ' communities.

Case Record - Cheshire Headteachers

A facilitator comments :

"after a meeting with colleagues in NCSL, an HMI and Headteacher in the Cheshire area we were invited to the Cheshire Headteachers conference. An overarching Cheshire online community was created with the aim being to set up a sub-community for mentors so that they can share experiences and communities for new heads and mentors." (It is noted this is similar to the model being developed in Wales.)
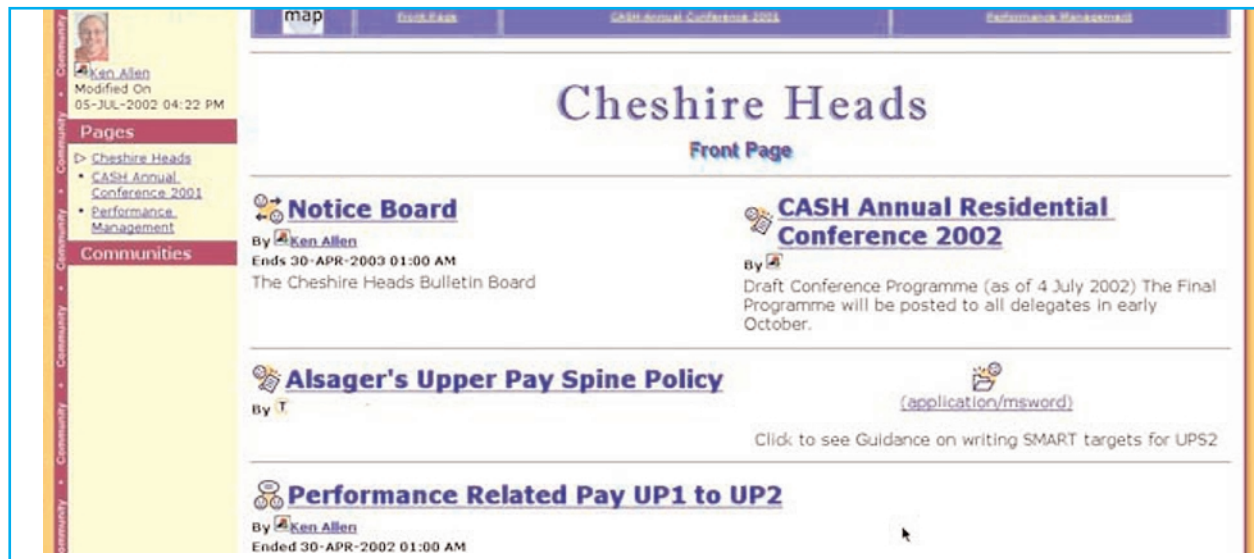

Image 2.19 Cheshire Headteachers community

The relationship between Talking Heads Facilitator and Champion Facilitators.

As evidenced throughout this section the partnership between the full time facilitators and the champion facilitators is essential to the champion fulfilling their role successfully. Our case studies show that a range of strategies are needed to scaffold these champion facilitators. These scaffolding aspects are covered in more depth in appendix 2.5.1 of this report, but include face-to face support and training, regular telephone meetings and online communication using a combination of email and community tools, such as stickies.

The full time facilitators have to combine the skills of detective, coach, mentor, trainer, guide and confidant in supporting these school leaders. They have to have resilience, tenacity and endless patience. They often develop a personal rapport, which is important in showing how we value the contributions of the champion facilitators. One vital skill is the ability to spot and nurture the potential champions. As more stakeholders, such as

LEAs and other agencies become involved, the role of a champion develops further. They can successfully reach an increasingly wide range of people through the network they create. Our case study research shows that where the LEA also become partners to the development of "Natural Communities" along side the champion facilitators and facilitators these communities tend to thrive.

Case Record - Shropshire School Development Group 15 Community

A facilitator comments:

"Initial contact with Shropshire was instigated by a Primary headteacher who had expressed a wish to begin using Talking Heads as a vehicle to supplement the work of his local cluster group of head. Simultaneously, Shropshire LEA was also about to enter into a contractual agreement with Oracle to develop their use of Think.com count-wide. The primary head organised a meeting between the LEA and the facilitation team, which in turn lead to a Talking Heads presentation to a pilot group of Shropshire Heads, who formed an LEA pilot group and face-to-face training dates were arranged.

The outcome has been a purposeful community, which is regularly visited by its members. Regular top up face-to-face training is also being used, at the head's request, to maintain this engagement. The champion facilitator has been vital in kick starting the community and in developing systems for its longer-term sustainability by attracting other heads to take on the championing role. The LEA ongoing involvement has been important to the credibility of the pilot use of online communities in this area. It is envisaged by the LEA that this potential pilot group will form a core of champions who would hopefully return to their own clusters and develop more local communities.'

See appendices 2.5.1, 2.5.2 and 2.5.3 for tools to aid the recruitment and training of champions.

All the evidence points to the fundamental role of the facilitator, when working to help champion facilitators be successful, is making the most of the time these school leaders have to offer. This has clear implications for the working time of the employed facilitators.

Impact of Champion Facilitators on Leadership and Management in Schools

As is seen by many of the references in this part of the report our research shows that where champion facilitators are effectively supporting an online community or an activity within communities, the impact on other school leaders is significant in moving their thinking forward. The role is central to the learning that is going on not only in the online community but also as a contribution to the wider development of leadership and Management as embodied in the NCSL Framework for Leadership (NCSL, 2002). In particular, at least seven networked learning communities have an active Talking Heads champion as a leading member.

Champions – Key Findings

- Recognising and developing champion facilitators has been a key factor in extending innovation in Talking Heads
- Evidence shows that, champions have greater success in establishing communities when support has been available.
- Champion facilitators have worked most effectively when there has been a clear purpose, agreement and time limit put on their role, which has brought about a commitment, coherence and enthusiasm.
- The evidence in the case records suggests that the role of champion facilitators working in partnership with the facilitator is key to the development and vibrancy of 'Natural Communities', (See section 2.6) and topic or

theme communities, such as the one for Special Educational Needs.
- To date, the most successful champions have had well-structured support from facilitators, who have worked with them to provide a clear purpose
- 'Natural communities' have developed more quickly when there has been a strong partnership between facilitators and champions
- There is a considerable overlap between Community of Talking Heads hotseat guests and champions
- Becoming a champion is a positive and beneficial experience for those involved

Recommendations

- That a system of identifying, induction, developing and supporting Champion Facilitators be adopted as an integral part of the development of Talking Heads
- That a support manual be used as appropriate, to aid the work of these champions along with a letter setting the expectations of the school leader and support to be provided (see appendix 2.5.2)
- That provision be made to remunerate out-of-pocket expenses
- That as a further motivating factor, accredited professional development opportunities should provided for champions. These should range from recognition by NCSL through the use of certificates. This could be provided through certificated NCSL online facilitation training, or through being able to use the experience towards further qualification such as an MA
- NCSL hold a face-to face conference of Champions at Nottingham as a positive recognition of the contribution these school leaders have made
- That research into the ongoing role of Champion Facilitators and their impact on the vibrancy of Talking Heads be extended (see appendix 2.5.3).

2.6   From 'Natural Communities' to Local Working Groups

Another strand of Talking Heads was aimed at developing participation through 'natural communities'. These could be pre-existing 'natural communities' of school leaders such as local networks or consortia of headteachers or they could be cluster groups. A variety of other terms were used such as 'affinity groups' and after some time of working with these groups, the name Local Working Groups was coined to indicate their purposeful participation. Clearly, location in an electronic environment need not be an important criteria for such groups.

The rationale for this work was that if naturally occurring communities of school leaders use community software within Talking Heads, their networks can be made more effective and productive having a positive impact on the development of the individual leaders, the group, and ultimately their schools. The initiative sought to build Talking Heads activity from the 'natural' work of individual and groups of Headteachers. Thus plans and agendas for meetings, online discussions of key topics and issues could be integrated into the Headteachers daily work. It was envisaged that headteachers might log on daily for local network activities as a matter of course. The 'Natural Community' initiative was also used to encourage regular participation in and use of the other Talking Heads communities being seen as potentially providing a sustainable foundation for participation.

The Talking Heads team worked with 12 groups. These were,
- Devon.
- Essex
- Stoke.
- Trafford
- Waltham Forest.
- Birmingham & West Midlands Catholic Primary Headteachers
- Kent

- Hackney EIC
- Cheshire Headteachers
- Bexley
- Blackpool EiC
- Shropshire Headteachers

The progress was documented in the form of 12 online case files or records of conversation, events, minutes of meetings and occasional surveys and interviews. These were analysed to reveal common threads of key components to building successful online 'natural communities'.
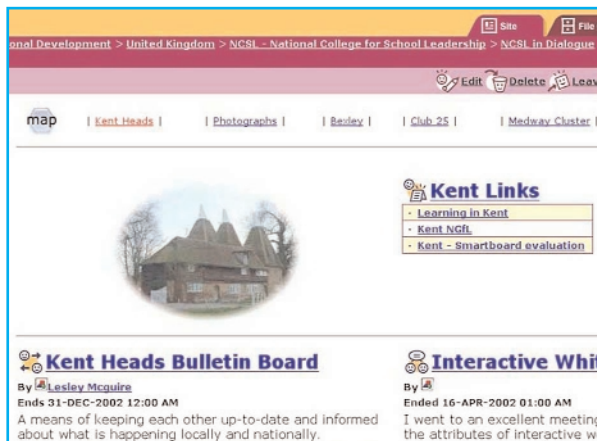

Image 2.20 Kent community

Analysis from the Case Records on 'Natural Communities'.
Where these online communities work well professional development is an integral feature and supports the leaders in their every day work. The combination of a one-stop communication point and a range of tools that enhance the quality of dialogue and decision-making foster a sense of commitment and belonging. These tools offer a means of managing the ever-increasing flow of information and reducing the time to complete communication tasks.

Online communities will not replace personal contact but they do improve efficiency and enhance the interaction. The increased efficiency enables effort to be focused on the challenges rather than means of communication.

The ICT skills required to participate need not be a barrier and often can motivate the leader to improve those skills.

"until my ICT skills become better developed I will not be able to access the huge potential offered here…" –an active cluster headteacher.

It is inevitable and desirable that these communities have the capacity to link with other communities and share knowledge skills and understanding. The key outcome is a shared culture of individual and group 'capacity building', which supports the continual improvement of their schools.

The case record of the development of the Trafford Community shows how embracing the concept of online community for their activities is making a significant impact on the school leaders involved. As well as this, it has had an impact on the wider Trafford educational community. Three schools have become their own 'Authenticating Communities' in think.com. The school's ICT coordinators have set up their own community and a number of other groupings that work with these schools. The Technology College Trust are keen to establish linking communities.

A headteacher in Colchester expressed his belief that using the Think software in Talking Heads has improved their communication and will have an impact on teaching and learning. Two of the members had included the use of Think in their performance targets.

The Key Factors in Building Successful Online Communities

The case records of the 12 communities were analysed so that key factor in the successful building of online communities could be identified. These form building blocks from which success flourishes. These include:
- Negotiating Purpose, Goals and Commitments
- Ownership
- Championing
- Face-to-face training
- The role of the facilitator(s)
- Involvement of the LEA
- Regional bodies and other stakeholders

Negotiating Purpose, Goals and Commitments

The 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 natural community work. For a set of tools used by the facilitator to clarify the purpose and commitments whilst working with groups please see appendix 2.6. The commitment includes accepting that individuals must change the way they work to exploit the online technology.

One natural community, for example announced,

'The Trafford Secondary Heads Association (TSHA) has chosen to adopt Talking Heads as its chief tool of communication outside of face to face meetings…As of March 2002 all paper communications will cease and THSA business will then be conducted through think.com exclusively."

Purpose and goals refer to how the natural community will use the tools offered by the community software, as well as some clarity about the kinds of discussions that will go on. Another headteacher reported that,

"For Stoke to go forward it must have a feeling of its own vision – a little difficult at the moment with rganizing ion, but that in itself may provide roots for development. There is a need to talk through concerns with colleagues both within the city and elsewhere the problems of down sizing. They may also be concern with the need to pull a community together in the light of the problems facing multi-cultural society following Sept. 11th."

Ownership of the Community

The case record evidence shows that the most successful communities do develop a sense of 'ownership' and wish the environment to be seen as theirs without the influence of facilitators. Communities that reach this level of 'ownership' require a different role by the facilitator but they do need the ongoing scaffolding even if it is less evident than before. In one case record it was reported that,

"As of the beginning of this month, all traces of my input have been replaced, by the headteachers involved and much activity is apparent."
They add:
I am involved on nearly a daily basis with their progress. I will visit one of the champions again soon who is assessing at the moment what support is needed."

Another case record report states a headteacher wrote to the facilitator: 'Someone has been messing with our community?…The facilitator wrote 'I stickied my confession.'

Champions (See section 2.5 for detail)

All the evidence from the case records points towards the vital role of the community champion/s in the creation, vibrancy and sustaining of natural communities in an online environment. However, having a champion is not sufficient for a community to thrive and they need the rest of the members of that

community to buy in. Only then can the efforts of the champion be fully rganizi.

A facilitator reports on a community that has not taken off:

'The lead headteacher is very much a champion and 3 or 4 of the headteachers have received training in think.com. The overall impression is that the headteachers group is fragmented and too busy in their daily crisis management to get involved.'

A facilitator commenting on the relationship they have with a set of champions: 'Most will come swiftly into a discussion when I alert them to the need.'

The research shows that the relationship between the Champion/s and facilitator/s is vital if the development of ownership by the community members is to evolve. A key skill of the facilitator is to move the champion from one of dependency on the facilitator to one of supportive advisor and friend.

Face-to-Face Training

The communities that have been most successful have had an element of face-to-face training for the headteachers built into the process of their development. This training has allowed school leaders to gain first hand experience of using think and online communities in Talking Heads.

It is important that champions attend these training sessions so they model how to use the online environment. Research also shows where this sort of training has not taken place, the communities have struggled. One session is insufficient for the headteachers to gain confidence . They value continuing contact.

Evidence from training sessions demonstrates that the majority of headteachers in these groups, once they understand the possibilities of online communities at a national level, and also

at a local and school level, are keen to get involved and try to make it work. However, most have yet to change their working practices to make online communities an every day tool, which is seen in the following statements:

A facilitator reflects on work with a community,
"There is a fund of goodwill and eagerness to learn new skills but headteachers are worried about finding the time.

The role of Facilitation and Facilitators

The case records demonstrate that the facilitation processes and skills are key to the success of these communities. Without the facilitators' involvement, expertise, vigilance and ongoing scaffolding few of these natural communities survive for long. Even when there is a very keen Champion of the community these communities falter in the earlier stages unless they are supported by a dedicated facilitator/s.

Facilitators need to be aware and receptive to school leaders who ask for the formation of Natural Communities (e.g. Gloucester Headteachers). They also need to be proactive in working with the networks they come into contact with to tease out if an online community is appropriate for them (e.g., a group of dispersed Devon schools facing challenging circumstances).

The following examples from the case studies are just a few of the many examples of what it takes to keep these communities going by facilitators.

In the first example a facilitator records,

"Facilitators who know their local areas and networks come to understand who are the movers and shakers, gatekeepers and drivers, which helps in moving these communities forward. The credibility of the facilitator is as important as is the person who introduces the facilitator to the group."

In another example, a facilitator records an action plan of ,

'Ways forward':

• help set up the community
• contact all headteachers to encourage them to register and get involved
• provide training sessions
• regular support for champions, especially keeping the community lively and relevant
• supporting the network that surrounds the community such as linking with interested personnel in the local education authority and fe colleges
• dealing with the spin-off interest from other groups and schools nearby

After a slow start for a community due to delays with registration a facilitator reports,

> *"I am writing to all the community members offering assistance in activating this community. I am happy to meet with a group of community members and give training targeted on your needs."*

Another facilitator establishes a contract with, ''I will keep regular contact with the headteachers and champion. I will monitor the pulse of the community.'' This facilitator lists an example of the many emails, electronic stickies that they are dealing with on a daily basis, which act to encourage participation.

Example of one hour's period.

• 10.30 Phoned Headteachers –got fax machine
• 10.32 Spoke to Champion
• 10.40 Phoned headline busy for 10 minutes. When got through headteacher out so left message
• 10.50 Followed up one headteacher who had lost codes was enthusiastic to receive them
• 10.59 Phoned headteacher who also may not have received codes. Got answering machine so left message
• 11.05 Sent two emails to headteachers that had not

attended course but are registered to encourage them
• 11.10 One of earlier headteachers phoned back. Headteacher reports had been into community and left a joke. Is intending to visit again soon
• 11.15 Tried one of previous Headteachers again. Got through this time and helped her to log on
• 11.25. Received email to say a headteacher was trying to get into Talking Heads from home but had 'left all my bumph at school.'' Emailed back instructions.

The above examples also demonstrate the considerable 'scaffolding' by facilitators that is needed to ensure a community becomes established. The facilitation during the case study period has been based on a 'taper' or 'wedge' support model:

• Initiation – a high level of facilitator involvement working with champions.
• Development – increasingly members of the community take over its development and running with increasingly hands off facilitator involvement.
• Sustaining – members of the community taking ownership, running the community for themselves and requiring a 'light touch' of facilitator input. The eventual aim being that the facilitator is only there to provide a regular health check.
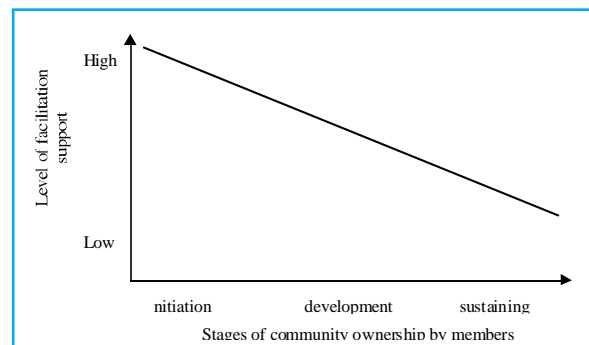

Figure 2.7: Wedge of facilitation

In practice none of the communities have reached this 'sustaining' level yet but there is evidence that over time this will

be achieved. It should be noted that none of the communities are over a year old at the time of writing.

It is clear that the significant barriers are pressure of work, the level of ICT skills and access to a computer. It is our belief and the stated wish of the school leaders that facilitation support will be required to continue into the foreseeable future if the communities are to continue to develop. As those barriers are reduced or eliminated it is expected that the level of facilitation required will decline.

Case record - Involvement of Local Education Authorities (LEA), Regional Bodies and other Stakeholders

The case records show that natural communities benefit from having the support of their LEA or other local and regional stakeholder. Examples are found in the involvement of the FE colleges in Trafford and the Excellence in City initiative in Blackpool. This support, both in the endorsement of the use of online communities but also by supporting training and other costs, has demonstrated a wider commitment providing validity and credibility. It is important to ensure that headteachers understand the nature of 'community', and to make efficient and constructive use of their time online. LEA involvement can sometimes be the driving force behind this.

Working with LEAs and other stakeholders bring added complications and sensitivities (see section 2.6 on Purpose, Goals and Commitments for more details). One of the important factors to emerge from our case studies is that what helps to get round some of the challenges of working with these bodies is having a facilitator who lives nearby and knows 'the patch'.

In one example the case records show a Facilitator following up the previously mentioned seeds of interest.

> *"I had a long conversation with an HMI this afternoon. He is organizing workshops for all the Cheshire Heads at their*

annual conference…the HMI is providing a slot on the programme of 15 minutes on Talking Heads followed up by discussions at lunchtime. He is keen to see TH used with Cheshire headteachers for peer to peer mentoring.

In another example,

"following a general training session a headteacher asks us to arrange another training session just for their EiC cluster."

"The borough is leading two initiatives following an initial meeting with the LEA school improvement officer."

One facilitator tracking the natural communities they are working with records,

"LEA support of headteachers' involvement in developing online communities is good.' LEA involvement has brought credibility and overcome some of the obstacles."

This case record research highlights a range of barriers and obstacles to the creation and sustaining of vibrant natural communities online. These parallel the barriers to participation identified in section 2.1 and includes difficulties with access, delayed registration and lack of familiarity with the software. Time commitment is a major barrier.

Facilitator visit to a Champion.
"The LEA intranet was so slow we could not access the think pages. I ended up running my telephone extension cable through to the school office and connecting via the head's laptop having corrected the settings."

Delayed registration has held up training and creating the critical mass of interest to get the community active. The recovery of this position adds considerable workload to the facilitator, especially trying to regain the momentum in the community.

"Time has emerged as a major reason for doubting the usefulness of Talking Heads."

"With the half term over got through to two headteachers. Both still very interested one had been active recently."

"Break downs in the software, Internet links and LEA/school intranet systems that block out think.com."

"There were plans to develop a small Network Learning Community but these have been superseded by local developments and are unlikely to come to fruition."

"In all three communities I work with efforts to overcome resistance focused upon 1. Overwork of the headteachers, 2. The availability of email and intranet."

Headteachers are busy professionals and finding the time to invest in Talking Heads is difficult. However, it must also be seen as time in the context of the potential positive benefits and many have not seen or do not perceive the investment of time to be valuable.

Lexden: Creating an Online Community from a Pre-Existing Natural Network of Headteachers - case study

This case study refers to the first Local Working Group (LWG) to be inducted. The group consists of the headteachers of the main partner primary schools of a large secondary Beacon comprehensive.

The coordinator was a member of the TH pilot project. He had joined as a result of his experience with the OU LPSH course and had experienced using 'First Class' software. The frequency of communication he had with others declined after the end of the course as the group lost "purpose". He encouraged the other members of his cluster to register and log on.

The first training session was arranged for November 5th 2001

in the local Curriculum Development Centre. The group had specifically asked for the pace to be gentle as they felt they lacked ICT skills.

It was stressed during the training that for the online community to be successful they would need to change the way they worked. Emphasis was placed on using the community software as a cluster knowledge management and communication tool. They were encouraged to agree to login everyday and leave a comment - they did.

The community was created with minimal features in an attempt to avoid confusion and compound any 'techno fear'. There was a bulletin board created using the 'debate' tool and an agenda created using the 'hotseat' tool. As confidence was gained the number of elements in the community was increased.

At first progress was limited as most of the group had not developed a secure grasp of the Think software and they still defaulted to their more familiar way of working via phone and fax. The group requested a second training session in one of the schools. That took place on January 21 2002. As confidence was gained and the potential realised a third training session was held at which they resolved to create the items in the community themselves.

The nature of the activity that developed
- Discussing the date of upcoming meetings both business and social
- Overtly supporting each other's personal and work situations
- Collaborating with research and eventually sharing a policy on race equality
- Humorous exchanges
- Sharing experiences of purchasing or renting equipment
- Sharing knowledge about how to use the community tools.
- Acknowledging the learning from the support given

From	To
Communication by phone fax and email is the norm.	Members participate in the many-to-many (instead of one to one) conversations within think
Tentative staccato input prevails	Flowing detailed dialogue developed reducing the need for alternative forms of communication.
Guarded comments of limited value.	Significant, open comments which initiate action and reflection by the members. The activities add value, both professionally and socially, for the group.
Limited frequency of access.	The community is accessed by its members more than once a day on average. (It is not anticipated that all natural clusters or local working groups will develop this intensity of activity)
Limited evidence of social capital.	Empathy, trust, collaboration and sharing are intrinsic features. Humour is freely used as a means of reinforcing the bond.
Members rely on the facilitator to create items.	Members create the items required.
An specialised archive is not necessary	A specialised archive is desirable for efficient operation of the community.
Software tools and features are used sparingly.	The features expand as more of the group's activities are transferred online. (Not all are professional task-based as the social dimension develops some items can be created to support purely social interaction)
The facilitator provides high levels of support and observes the activities in order to identify key stages and needs.	The facilitator maintains a watching brief and diplomatically prompts rather than interjecting as the group adopts a more active role in maintaining and extending the community.
Most members are reticent and acknowledge they need support.	The members are more confident. Some are willing to promote the benefits, support other individuals and working groups.

Table 2.15: Changing Nature of Online Community Activity Over Time:

- Comment positively on the facilitator improvements to the community. Comment on apparent error in software (really a request for help)
- Acknowledging the value of the workshops and recognising that they have more to learn
- Alerting the group that more information has been made available on the site
- Sharing ideas about specific skills that need to be developed at the next workshop
- A range of comments on policies. A request for views on how to implement/process the policies
- Sharing success

The April Bulletin Board
What did the headteachers do?

- One member created the bulletin board using the debate tool with Business, Social and Urgent, Information categories. 130 contributions in four weeks.
- Discussing the date of upcoming meetings both business and social.
- Overtly supporting each other's personal ands work situations.
- Collaborated to share research and eventually a policy on Race Equality.
- Humorous exchanges. Sharing experiences of purchasing or renting equipment.
- Sharing knowledge about how to use the community tools.
- Acknowledging the learning from the support given.
- Comment positively on the facilitator improvements to the community. Comment on apparent error in software (really a request for help).
- Acknowledging the value of the workshops and recognising that they have more to learn.
- Alerting the group that more information ahs been made available on the site.
- Sharing ideas about specific skills, which need to develop at the next workshop.

What was the impact and learning?
- They maintained a sense of commitment to the BB and ownership of the community.
- Arranged a future face to face meeting online.
- Shared policies enabled them to move forward with implementing the Race Equality policy.

Is it worthwhile?
- Humorous exchanges raised morale "Thank you to all of you I needed a good laugh"
- Headteacher acknowledges learning and impact on her practice as a result of facilitator providing information.

What did the facilitators do?

- Facilitator adds information in response to earlier request for help. Drew attention to current hotseat in NCSL in Dialogue relating to a previous question.
- Encouraging comment about their prowess.

How have the headteachers benefited?

"….. developed and challenged my thinking, given me access to a whole range of information all of which has benefited my school – In other words it has kept me on the ball."

"Probably, we have always been a close professional group of mavericks who met on a business and social standing. But we now contact each other a lot less by fax and phone and even email."

"Indirectly , my own ICT skills have improved therefore I have greater access to other relevant sites and improved communication with other experts generally.

"Yes (name) and I visited the Beacon school in (location) as part of our Prof. Dev. Since we had same performance manager and targets, i.e. to raise the standard of ICT in our schools. The TH has led to an increase in discussion of various technology for example video streaming and use of digital cameras."

" Difficult to single out one thing but suggest:
- *Reduces sense of isolation*
- *Helps professional development*
- *Reduces time spent as you can determine how long you spend.*
- *Daily access without needing to phone or wait until someone is free.*
- *Talking to five people at once and fairly quick feedback.*
- *Sharing documentation (not reinventing the wheel)*
- *Sharing opinions about current issues and how to deal with certain issues."*

What in your opinion is the worst feature of the local community?

"Frustration with speed of Think.com. My ignorance with technology."

"Initially rather frustrating IT skills not too hot – much better now not hampered by practicalities."

The future:
This LWG has agreed to work with another Local Working Group to share expertise and support each other. They also plan to create online communities for other staff groups such as ICT coordinators and SENCOs.

Lexden- Lessons learnt
- Shared sense of purpose and established social capital are important factors in the success of a local working group
- ICT skills can be developed but inadequate computer facilities are a significant obstacle
- This group worked together well before transferring some of their activities online and had a keen and visionary champion
- Sensitive and timely facilitation is critical but there are early indications that these groups could be largely self supporting and could support other LWG's as they start

Local Working Groups – Key findings

- Bringing most regional groups of headteachers into an online community environment takes considerable patience, perseverance, time and the development of a trusting relationship with the facilitator
- The numbers of requests for new communities indicates that the idea of online community is attractive to many headteachers
- Many headteachers would like to see their existing groups communicate online (generally regional groups)
- Initially, some members want an easily editable website that

delivers minutes, agendas, and allows the convenor or co-ordinator of the group to minimise mailing. It is sometimes difficult for these groups to make the shift to online conversations and realising the "community" element online
- The group establishing the community, facilitators, champions and members, need to collaboratively formulate a clear set of purposes and goals, which are supported by a commitment (agreement) from the groups' members. See appendix 2.5.1 for a toolkit to assist with this.
- As discussed in the section 2.1 on participation, the routine effort of logging on to communicate with others needs to be grounded in a genuine need and the fulfilment of that need. It also requires becoming familiar with a different form of communication, that of many-to-many instead of one-to-one
- This transition is made far more easily in groups that have "social capital" where regular communication is already established and socialised, and there is a commitment between the members to each other and a clearly identified benefit in continuing their communication online
- In most instances a "wedge of support" is required, with the expectation that the group will become self-sustaining
- The "toolkit" (see appendix 2.6) is assisting to optimise the time spent consulting to groups regarding the nature and use of the online environment and online communities in particular

Recommendations

- Regular training opportunities need to be provided to assist school leaders in making the use of online communities part of their daily toolbox of professional development.
- New natural communities should not be created without a clear purpose, and commitment to participation
- That all local working group communities have a dedicated facilitator/s to help them develop and sustain vibrancy
- That a full set of information including case studies and templates be made available online to minimise the amount of time requiring to be spent in face to face presentations

to groups interested in establishing online communities. This could perhaps be done collaboratively with the networked learning communities

- That the natural communities toolkit (appendix 2.6) be converted to an online tool for groups to use
- That champions are supported to network with other natural communities, cascading good practice and promoting the philosophy
- That quick guide materials to aid champions and those creating and sustaining these communities, are produced and regularly updated
- That a natural communities best practice community be established online once numbers reach critical mass
- That regularly updated training sessions for facilitators be organized to share, extend and disseminate the lessons emerging and those already learnt
- That training be included for new facilitators, for working with local working groups
- That a set of guidance for working with LEAs and other stakeholders be developed

Section Three: Architecture - Making Online Community Delightful And Productive

This section gives an overview of the structural issues involved in creating, sustaining and developing communities. The current structure of Talking Heads has evolved over the two and a half years of the project, focussing on building participation through creating a structure that is relevant to the needs of headteachers. Explanations about the types of community can be found in section 1.2.

Changes have been dictated by identified needs and external events including changes in the software, the increase in numbers registering, requirements of key stakeholders (DfES and NCSL) and the novation of Talking Heads from DfES to NCSL.

3.1 The development of the architecture and 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 structure new initiatives. The research undertaken during Talking Heads has added to this body of knowledge.

This section concerns identifying the structure which aids the developments of a successful community. A successful community is one that meets the needs of the group for whom the community is designed and thus is vibrant in terms of participative activity, including reading and contributions to community discussions. During the Talking Heads project, ULTRALAB have investigated the organisation and structure of a large number of communities and continually made refinements to the model.

Phase one: start up - February to July 2000

The facilitators familiarised themselves with the think software over the month of January, in its previous version named Scoop. ULTRALAB's Sodium design team travelled to Washington DC to work with the Oracle developers to design a look and feel more appropriate for the headteachers rather than that developed for school children in aged 8 to 14, the originally intended audience.

Talking Heads officially 'opened' to headteachers on February 14th, just over a week after the think software had been upgraded. Communities were established from the initial pilot questionnaire data and the team also capitalised on the facilitators' professional knowledge of various domains. Two communities that developed from the initial pilot data included 'Performance Development' as many headteachers expressed specific interest in this topic, and the 'Primary Community', which was established because around 60% of members were from primary schools. A community that developed from the facilitators' skills domains was the 'OfSTED' community.

Initially the only community that all headteachers belonged to was Talking Heads. An overarching community, it was used to provide topical news and as a general conversation area. Headteachers were generally made members of up to five communities as a starting point. These were chosen by facilitators on the basis of the interests indicated by the headteachers on the initial registration questionnaires. They were unable to join communities independently of the facilitators' assistance due to the design of the software. All headteachers were assigned to either the Primary, Secondary, Middle or SEN community and a Home community.

The 'Performance Development' community was so named because it emphasised the leadership and management aspect of this domain, but also because it was politically desirable to avoid pre-emptive questions about the new Performance Management requirements being developed by DfES before they had trained headteachers.

Each community was adopted by a team of facilitators. There were subsequent requests by headteachers for communities specific to their circumstance, such as small urban schools and middle schools which were set up by the team. At first there was a tendency to create new communities for any topics requested. These communities were difficult to sustain as they split the focus from established communities, dividing the attention of headteachers and ultimately leaving insufficient people to participate. This may also indicate that the purpose of communities had not been clearly negotiated between the members and so there was insufficient commitment to its success.

Where topics were identified by facilitators, such as the Business Links and Working with Stakeholders communities, there was some tension caused if headteachers did feel the need to discuss it.

A feature of the software that is key to the development of community is a restricted membership for each community space. This means that only members of a community can see the content and this is essential if a feeling of trust and community is to develop between the headteachers. This does, however, make for a complex administrative process that requires headteachers to be joined to communities if they are to participate in them.
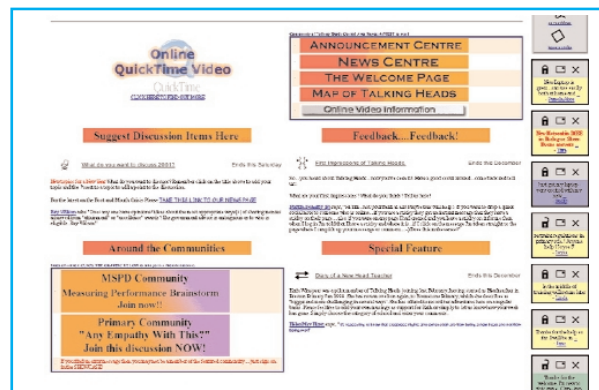

Image 3.1 Community of Talking Heads Spring 2000

The first community to be set up and run by a headteacher was the 'Gloucester Community'. He had been very active using the tools and designing articles on his home page. He took the initiative to contact colleagues and advertise the presence of the community, but there was little or no response and the community failed to generate participation. We believe that the purpose of this community did not meet the needs of the prospective membership.

Home communities

Home communities consisted of around 25 members, set up by each. They were established as a place that provides some privacy for small groups, and familiarisation with the online environment. The facilitators, therefore, set up items to: introduce headteachers to each other, inform them what was happening in the other communities, answer their questions and induct them into the ethos of online community.

Participation in these communities was mixed. Several facilitators ran online synchronous conversations or "chats". Although attracting a limited number of members, they brought some 'champion' headteachers to the fore who became very active within the communities. The synchronous chats also generated a degree of rapport amongst those who participated.

In response to the apparent decreasing need of headteachers for these small home communities over time, each facilitator amalgamated them into one with around a hundred members. This maintained a "one stop shop" to communicate with their group of headteachers.

The communities in Talking Heads in May 2000 were:
- Business Links
- Faith
- Finance, Buildings, Legal, Health & Safety
- ICT & Curriculum
- Learning, Curriculum and Assessment
- Middle Schools
- Multicultural
- New Technology
- Nursery and Early Years
- OFSTED
- OFSTED Stress Buster
- Performance Development
- Primary
- Secondary
- Small Schools
- Special Schools, Special Education and Pupil Referral Units
- Supporting Schools in Special Measures/Serious Weaknesses
- DfEE Welcome
- Working with Governors and Parents

(Source Talking Heads archive May 26, 2000)

The process in the first months, underline several themes that have become central to the development of Talking Heads:
- creating communities and conversations that are relevant to headteachers, which may be identified themselves through application forms, surveys, and online discussion
- identifying relevance through facilitator understanding of topical issues in the domain
- meeting expressed needs of individuals or groups
- simplifying, rationalising, and controlling the environment

Talking Heads is a vehicle for exchanging information. This is not merely a website of 'official' information but also includes information generated by headteachers in the form of advice, policies and so on. This needs to be accessible to headteachers and therefore ordered, archived and easily retrievable when needed by an individual. However, this is not the primary function of a 'community' (See section 1.3). Community is also about sustained social relationships involving trust, sharing and empathy. Indeed we would argue that some information might only be shared by headteachers if they feel the sense of community and trust. Building and sustaining this is an imperative.

Lessons learnt

The primary lessons learnt about developing the framework of communities, was that there needs to be a strong purpose for members to actively participate. The home communities, although serving an effective induction and broadcast/ signposting function, needed a larger membership to sustain activity.

Phase two: October 2000 - The "show home"

Feedback from headteachers indicated that they were finding it hard to find discussions they had contributed to due to the proliferation of items and communities (see section 2).

The DfEE asked the team to prepare Talking Heads as a "show home" for the NCSL launch at the New Heads Conference in November 2000, as well as for the new tranche of online registrations and cohort groups such as Beacon Schools, Excellence in Cities and Schools Facing Challenging Circumstances. This stimulated a complete restructuring of the Talking Heads communities. In preparation for the launch of the NCSL, facilitators prepared summaries of conversations for publication on their website.

The DfES instructed that all headteachers be made members of 11 communities, so that they would see these when they first logged in. However, ULTRALAB's experience in building communities persuaded the DfES to reduce this number to 8.

These communities were:

· NCSL
· DfEE
· **Home Community**
· Technical Support
· **Teaching and Learning**
· Finance and Budgeting
· Managing Staff Performance and Development
· **Heads and Tales (the social rooms)**

The three topic communities (marked in bold) became the focus for participation receiving the majority of headteachers' contributions.

At this time the Community of Talking Heads became very much a links page. There were also several long term conversations encouraging headteachers to suggest topics for discussion and give feedback, a headteacher's diary, and "showcases". The "showcases" were "taster" pages, which included some conversations on topics being discussed within the smaller communities and a mechanism for joining those communities. In the words of the facilitators:

"I think we wanted to make sure that when they did actually come in (to the smaller communities) there would be a commitment because they would have had a taster of what it was all about, rather than just saying, 'I want to join, because I want to see what it is like.'"

There was also an aim to share findings:

"…and we hoped that maybe that would expand out, so, say a group of people got together and found the cure to bad behaviour in classes, they might actually publish it here."

Where live items were published on the showcases, confusion was created however:

Image 3.2 Community of Talking Heads Autumn 2000

Talking Heads: Two Year Research Reflections 31 July 2002 ©2002

"… there was a confusion between what was actually going on in the showcase - the discussion that was going in the showcase, and the community itself."

On reflection, the facilitators wondered if the vibrant discussions taking place in the showcases might not, in some cases, have distracted headteachers' attention away from the communities themselves making them less viable.

A major issue at the heart of community is the identity of its members. This was particularly highlighted by problems which arose when duplicate accounts were created. Talking Heads is based upon trust, empathy, disclosure and support so ensuring the integrity of membership is an important issue. Where headteachers had two accounts, confusion arose over which account represented the 'real' and 'active person' to communicate with online.

At this same time, the communities' list became stabilised and by May 2001 the full communities list was as follows:
- Going for Special Status (new)
- Community Builders (new)
- DfEE in Dialogue (formerly DfEE welcome)
- Faith (old)
- Finance, Budgeting and Data (formerly Finance, Buildings, Legal, Health & Safety)
- Heads & Tales - The Social Rooms (new)
- ICT and the Curriculum (old)
- Managing Staff Performance and Development (performance development)
- Middle Schools (old)
- Multicultural Community (old)
- National College for School Leadership Community (new)
- New Technology, Video etc. (formerly New Technology)
- Nursery and Early Years (old)
- OFSTED: Getting the most from Inspection (merger between OFSTED and OFSTED Stress Buster)
- Primary (old)
- Pupil Behaviour Management (new)

- Secondary (old)
- Small Schools (old)
- Small Urban Schools (new)
- Special Measures / Serious Weaknesses Support Community (formerly Supporting Schools in Special Measures/Serious Weaknesses)
- Special Needs, Special Schools and PRUs (formerly Special Schools, Special Education and PRUs)
- Teaching and Learning (Learning, Curriculum and Assessment)
- Working with Stakeholders (developed from Working with Governors and Parents and Business Links)

Communities initiated by headteachers were as follows:
- Cambridge (new)
- Gloucester Heads (new)
- Bedfordshire Heads (new)
- Kent (new)
- School Self Review (new)

Lessons learnt

The three communities, Learning and Teaching, Managing Staff Performance and Development, and Finance, were the focal point for most members' participation, although reports indicated that members also greatly appreciated individual small communities such as Small Schools. It appears that the overarching topics were well selected and generated a clear signpost for members on where to participate.

Phase three: Migration July/August 2001 –Think 2 - Going for Cores

At the end of July 2001, the second version of Think was launched. This meant a complete change of architecture, navigation and design. Planning for this began in earnest in early June when Oracle provided a pilot version of the software for testing. This provided an opportunity for further rationalisation

and control to enable better navigation and access. The planned growth to potentially 24,000 headteachers was starting to make some of the practices developed in 'the pilot' difficult to sustain.

Key features of think 2 included the four portals:
- Home – Individuals' personal space where they go to at log in, see email and sticky notifications, have a personal web page
- School – in the context of Talking Heads this is the NCSL in Dialogue community
- Community – lists all other communities a member belongs to
- World – where you can search for all other communities and members

The term "school" for NCSL was seen as inappropriate and confusing for the headship audience so efforts were made to negotiate other options with Oracle. They indicated, however, that this was an integral part of the software design for schools and would not be changed.
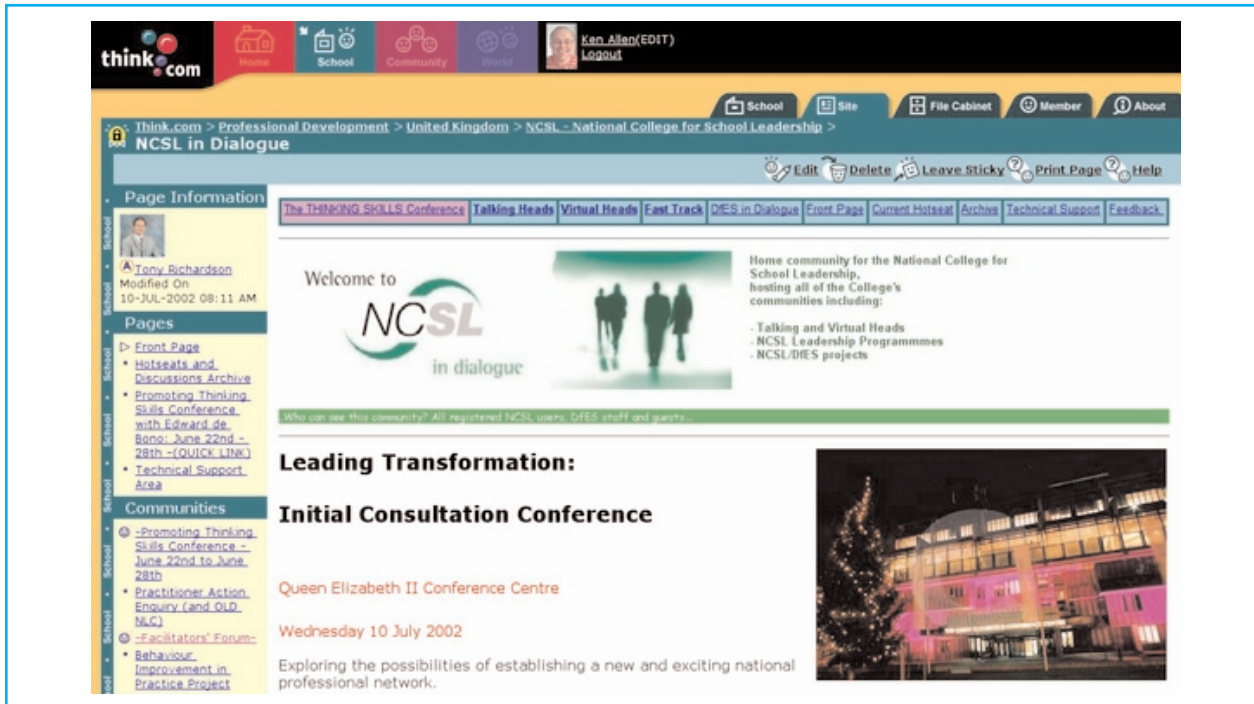
Image 3.3 school portal tab

The new software aimed to increase transparency, this meant that all communities' names and information about their purpose, but not the content, would now become visible on the left-hand side of the page to everyone using think.com. Also, all "pages" under a community now became visible on the left-hand side of the page, on the one hand assisting navigation, but on the other hand potentially overwhelming and confusing members. To reduce confusion a number of redundant communities and pages in communities were deleted.

The now 3000 members operated in a community that had experienced an "organic' growth in structure, where new communities had been created in response to requests from members. Each of these communities featured several pages with numerous points of debate. Navigating the structure

therefore became very difficult. Headteachers commented that it was becoming increasingly difficult to relocate items they had contributed to or were interested in. A simpler structure had to be found so that members could easily find items of interest, contribute to those items and return. In short the sheer size of the structure was becoming a barrier to participation for them tasked the facilitators to explore new structures.

A working party met in June 2001 to talk through the issues that the software changes and item proliferation presented. Two key decisions were taken at this meeting based on research and experience over the previous 18 months.

1. That three core communities would be established, one containing all the current headteachers. This community would be built around the Teaching and Learning community to sustain some stability. The second and third cores were to start afresh and were to be filled

synchronously as new members registered. Their number was to total 1500- 5000 members each.

2. The Managing Staff Performance & Development, Heads & Tales, Primary and Secondary communities, (the first three of which were vibrant), would be pruned and the galleries merged if possible to provide the basis for one of the other cores. If this were not possible, the summaries would be placed in the gallery of the first core community. These topics would then be recreated as individual pages within each new core community.

It was also decided:
• That the NCSL in Dialogue community was to have four pages, Front page/ current discussion, Hotseats, Technical page and archive and retain the Building Bridges and Corridor communities
• That the DfES in Dialogue community would have three pages; Front page, Hotseats, and Archive
• That the Community of Talking Heads would be renamed Talking Heads Central and act as the overarching community with three pages, Front page, Hotseats, and Archive
• That all the small communities would be migrated, and pruned to three pages
• That inactive communities would be closed and archived. This affected most of the original home communities.
• That all pages were to limit the number of items across a page to two. Similarly any images or banners were to be restricted in width to prevent scrolling.
• That purpose statements were to be made explicit.

After consultation with Oracle it transpired that it was not possible to migrate or amalgamate communities or to copy items to other communities, (this functionality became available later). This meant that the other topic communities had to be closed and items deleted. These communities were summarised, but their rich dialogue was otherwise lost. This highlighted an inherent tension between change in the online learning environment and continuity in the community.
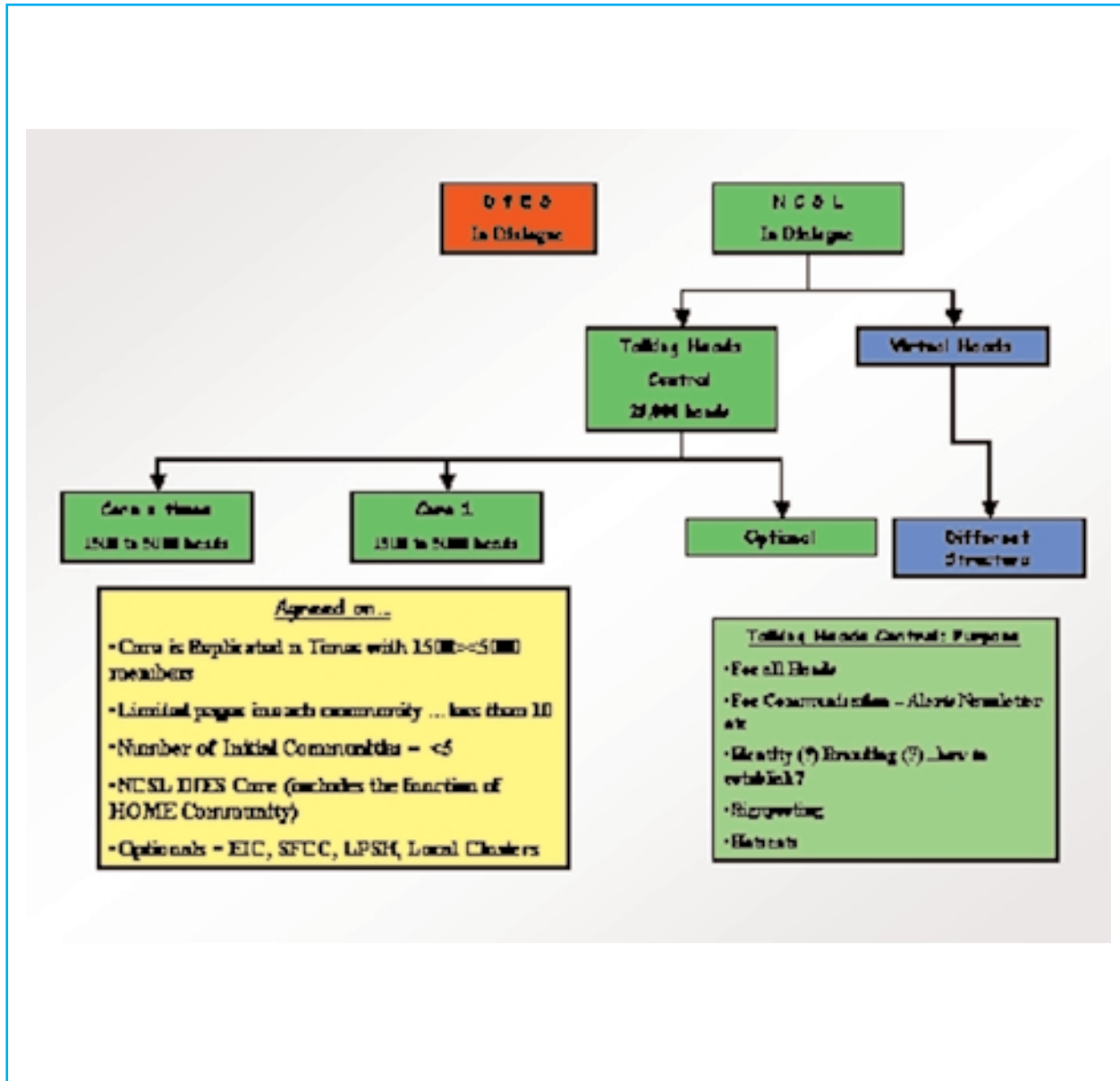
Image 3.4 model agreed at June 2001 meeting

Shortly after these decisions were made, it became apparent that the original forecast for registration numbers would not be met and that only two cores would be operative in the foreseeable future. The previous decision was revisited and an alternative strategy put forward.

The primary suggestions were:
- That the headteachers should be split into three "core" communities, with some actively contributing members being made members of more than one. It was suggested that these three communities could be designed along different lines providing rich research opportunities
- That archives of the previous conversations would be kept
- That there would be a space for general announcements
- That the Heads and Tales community be open to all NCSL members

Having discussed the proposals, the final decision was that there would be two core communities with existing members in one group. The second core would, therefore, consist entirely of new members.

Image 3.5 Talking Heads Central

Phase Four: Rationalisation - Feb 2002 facilitator face-to-face

In response to the 2001 questionnaire findings which indicated that 50% of members were having difficulty navigating and finding items, a focus group was brought together at ULTRALAB. The group comprised champions, those with criticisms, and new members.

The focus questions were:
1. What can we do to make Talking Heads easier to use?
2. How can facilitation better meet headteachers' needs?

The information gained and action taken is summarised in appendix 3.1 It included:

•   making navigation of the communities easier
•   better signposting of communities
•   better organisation of conversations
•   clarifying the role of the facilitator
•   clarifying expectations between facilitators and headteachers
•   renaming the Core communities as Cohort communities

The key issue of simplifying navigation was addressed through the creation of a map in the community of Talking Heads.
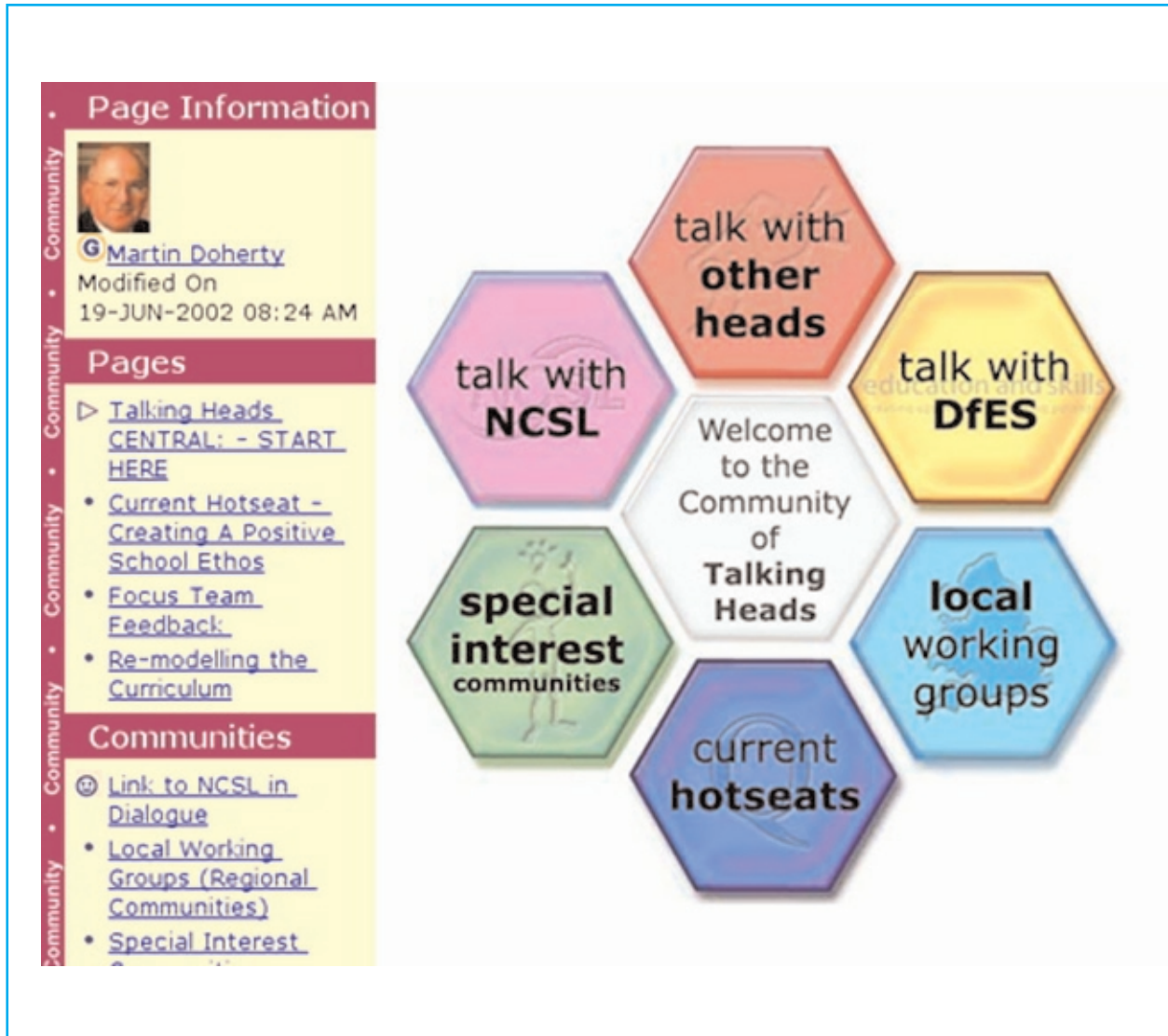
Image 3.6 Community of Talking Heads navigation map

Image 3.7 New Heads welcome community

3.2 Organisation and Management of a Cohort Community (The Cores)

The June 2001 migration meeting agreed to amalgamate the key topic communities into core communities according to the model outlined above.

Cohort 1 (The Core)

Headteachers can create conversations in the community that are then published on the front page of the community by the facilitators. This process involves a close relationship between the headteacher and the facilitator in both the creation of the item and the publishing. Headteachers who wish to take responsibility for the whole process are supported by the facilitators to enable them to do this. Newly published items are placed near the top of the selected page and move down the page as new items are published. After items time out they are

Since April 2002, the third tranche of headteachers who received laptops have been inducted into the New Heads Welcome community which is now being developed into a third cohort community.

removed from the published items, summarised if appropriate, and archived. The time an item remained published depended on the degree of participation it received and the overall activity on a page. A typical amount of time would be between two to three months.

The most common items created by headteachers are conversations and brainstorms. Articles and debates are also used. Hotseats are seldom created by headteachers. There are more contributions during term time and less during school holiday periods.

The Cohort 1 community tried to minimise the complexity of the structure whilst retaining a common look and feel on each page. It was decided that ideally each page should not be more than seven rows long. In practice this was often difficult to stick to because of the tension between keeping active discussions open and the number of new discussions being created.

Cohort 2 (Indigo Core)

A team set out to design a community from September 2001 with a brief to make it sufficiently different from the existing Cohort 1 community. The team proposed to design a community with only two pages and sections for the different topics under discussion. By having a simplified and lean structure, headteachers would easily find items and be able to return to them.

The team proposed used following six section categories split over 2 pages:
1. Managing Staff
2. School Finance
3. Progressing Pupils
4. Curriculum Discussions
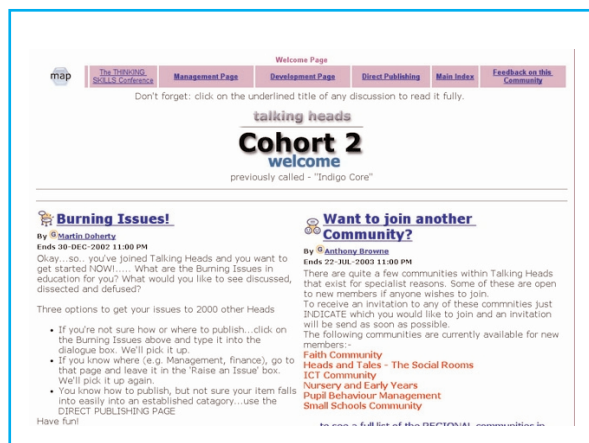5. Seeking Help
6. Thriving as Head

Image 3.8 Cohort 2 community

Each section would contain, in the first instance, only one discussion item that would run for a week and then be replaced with a new item. This would mean that there would be only six active discussions. All new items would be suggested and created by the headteachers. It was the aim to empower them to take over the community and run it without facilitator support. However, facilitation was seen as essential to scaffold the headteachers towards this aim.

An archive was created for each section with items added to the archive as they were created. This system of archiving was subsequently extended to the creation of a categorised index, accessible from every community page.

The basic framework of the community was completed with the addition of two other pages. The first was a Welcome page for new headteachers. The other was a direct publishing page designed to allow headteachers to easily publish new items.

Cohort communities - Key Findings
• To create the space for up to 6000 headteachers to interact and have a voice raises tensions between issues of simplicity and ownership

• To achieve interaction and give headteachers a voice, structure and facilitation are necessary
• Whatever structure is decided upon it should have a limited number of pages and a limited number of items on each page - simplicity is the key
• Archiving needs to be an ongoing process to give prominence to current discussions and allow access to past ones
• Archiving at the point of item creation is most useful from the point of view of community management

Appendix 3.2 lists Key Guidelines for Community Design

3.3   Size of a community

During the lifetime of the Talking Heads project, communities have varied in size from 20 to 11000 members (for the purposes of this section community size refers to the number of members). The initial Talking Heads pilot group of 1200 new headteachers formed the first cohort.

With the transfer of the project from DfES to NCSL the number of Talking Head users increased:
• By the intake in 2001 and 2002 of recently appointed headteachers
• With an online registration form placed on the NCSL website in September 2001
• By the roll out of Talking Heads to all headteachers taking part in the LPSH programme and a number of online initiatives, which include the Strategic Leadership through ICT Programme, Bursars, New Visions programme, Pathfinders and the Leadership Stories initiatives.

The purpose of a community influences its viable size and structure. A recurring dynamic is the one between vibrancy (active participation rates) and size.

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 enabled changes to be made in size of memberships over time. It has also enabled facilitators to observe and document the changes in vibrancy of communities.

The Talking Heads questionnaires, informal interviews with headteachers, and focus group have enabled facilitators to document headteachers' words and understand the effects of community size. For example some headteachers stated concern over the privacy of their comments when the membership extended above the size of the pilot group. The feeling of 'knowing' the group declined and uncertainty over 'who can see this' developed amongst some members. In the words of one head; "it no longer feels like a community with all these strangers in here"

Size of a Community - Key findings
- The Talking Heads experience initially seemed to indicate that communities under 50 could not be vibrant. Many communities established failed to develop and a number 'died' after a short period of activity by a few headteachers that had requested that the community be established. The development of communities for Local Working Groups communities have countered this view and shown that a community with a very small membership can be sustained and vibrant. This leads ULTRALAB to conclude that there is no clear relationship between the size of the community and success (as measured by participation). There are a number of other factors, which affect success. The prime factor identified is clear purpose (see section 2.6).

- 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 as defined in section 1.3. However these areas do provide possibilities for high profile 'guests' to communicate in 'hotseats' with large numbers of headteachers and aspiring

headteachers, thus ensuring that there are channels of communication between the college and policy makers and headteachers/aspiring headteachers.

3.4 The Use Of Community Software Tools To Increase Participation

Online community software (or Community Ware) has been available since the late 1980's and has been used by ULTRALAB for a number of projects since 1992. Most products tended to be textual in nature, for example First Class used by ULTRALAB for its LiNM and OLN projects and by the OU for Teacher Education.

The design specification of think.com created by ULTRALAB, and its subsequent development by Oracle, was intended to provide a tool that enabled the online environment to mirror, and build on, face to face discussions. The tools that were suggested included conversation and debate tools, brainstorms, and question and answer formats (or 'Hotseats'). A second strand underpinning this philosophy was that the tools should be useable by participants who would create their own community activities.

When the first group of pilot headteachers came online in January 2000, Talking Heads was the first large project to use the think.com environment. The various discussion tools, such as conversations, hotseats, debates and brainstorms were available for use for the first time. As there were no set patterns of use, the ULTRALAB Talking Heads facilitation team had the opportunity to innovate. ULTRALAB knew that the think.com software was innovative; the software was built on the specification developed at ULTRALAB and based on their critique of the limitations of existing Community Ware. Members of ULTRALAB, including the Talking Heads project
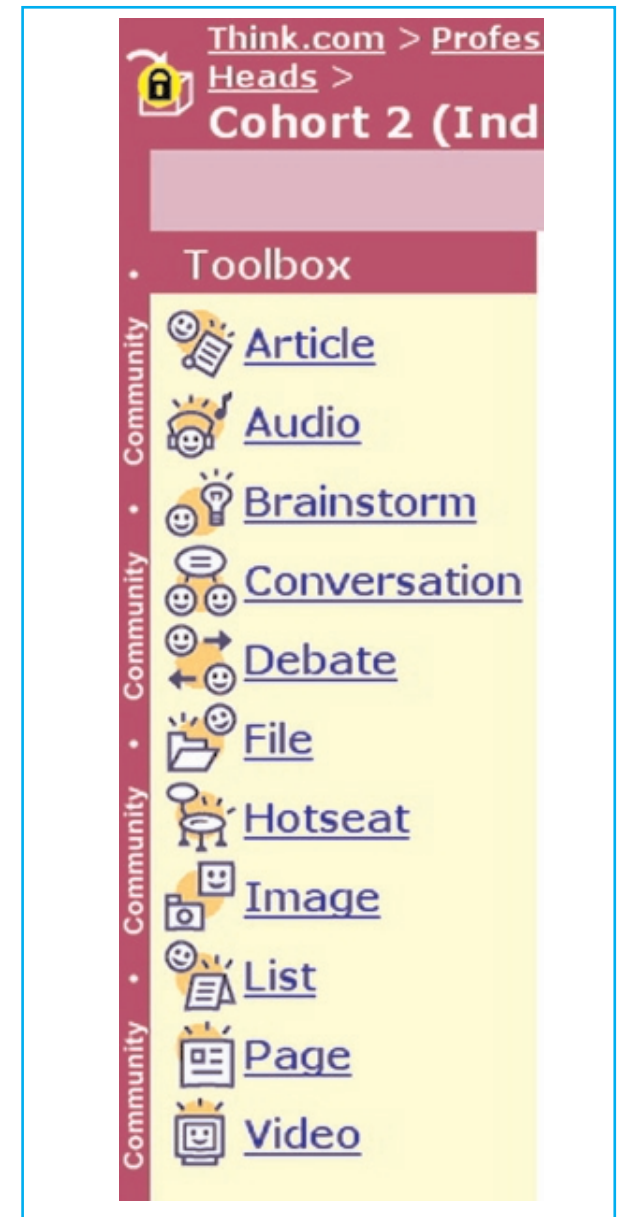

Image 3.9 Think tools

leaders, had been actively involved in the design of think.com and heavily involved in its early user testing in early 1999.

As with any tools there was a period of experimentation and throughout the life of the project the Talking Heads team has been involved in manipulating the software tools to develop interesting and innovative ways of working. For example although the think environment was asynchronous early in 2000 attempts were made to gather a group of headteachers together online at the same time and to use the conversation tool as a synchronous activity. This continual innovation has been essential in keeping Talking Heads fresh, interesting and vibrant. As one ULTRALAB facilitator commented in May 2001;

''the use of the tools shows the pathway of our own journey - from brainstorms at the start, to conversations, hotseats and finally to debates, which we're still experimenting with''

The aim of all this work had been to increase, and to maintain, the participation of those headteachers who have, by July 2002, been members of Talking Heads for over two and a half years.

The conversation tool for asynchronous discussion

Conversations were used initially for a large number of discussions. In an analysis of 4 small and 3 large Talking Heads communities undertaken in 2001 between 60% and 70% of all the contributory items were conversations. This was because the facilitation team found the conversation tool the most versatile and easiest to set up and because they are easiest for participants to use, as they simply have to type their contributions into a text box.

In the early stages of the pilot, when experimentation with the tools was taking place, general conversations entitled 'What would you like to discuss?' were used for community members to raise issues. Many of the issues raised got lost in the number of contributions posted, making it difficult for facilitators to follow up headteachers' requests. When facilitators initiated

new conversations as a response to issues raised in the general discussions the result was a large number of starter discussions with very few responses. In an analysis of one large community carried out in 2001, 28% of the items created had no contributions. There were two primary reasons why this was the case.

- Having many conversations meant that it was hard to find.
- Not all questions raised warranted a full discussion - sometimes there were only one or two responses needed to answer a question.

Online spaces need to be 'welcoming', and there is a 'social' function involved in the establishment of new online relationships in a community (see section 3.1). This mirrors the face to face experience when meeting people, for example at a conference where participants informally introduce themselves, and perhaps engage in a 'warm up activity or even 'ice breaker' activity. Translated to an online context this requires an online space for introductions. Other members need to be able to answer the question 'who is in this online space with me? What can they offer? The use of the conversation tool for introductions was a feature of communities from the early days in 2000.

The use of conversations as a noticeboard was adopted by a number of overarching spaces with large memberships. This provided an area for notices and for the provision of help and support.

The conversation tool for synchronous discussion

There were early attempts to use the conversation tool as a synchronous activity with scheduled discussions taking place in some communities. For example the Special Educational Needs (SEN) community had a schedule of online 'chats' arranged from April 2000 to November 2000. The idea behind these was to give headteachers a feeling of mutual support and allow members of the community to develop a spirit of collaboration.

ULTRALAB facilitators have reflected on the importance of the early synchronous discussion in building relationships amongst the pilot headteacher group.

> "It was very successful with <name> in building up a relationship with <ULTRALAB facilitator>"

> "it was the heart of the community, those synchronous chats"

> "synchronous 'chats' helped to build a sense of community"
> Comments from ULTRALAB facilitators regarding pilot group 'chats'

There follows two case studies of the use of synchronous chat. These were written using a standard format suggested by the Open University (OU 1981)
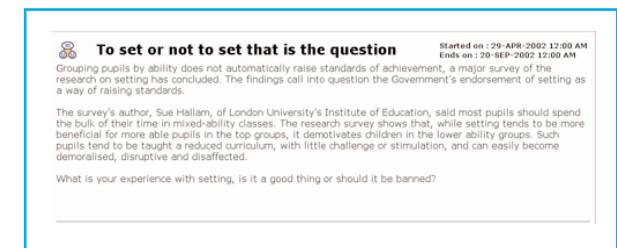
Image 3.10 conversation tool

The Grand Chat 7/6/00 3.30 p.m. - 11.30 p.m – case study

Context

The Grand Chat was advertised at least two weeks in advance using a banner in the Community of Talking Heads. There was a rota of ULTRALAB facilitators available to encourage new headteachers to come in and how to contribute, get to know each other and to discuss their burning issues.

The aim of the event was to bring headteachers into this new

environment for the first time, to learn to contribute, to meet each other and to discuss topical issues.

What did the headteachers do?

In total 23 headteachers participated with 158 contributions. 6 phoned facilitators for online instructions on how to participate. The number of headteachers who accessed the chat but did not actually participate is unknown. For example,

"Dear (name), I did log on to the chat show at 8 pm on Thursday, but I didn't know what to say. Stuck for words Eh!! No I just seem to lack the confidence to communicate with people I don't really know."
Email sent to a facilitator after the event

What did they learn?

Through the use of the conversation tool headteacher learned to share experiences and information.

"Hi - we seem to have some things in common - if I remember rightly you're Head of an EBD school - is this correct? How have special school staff managed pupil progress in threshold applications - although we have systems in place for tracking and collecting data and focussed IEP targets staff found this section difficult to do - although P scales have certainly been a help! "
Headteacher's comment from the Grand Chat

Some were signposted to further information, and learnt that hyperlinks to other websites outside Talking Heads could be used. For example one facilitator contributed the comment
*"there is Threshold Q and A at
http://www.dfee.gov.uk/teachingreforms/re_threshquest.htm"*

They learned that Talking Heads was a place in which they could let off steam and share the lighter side of their role!

*"Thank you for organising tonight, it has forced me to make time to communicate. Forget Threshold........... Forget Ofsted......... Forget work overload. I need an answer to a far more serious question ......What do I do about moles in the playing field?? They are cute.......yes! They hurt no-one ......yes! Are they a ******* nuisance ...... yes! Suggestions please."*

All the above are essential in establishing feelings of community. Headteachers also learned the value that sharing and contributing could bring. This is essential in establishing the participative and collaborative philosophy outlined in section 1.3.

"Thank you to all for my enlightening experience. The TH community is a new and exciting medium and one which should expand and develop."
Heads comment from the Grand Chat

Is this a worthwhile activity?

The chat enabled headteachers to identify with each other and each other's problems as beginners in this new environment. *"Can anyone help on how to access the virus live update? Mine just won't let me do it - has anyone succeeded?"* (Headteacher's comment from the Grand Chat. They discuss the pressing issue of threshold and how to deal with it, sharing problems and correct procedures.)

"Was going to start on the first of my 57 Threshold applications tonight but, for the first time, Talking Heads seemed a better idea! I am very concerned about the phrasing of my comments and how I am going to feed back to some staff whom I can't support. If I could have warned them that they needed to improve for an assessment in two years, this would have been a management tool - as it is it will just cause bitterness in some cases. Invidious! "
Headteacher's comment from the Grand Chat

Headteachers also let off steam and have a laugh by discussing

the minor irritating issues they have to deal with in a humorous manor.

" I've got more mice in school than all the Talking Heads put together. Can't put conventional chemicals down as it is a health risk (my children eat anything)."
Headteacher's comment from the Grand Chat

Of the 23 headteachers who participated that night a significant number are recognisable as champion headteachers or headteachers that participate on a regular basis.

What did the facilitators do to enable the event to take place?

Facilitators made themselves available on a rota system:
•   To welcome headteachers as they started to participate online
•   To introduce headteachers to each other and to host the conversation when necessary
•   To provide links to external web sites for information such as that on threshold
•   To provide support via the phone to any headteacher having difficulty accessing the chat or making a contribution (Phone numbers had been emailed to all headteachers and advertised on site prior to the event).
•   To summarise the conversation periodically so that headteachers coming in did not have to read through all the previous conversation and could catch up quickly.
•   To thank headteachers for their participation as they left the event.

What did the facilitators learn?

•   The technical problems headteachers were experiencing in school and at home with connecting up the laptop and accessing the web site.
•   That headteachers didn't understand the community structure and where the chat was taking place to be able to access it, and the navigation problems they were

experiencing around the site.

- A number of potential champion headteachers were identified and topical issues that we needed to develop further within the communities.
- Ways in which we needed to support headteachers who lacked the confidence to actually contribute.

What did facilitators do following this activity?

- Future events / initiatives were advertised and linked from all communities
- Initial laptop training was evaluated and improvements recommended
- Major topical discussions were identified for communities from the points / issues raised so that they could be discussed in greater depth with more headteachers
- Navigation problems were evaluated and we trailed a number of procedures to aid this process.

Final comment:

"I would just like to say thank you for Talking Heads. It is reassuring to know that all the things I should know about or be doing are in here somewhere. The best thing about it is the fact that you can get advice from colleagues or have a damn good moan about the injustices we experience, in the knowledge that the readership understands only too well what we mean. Cheers everyone!"

The Effect Of Synchronous Chats On Developing Relationship Between Headteachers And Their Facilitator – case study

What did the headteachers do?

Early in the pilot a series of synchronous chats were held on a Wednesday evening from 7.00pm-9.00pm. Eight chats were hosted in all from 12/04/2000- 29/6/2000. These were non-contextual and deliberately held in a facilitator's private home community of 100 pilot headteachers.

What did they learn?

The headteachers shared common concerns and learned some of the skills for using online space for synchronous and informal discussion.

Is it worthwhile?

Reactions from headteachers was positive:

"It was worth all the work. More will do it next time. If you set up a topic it will remove people just talking. Other pages provide the serious bit…….thanks "

"Thanks for the work <name>, always enjoy the chats"

"Sorry, forgot will see <name> on chat, always good value."

What did the facilitators do?

The facilitator advertises and holds the chat in the home community as well as acting as host. Facilitators invite all the headteachers to take part by sending private messages of encouragement, greeting each participant on arrival and encouraging and stimulating conversations.

What did the facilitators learn?

For some, headteachers' synchronous chat was a very quick way of building up a good professional and social relationship with others, whom they had never met other than online. It required commitment from headteachers and the facilitator, since chats took place on a weekday evening.

What do we intend to do next?

More chats could be held with a specific focus other than just a social element to attract in more headteachers and help breakdown barriers.

Although valued by a very small number of headteachers synchronous chats were unwieldy because the software was designed for asynchronous activity.

"..it felt it was bending the tools too far, made the tools look lacking"
Comment from ULTRALAB facilitator

In addition, allowing the members of a community to 'slip time' has a huge advantage in that headteachers can come to the community at a time that suits them rather than at a prescheduled time. Synchronous activity was also facilitator intensive in that facilitators needed to be available for the whole advertised period of the chat regardless of the number of participants. One facilitator put it in this way,

"I found it embarrassing waiting for someone to come in, it felt that it became a burden on heads to come online"
Comment from ULTRALAB facilitator regarding pilot group 'chats'

Building participation through the 'brainstorm' tool

The brainstorm tool was used extensively at the beginning of Talking Heads in January 2000 for starting open discussions and for any discussions which were considered by the facilitation team as sensitive. Initially it was assumed that headteachers might be reluctant to raise sensitive issues in the community space. Indeed until June 2000 all DfES policy hotseats started with a brainstorm, which allowed headteachers to raise anonymously those issues that were sensitive.
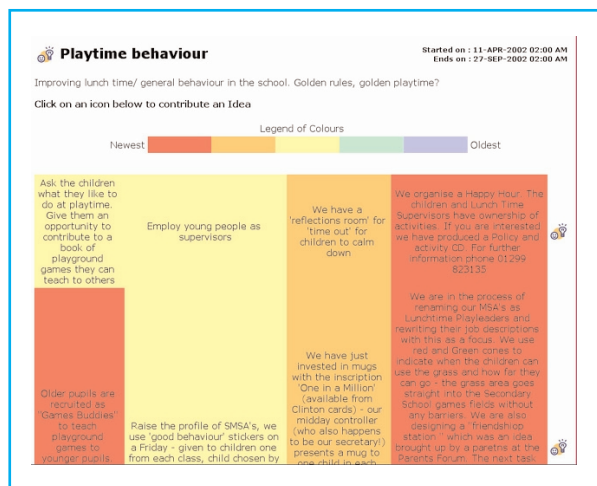
Image 3.11 example of the brainstorm tool

The Brainstorm Tool: Leadership and Management Brainstorms: March 2000: – case study

What did the headteachers do?

This was one of the first activities in Talking Heads. The question asked headteachers to put down some simple thoughts on the differences between leadership and management.

What did headteachers learn?

New headteachers reflected in the brainstorms on the differences between the meaning of the two terms. A sticky was sent to a facilitator in Oct 2000, 7 months later from a headteacher saying,

"Thank you, this is the most useful thing I have found on Talking Heads"

This activity was worthwhile as an icebreaker; it was a quick process, which had a large number of responses. As one of the earliest activities online it encouraged headteachers to contribute and demonstrated the value of participation in that it was used by headteachers after the brainstorm had closed.

What did facilitators do?

Set up the brainstorms, posted in the original "Discussions" page on the Community of Talking Heads.

What did facilitators learn?

That brainstorms are good for quick activities. They need to be time-limited. Value can be added if they are be followed up by extension activities. As this one wasn't followed up a valuable opportunity was lost.

What did facilitators do next?

The success of this brainstorm, in terms of number of participants, set the pattern for the intensive use of brainstorm around the site. Following this brainstorms were used as a way of preparing ground for hotseats.

The team has, however, been surprised by the willingness of Talking Heads members to raise difficult and controversial issues inside Talking Heads without the anonymity of the brainstorm, for example headteachers have discussed frankly subjects like being bullied by governors, teachers and parents

Gradually the use of the brainstorm tool has declined, so that by April 2002 it is rarely used. As one ULTRALAB facilitator stated it in May 2002,

"we used brainstorming to protect privacy, as it was anonymous..it didn't time and date stamp, but we as well as the heads outgrew it,..it was a stage in our development and experimentation with the tools"

An extension of the brainstorm tool is the ability to vote on an idea. The facilitation team have used this extension to gain information on a number of issues, for example in 2000, headteachers were asked to vote on the number of terms there should be in the school year. Talking Heads has considered using this to gather opinions and it has been used in a number of specialist communities, for example in the 'Middle School' community. Evidence gained from the voting indicated that it did not increase participation, but as the Middle School community facilitator noted;

"members came straight in to vote, which they did, but then went straight out again."

Building participation through using the hotseat tool

One of the most successful tools has been the use of the hotseat to allow participants to question experts. Some case studies regarding the use of the hotseat tool are presented in section 2.4. This section describes how the use of the hotseat tool has developed.

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. In the early stages of the Pilot Project, the brainstorm tool was also used.
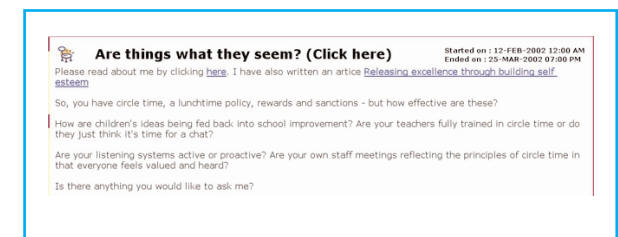

Image 3.12 hotseat question

Talking Heads opened with Michael Barber as high profile hotseat guest and it is noticeable that high profile educational

hotseat guests, such as Tim Brighouse, do attract a large number of questions. This underpins the school improvement feature of Talking Heads by connecting school leaders to leading experts and policy makers (see section 4.4).

Hotseats have been run in NCSL online communities from the start of the Talking Heads pilot in spring 2000. There have been now been in excess of 40 hotseats open to members of Talking Heads since that date. 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.

Later, in November 2000, the NCSL in Dialogue community was launched and hotseats have been run there. A distinction was now made between guests in the DfES in Dialogue community, who were representing the department, and those in NCSL in Dialogue who did not have this affiliation.

Initially hotseats were run in the DfEE (later DfES in Dialogue) community, with policy experts and national figures answering questions. They usually ran for a period of three weeks. Each guest was asked to provide a brief pen picture or biography and a starter article. Visited by an ULTRALAB facilitator, they were trained in the use of think.com and shown how to respond to questions.

From the very first comment in the very first hotseat, with Professor Michael Barber, it became clear that some headteachers felt quite able to make direct comments, even when their names were attached.

"(name): Re raising standards at KS2. The Primary Sector has risen to the challenge of enabling more children achieve L4+ over the last few years. How can you be sure that this 'hot housing', i.e. intensive literacy / numeracy training in the shape of before and / or after school booster classes // a delivery of a curriculum which focuses intensely on the SATs in year 6, is

actually developing a firm understanding of the subject matter, a love or even an enjoyment of the subject matter, as opposed to 'cramming' to get as high a level as possible and then promptly forgetting?"
(The first comment from a headteacher in a hotseat)

In some hotseats, the use of two contributory items, brainstorm and hotseat, was clearly leading to confusion. When comments were placed in a brainstorm, they needed to be transferred into the hotseat by a facilitator. This led to a misunderstanding as to who had made the comment.

A similar effect was seen when a conversation was run prior to a hotseat in a case where the guest was unable to answer questions for part of the allotted time. The conversation raised a number of questions, which then had to be answered by the guest, via a facilitator. These answers did not easily fit into the hotseat structure.

The reasons for these confusions were partly to do with restrictions in the software, such as an inability to make anonymous contributions in a hotseat directly. As a result, however, the standard process evolved so that headteachers could only contribute to a hotseat.

As with all online conversations, and indeed, face-to-face ones, it is essential that the purpose of the hotseat is clear and that the stimulus of the starter article and hotseat introduction provoke responses, but that potential questioners are not 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.

Measuring the success of hotseats is not easy. Successful hotseats may have significant numbers of readers, significant numbers of questions and answers or significant numbers of questioners. Alternatively, even small scale 'hotseats' may lead to significant learning gains by readers. Additionally, where a hotseat is run by a policy maker, a measure of success is in its effect, direct or indirect, on policy changes. Please see section 2.4 for a case study.

In the latter case for example, in 2002, the DfES used the hotseat process to consult with school leaders directly on proposed policy changes and initiatives, such as Sure Start, and making NPQH mandatory for headship. This use is enhanced by a 'policy' response to the consultation exercise.

The ratio of contributions to hits on hotseats is up to 1 to 60 and more typically 1 to 10. This may be compared with a keynote or seminar speaker at a large conference. There will be many more people who have been impacted by the speaker's presentation through listening to the questions and answers posed by others than there will be who pose a question themselves.

Hotseats run during holiday periods have not generated significant participation. There is a balance to be made between having a rolling programme of hotseats, the rhythm and changing topicality of the school year and having times when there are fewer members logging in.

In June 2002 a hotseat 'event' was organised in NCSL in Dialogue, focussed upon 'Thinking Skills'. The Hotseat guest were Edward de Bono, Robert Fisher and others. Please see section 2.4 for a case study.
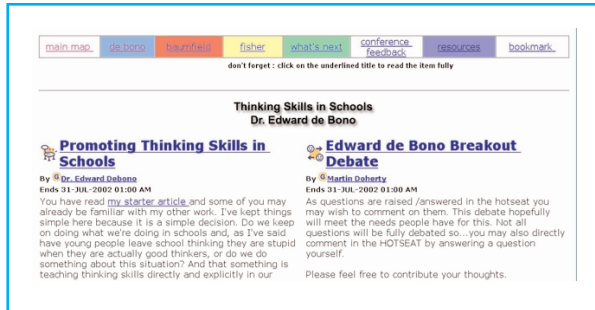
Image 3.13 thinking skills hotseat

Having high profile speakers, advertising the event, time limiting the event to two weeks and limiting to applicants online produced over one thousand applicants and three hugely active discussions. These led to break out discussions and are to be followed up with further work.

In general, the scheduling of hotseats needs to be co-ordinated across all of the NCSL online communities otherwise there could be too many related topics. However, space needs to be found for hotseats on topical items as they emerge.

Building Participation through Using the Debate Tool

The most underused discussion tool in Talking Heads is the debate tool, yet it has been found to be very effective. The tool enables different kinds of entries to be colour coded by the creator. This might be seen to aid reading, scrolling and following 'threads'.
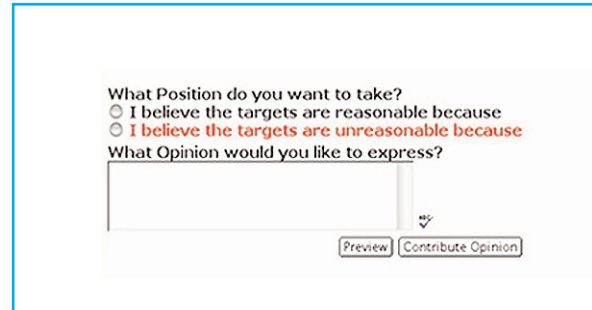

Image 3.14 example of debate

Some very successful discussions have taken place using this tool, for example the Teaching Assistants debate in NCSL in Dialogue. The use of the debate tool does require the facilitator to have an in-depth understanding of the issues to be discussed so that the right categories can be chosen. Wrong categories will result in low or no participation.
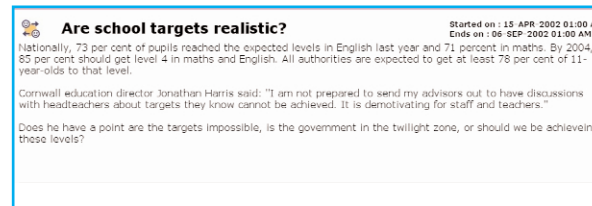
Image 3.15 debate question

Building participation through the article tool

Articles were initially used for transmitting information to Talking Heads members and for notices. Since January 2002 it has become popular amongst facilitators to embed HTML into an article to add functionality. As a facilitator comments,

> *"...we can now build lots of technology into using articles. This development also demonstrates our technical skill and confidence with the tools"*

An example of this can be found in the New Heads Welcome community where articles are used for guided tours. Embedded links within an article take the user to specific pages in different websites, while the article annotates the links to add value for the user. This means that the facilitator locates and develops the resources while the headteacher is able to follow the topic.
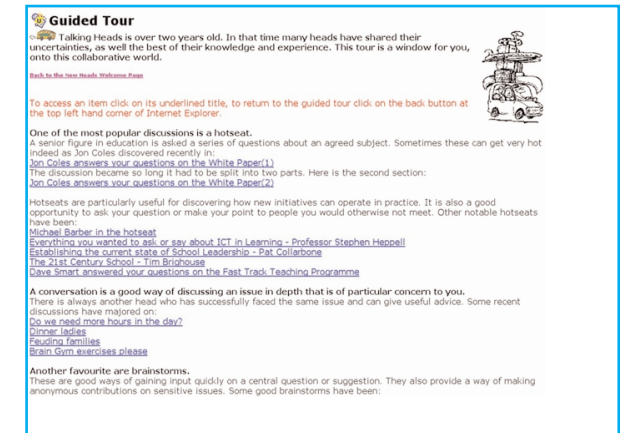
Image 3.16 using embedded links in an article to create a guided tour

The use of images, banners and animation
Making the online environment attractive is important and this can be done by the addition of graphics. Graphics and banners are important in providing clues of place for the user. From the start of Talking Heads facilitators have provided banners to indicate the areas, and to draw attention to activities. For example banners were used to advertise the SEN 'chats' and hotseat guests for the pilot group of headteachers.

As the Talking Heads site developed and facilitators' confidence with technology developed graphics were added around the site and HTML was used to embed graphics and animation in stickies, links and articles.

Image 3.17 using images to enliven the environment

The Community of Talking Heads was transformed into a clickable image map in March 2002 to aid navigation and each community had a navigation bar added, created by using HTML, to enable headteachers to find there way around the system. The feedback from headteachers indicated this had aided navigation.

By the time of the of 'Thinking Skills Conference' in June 2002 (see section 2.4 for a case study) it seemed obvious to use an image map as the welcome page to direct online conference attendees to the hotseats or breakout debates.

3.5   Framing Questions

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, the facilitation team has developed an understanding of the type of question likely to encourage responses.

Online discussions taken from three large Talking Heads communities, that had either no responses or more than fifteen, were analysed. Online discussions taken from four small Talking

Heads communities were also analysed, where there were no responses or more than nine.

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

Explanation of data terminology
- General questions raise an issue that concerns all headteachers within the community
- Specific questions raise an issue that only affects a fraction (if any) of the headteachers within a community
- Most successful questions (for this analysis a question was considered successful if it had 15 plus responses) were general, clear/concise, open, seeking specific information and were topical

Framing Questions – Key Findings
Summary of findings for large communities
- Successful specific questions tend to be topical, contain a single question, and are initiated by headteachers
- Short, specific questions need to provide sufficient information to elicit a response
- Successful general questions tend to be accessible and open (more than a yes/ no response)
- Topicality was an important variable in large responses to specific questions, but not to general questions
- 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 not get a response
- Brevity is not a prerequisite for success

Summary of findings for small communities

- Brainstorms were used for more than half the successful discussions

- 75% of discussions with no responses were conversations
- 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.
- Every successful specific discussion starter was seeking something, for example support, advice, experience
- Short questions were twice as likely to generate a big response than no response
- Unanswered questions tended to share a profile of length, complexity, and asking more than one question in a discussion starter

Exemplars of Talking Heads questions that received good responses- case study

Question asked

"Graduate Teacher Training Problems - what would you like to discuss on this issue?"

What did the facilitator do?

This was set up by a facilitator in response to a very topical issue identified in the education press.

What did we learn about questions?

This was a very clear, concise topic that was designed to provide headteachers an opportunity to raise all the issues.

Was it worthwhile?
- Answers provided lots of detail with re-participation
- There were many disclosures about initiatives, lots of information sought and expertise / experience willingly given.

Question asked

"How was NOF Training for you. Was it good value?"

What did the facilitator do?

Aided the headteacher to set up the question which had been already specified by the headteachers themselves.

What did we learn about questions?
This was a short, concise very specific question which was topical and evidence in the education press had shown this to be an issue which headteachers had strong feelings about.

Was it worthwhile?

- The positive and negative aspects of NOF training were shared with a number of stories told concerning the value or otherwise of training schemes
- The question raised the emotional and collective unease of the training

Question asked

"Anyone any experience of Brain Gym Exercises please"

What did the facilitator do?

This question was set up by facilitator on behalf of a headteacher looking for information and experience on Brain Gym exercises.

What did we learn about questions?

This was a concise and very specific question asking for information.

Was it worthwhile?

- Useful links were posted which headteachers seem to be grateful for. There was also much useful information given including books and courses
- The discussion highlighted opposing, reasoned, in-depth

views which headteachers fed back to facilitators, in emails and stickies, making interesting reading

3.6   The Use of Video

The members of Talking Heads produce large quantities of text, living in a world in which the written word is highly valued. In an attempt to extend the environment, enliven the discussions and raise interest and participation, experiments were carried out using video.

Use of video by a London school in June 2000- case study

What did headteachers do?

A facilitator contacted a headteacher by email to check on their progress with Talking Head communities. A discussion took place around Special Needs issues and staffing needs in the headteachers school. The school was in special measures with issues of staff retention. In dialogue with the facilitator, the headteacher expressed a desire to present a video to promote a conversation or brainstorm within Talking Heads, the idea being that a video would capture the necessary emotion. The headteacher was prepared to devote the time necessary to promote the issue within the community.

What did they learn?

Increased publicity for the issue lead to a number of discussions. The support and trust offered by the facilitators in a sensitive staffing issue was valued by the headteacher.
Was it worthwhile?

The headteacher involved gained the support of 5 other headteachers in similar circumstances, who contacted her to offer support following the posting of the video footage in Talking Heads.

What did facilitators do?

- Undertook peer training in the use of video
- Filmed and edited the video.
- Used care and sensitivity when dealing with the
- Enabled the headteacher to make use of the different technology
- Explored the use of video in the context of Talking Heads development
- Helped the headteacher to network with others in similar circumstances

What did facilitators learn?

Because there were only a few responses gained, the facilitators questioned whether this was this the correct community for the issue. As a small support community it might have been better to raise the issue in a larger community where more response was likely and an open discussion regarding the issues could have taken place.

There were technical lessons regarding the use of video in terms of video platform (Real Player and Quicktime) and in terms of the problems some headteachers had accessing the video because they did not have the right browser plug-ins to view the video footage.

The magnitude of the sensitivity surrounding some issues, and the need to handle them with care was explored, as was the need to edit with sensitivity controversial elements of the story.

The question was raised whether the time spent on this activity was cost effective.

What's next?

Future video work was focussed on a more mainstream example of school life.

Video is complex and may have been a step too far. Facilitators have concentrated on graphics and animations. Sound alone or sound combined with still images could be viewed as an equally effective intermediate step, although time constraints would still apply.

Image 3.17 example of the use of video

There was a real benefit to researching the use of video in schools, although the initiative was ahead of its time. Most headteachers were on slow telephone modems and video requires higher bandwidth. The headteachers who were most interested in communicating in specialist communities were those who often had the most difficulty with bandwidth; the primary headteachers group. This group were often not able to access the video. Broadband internet connection is, however, making video more accessible and the early experiments will allow Talking Heads to benefit from the expertise gained in the pilot.

Conclusion

This account of the architecture and structure created in Talking Heads has focussed upon a number of key themes. Firstly, there has been the desire to build participative community. The tension between 'information' and 'community' as an intimate social environment has been explored. Issues of size and structure of sub communities are central to this.

 The belief in empowering headteachers to own and create their own communities, based upon their needs has been explored in the practice of the Talking Heads Facilitation Team. The competing demands of freedom and constraint in an online environment have been explored. Lastly, the nature of the tools available through think.com community software has been exposed through the online activities that have been developed.

Overall the story is one of competing demands and compromise on how to structure and design the community of Talking Heads.

Section Four: Impact - 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 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, which has provided 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, or is difficult to measure because the effect is subtle, such as when it involves shifting habitual frames of reference

4.1 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

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)

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 (see section 1.4 Model of participation and facilitation).

"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)

4.2   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 Heads 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.

As an informal learning environment Talking Heads isn't assessed, but 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. One recent example of this can be seen in the Redesigning the Curriculum Hotseat and the ensuing open community (section 2.3)

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 (section 2.1.3).

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"

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.

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"

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 naif 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" (2001 Questionnaire)

"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." (2000 Questionnaire)

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." (2000 Questionnaire)

"Problems over capability proceedings, by "chatting" to another headteacher, helped me to put everything into perspective and found useful tips" (2001 Questionnaire)

"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

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)

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.

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 (see section 1.6).

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)

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)

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)

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. (Section 2.6) In some instances, this has full backing and support from the LEAs.

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.

4.3 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)

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 from 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)

4.4 Edging towards systemic change

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)

Impact on policy

As the case studies of the DfES hotseats show (see section 2.3), 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.

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The Appendixes

Appendix 2.1.1 - The Results of the Longitudinal Case Study

Methodology

Fourteen headteachers were identified as having supplied data on entry to Talking Heads, and in two subsequent surveys at the end of the first and second years of Talking Heads. This data was supplemented with a record of their participation and where it was possible to arrange a telephone interview.

Each longitudinal case record was written, wherever possible by the headteachers' facilitator, from this data in the form of a case record. The case records looked at four themes, which were, Contextual background of the headteachers' school, The headteachers ICT use and profile, their participation record and the perceived impact on their practice.

The sampling mechanism identified headteachers who were both involved in the Talking Heads pilot and were new to headship. The headteachers were also part of the original Talking Heads pilot group as the longest serving members of the community.

The Profile

The case records covered headteachers from all types of schools from large urban and rural secondary schools to small primary, infant and nursery schools. A strong theme, irrespective of what type of school headteachers were leading, was that headteachers felt they needed to reduce isolation, share experience with other headteachers and have some form of peer support.

The headteachers were almost completely in two groups. All were enthusiasts for the concept of Talking Heads; some were skilled and enthusiastic users of ICT. Others felt they were not yet skilled users and wanted to become so. The skills on entry frequently included using e-mail and basic word processing.

Of the first group, their enthusiasm included promoting the concept with other headteachers. One Head was involved with making promotional video of Talking Heads. Another Head Teacher had become an enthusiast for Talking Heads because of her involvement.

Another strong theme was the desire off the Headteachers to learn

Participation

The case records reveal that the overwhelmingly frequent participation was as a reader, browsing through communities that headteachers' had an interest in. One visited SEN, Multi-cultural and OfSTED communities. Another Special Educational Needs, Small Schools and Faith communities. Teaching and learning community was another frequently visited area of one Head. The diversity of the communities that people visited was large, there being almost no common areas of interest. Overarching communities such as the Community of Talking Heads, NCSL in Dialogue and DfES in Dialogue were a popular and fairly common area to visit for most headteachers. In particular hotseats were seen as useful areas to visit.

There were two minority groups of two or three headteachers each. The first could be described as 'active' users. They would contribute regularly to discussions, and pose questions in hotseats. There was in the pilot the opportunity to contribute in synchronous chat. Several of the case records referred to participation in this form of activity.

None of the case records recorded anyone who had actually created an item, as opposed to contributing to one created by someone else.

A common theme in the case records was that participation had declined. Headteachers reported that they logged on 2-3

times per week in the early period. This had declined to once a fortnight or a couple of times per month, and in one case one-hour long session each month. An online time period of between 10 and 30 minutes was suggested as a frequent pattern of use.

There were many reasons for the decline in participation in Talking Heads. An element of the enthusiasm of the pilot had disappeared.

The intimacy of the group of Heads had disappeared with larger numbers. It was reported to be more difficult to find a way around the communities

One case record reported that, one head

Within a short while she became an enthusiastic supporter of the vision and was interviewed on local radio extolling the virtues of Talking Heads and online communities. Over time that enthusiasm was tempered by difficulties.

The headteacher said,

"At first I found it invaluable, then I felt it was getting somehow too big and difficult to navigate. Recently I have been mysteriously unable to access the web-site...Hopefully resolved now."

She also regretted the fact that questions now seem to remain unanswered and that the early intimacy has been lost.

Another headteacher revealed that there was a perception that Talking Heads participation took up valuable time, a significant contributing factor being the sluggishness of their school connection, which made downloading the site too slow.

Lack of time was a major important barrier, sometimes even despite its importance, one headteacher saying,

"the fact is there is simply not enough time to spend on what I consider is a luxury in communication - there are so many items of 'essential' reading that take up all available time".

However, one record reported that one headteacher had said,

" It makes little difference whether you access 3 times a week or once a month, there is always something new of interest and there is always a community which can offer help and support in a given area of school life."

Impact

Overwhelmingly, the pilots reported a transforming effect on the way they thought about, and used ICT. Even when most headteachers 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. Some comments from the reports described the following developments:

• (name) is convinced that Talking Heads has contributed greatly to her confidence as a headteacher and the experience has increased her awareness of the power of ICT.

• Her ICT skills have benefited from participation in Talking Heads and she has subsequently applied these skills within the school situation. For example, in presentations to staff, parents, governors and she is using her acquired skills to participate online in other groups and organisations. Without the experience of Talking Heads she feels there would not have been this development in confidence and increase in knowledge, which she has since acquired.

• The impact of Talking Heads has also been reflected in the school investing heavily in the use of ICT over the past 3 years of (name)'s headship and they are now looking at the

potential of online learning as part of the school curriculum..

• Generally (name) believes that TH has made a huge impact on his/her professional life, with a marked increase in both ability and confidence when using ICT and as a 'trusted friend and colleague' when help is needed on professional issues.

Headteachers remained enthusiasts for Talking Heads, despite the movement to less frequent participation. They stated that it had improved their leadership and were also able to reveal a large number of ways that it had impacted upon their work.

"It has been brilliant this weekend to get up to date information and advice on whether to proceed with assessing the threshold applications. Even tonight useful to have up to the minute guidance."

Another reported that (name) had collected ideas about fund raising and the use of ICT in school. One said that she had used Talking Heads to organise staff training.

Another case record said,

He states that the laptop has increased his effectiveness as a head, meets his needs and that he enjoys:
• sampling opinions of others
• keeping up with information
• accessing some useful jokes
Another benefit: has been discovering that a long lost friend is now a newly appointed headteacher.

One member reported that Talking Heads is always an option to turn to for policy writing, for new ideas and to help with planning

This account went on and said,
...Several links to Heads in similar schools have been made

and are maintained enabling advice, support and a reduction in isolation. In addition TH also helps with self-motivation and self-esteem. (S) he would like to see more chats around structured topics and more participation from other Heads, especially the lurkers.

In a further example of the impact that Talking Heads had made in terms of changes in school, one headteacher reported that,

"New ideas have definitely taken shape in school, such as assertive discipline and positive reward systems. I feel TH has really helped me, as a new head, get to grips with funding issues, OfSTED, budget queries and it has served as a useful support network."

Conclusions and Discussion

The longitudinal case records reveal some interesting insights into the key research issues of the Talking Heads research agenda. This focuses upon what we can reveal as the contribution of Talking Heads to building community, participation, professional development and school improvement.

First, of the case records the level of commitment to the notion of the community of Talking Heads was well developed and widespread. This showed itself in both those who were favourable from the outset and those that became converts. It showed itself in those that had ICT skills and those that were developing ICT skills.

Overwhelmingly participants report that it has made a difference to their leadership and management of schools. Of course this sample is skewed towards the pilot group of headteachers, who may well have been more enthusiastic in the first place. As we know from other data some headteachers became Talking Heads because they wanted free lap tops and not through any enthusiasm for the community.

However, the contribution rate to Talking Heads was low and declining and a variety of reasons were given including the size of the communities, the lack of intimacy and possibly enthusiasm of the pilot project. It follows therefore, that most participation was in the form of reading (or lurking) and this appears to be widespread and supported by the data.

The creation of activities by headteachers is virtually non existent. This is perhaps surprising in a community that calls for 'participation' but perhaps less so given both the widespread 'lack of time' argument and the difficulty of controlling widespread creation of activities in the online environment.

For most headteachers, although reduced, their involvement in the community remains positive and beneficial on many levels.

Appendix 2.2.1 - The Role of a Talking Heads Facilitator

Learning

Forming discussions using well-crafted questions
e.g. 1. Discussing with a headteacher about what is a good online question
e.g. 2. Helping a headteacher rephrase an item that has had a poor response
e.g. 3. Modelling good questions in items facilitators have created at the request of headteachers

Raising awareness through variety of communications with Headteachers (signposting)
e.g. 1. External e-mail and faxed newsletters
e.g. 2. Links and notices posted in communities
e.g. 3. Internal sticky asking for response on a specific item

Helping Headteachers to set up discussions (scaffolding)
e.g. 1 Reviewing notice boards for issues raised that can be developed into discussions in their own right
e.g. 2 Working with headteachers in face to face training sessions on item creation
e.g. 3 Working with hotseat specialists

Reading Headteachers contributions
e.g. 1 Regularly looking at community pages for recent headteachers contributions
e.g. 2 Responding to contributions by sending acknowledging stickies where appropriate
e.g. 3 Helping headteachers to rephrase contributions or develop them into new items when response is either lacking or promising

Summarising, closing and archiving where appropriate
e.g. 1 Summarising items that have timed out
e.g. 2 Organising and making accessible current none published items in communities
e.g. 3 Identifying and closing redundant communities

Responding to queries within 24 hours (48 hrs max)
e.g. 1 Helping reset a locked out password
e.g. 2 Phoning a headteacher over a usage difficulty they have expressed
e.g. 3 Publishing an item a headteacher has created

Community:

Maintaining and stimulating the core community

e.g. 1. Ensuring that headteachers are welcomed into their core community and that there is an opportunity for new headteachers to introduce themselves

e.g. 2. Providing all headteachers with an opportunity to offer feedback, raise issues or ask questions within the core community

e.g. 3. Ensuring that housekeeping tasks are carried out within the community and that it is up-to-date

e.g. 4. Looking out for new items in the File cabinet as they are created and helping headteachers to publish these items - Creating new items if appropriate

Offering Headteachers direct contact opportunities (at their instigation)

e.g. 1. Offering online synchronous chat times (optional)

e.g. 2. Offering to be available for telephone queries at a given time

e.g. 3 Providing clear contact details such as email address, mobile number etc.

Finding out what issues Headteachers want to discuss (Market Research)

e.g. 1. Make good use of registration data to identify areas of interest

e.g. 2. Provide an area in each community for headteachers to raise issues of interest

e.g. 3. Use any opportunity when talking to headteachers to ask for feedback

Contacting headteachers regularly (with focus on communal communication)

e.g. 1. Use bulk emails or stickies to update headteachers on community activities

e.g. 2. Use external emails or faxes to alert headteachers to special events or updates

e.g. 3. Use community links and notices to raise awareness amongst headteachers

Making individual contact where necessary

e.g. 1. Contact headteachers following registration, using phone, fax or external email to welcome them to Talking Heads and check their 'Welcome Pack' has arrived etc.

e.g. 2. Individual contact through phone call, letter, fax or external email if concerned about level of participation

e.g. 3. Use think email or stickies to respond to headteachers queries, participation or problems

Pursuing opportunities to enrol natural communities

e.g. 1. Identify existing "natural communities" such as local headteachers' groups and offer to demonstrate the potential of Talking Heads

e.g. 2. Set up a demonstration community – to show how Talking Heads can support the needs of a 'natural' community

e.g. 3. Identify and encourage potential champions who could organize/ co-ordinate a local or 'natural' community

Building trust and relationships

e.g. 1. Using individual stickies and emails to offer gentle encouragement to headteachers when they participate (acknowledging their efforts, thanking them etc.)

e.g. 2. Make use of own home page to provide headteachers with more than just a photograph – offer an insight into the approachable person behind the role

e.g. 3. Use the community to thank, encourage and support headteachers contributions. Beware of making negative or defensive comments. Aim for a human or personal approach.

Fostering a non-threatening environment

e.g. 1. Being supportive, encouraging and kind at all times – praise and model appropriate behaviour

e.g. 2. Avoiding any hint of an authoritarian style and be objective at all times

e.g. 3. Recognizing and acknowledging that 'lurkers' may be present in the community

Administration:

Making sure Headteachers complete expected activities (about section, emails etc.).

e.g. 1. Convey clear expectations in communications with Headteachers.

e.g. 2. Check Headteachers pages.

e.g. 3. Celebrate their successful completion with sticky/email.

Conveying to Headteachers understanding of Code of Practice (Netiquette)

e.g. 1. By own modelling.

e.g. 2. Remind/Inform headteachers where their practice shows lack of understanding of code.

e.g. 3. Celebrate good practice by Headteachers in communities.

e.g. 4. Post information about Code of Practice in major communities?

Modelling good practice

e.g. 1. In own contributions to community items

e.g. 2. In communications with Headteachers

Managing registration of new Headteachers

e.g. 1. Download new headteachers data from NCSL Database.

e.g. 2. Make contact with new headteachers.

e.g. 3. Track new headteachers through first login, contributions and creating items.

e.g. 4. Using Headteachers data to suggest places of interest in TH.

Working with other stakeholders and other facilitators

e.g. 1. Liasing with NCSL – using Building Bridges community.

e.g. 2. Supporting NCSL programmes where appropriate.

e.g. 3. Supporting and liasing with facilitator colleagues through the online community (when working remotely or face-to-face)

e.g. 4. In the event that a change of facilitator occurs, managing the handover to ensure continuity through passing information to the new facilitator and informing headteachers of the change.

Managing own CPD (particularly with regard to online community/ e-learning etc.)

e.g. 1. Identify own needs. Seek learning opportunities to improve/update facilitation knowledge and skills.

e.g. 2. Contribute own skills to Team CPD "pool" – passing on knowledge and skills.

Engaging in research collecting feedback, key witnesses etc. with a view to ongoing development of Talking Heads.

e.g. 1. Participate in agreed TH QA processes.

e.g. 2. Contribute to reports, data collection tasks etc.

Support:

Supporting Talking Heads tutorial and FAQ

e.g. 1. Help in the production or trialling of the tutorial

e.g. 2. Suggest items for FAQ area

e.g. 3. Offer an online support area or community where headteachers can ask for assistance

Helping Headteachers with technical problems where appropriate

e.g. 1. Being fully conversant with Think.com environment – navigation and tools.

e.g. 2. Suggest sources of technical help to headteachers – BT help desk, Quick Start Guide, FAQ's, Think Support etc.

e.g. 3. Knowing when to seek help from other facilitators/sources

Reassuring Headteachers when problems arise

e.g. 1. Show sensitivity and patience.

e.g. 2. Thank headteachers for taking the trouble to contact you.

e.g. 3. Follow up to check that the problem has been solved.

Updating Headteachers on Think.com developments

e.g. 1. Use community notices, newsletters and email to inform headteachers about developments.

e.g. 2. Explain how the developments may affect headteachers.

e.g. 3. Reassure headteachers when the system goes down and warn of downtime in advance

Providing support and encouragement in use of Talking Heads

e.g. 1. Thanking headteachers for contributions/ participation

e.g. 2. Making headteachers aware of the most appropriate Think tool for the task

e.g. 3. Establishing your role as first port of call

Appendix 2.5.1-Guidelines for champion facilitators

Expectations of the Champion Facilitator

The role will vary according to the nature of the support being provided by the school leader to Talking Heads. The recommendation is that the role, expectations and support be clarified in a letter explaining:

*   The focus of the role, for example how a theme is championed across communities.
*   The time frame and details of support.

For example they are expected to provide an agreed amount of time e.g. 50 hours support in a school year or pro-rata if in the role is for shorter periods such a term. To logon on average three times a week to monitor developments in the communities and discussions they are supporting. An end date.

*   That they be involved in an induction process, which will involve focusing on what skills are needed to fulfil the role. For example, one of the key roles is modelling the behaviours you wish to see.
*   They work towards having regular contact with a number of other headteachers helping them to be actively engaged in Talking Heads particularly with a view to capacity building and sustainability of any work that has been undertaken.
*   They will be provided with a specific support package to help them succeed in their role including review dates.

The Skills to look for in being a Champion Facilitator

Although a school leader may have many skills in working as a facilitator already, set out below is guidance on some of the key skills for being a Champion Facilitator within Talking Heads.

Champion Facilitators should...	Because...
Have their photos published in their Preferences	The online space can feel impersonal; photos and a few sentences of introduction can help break down any reticence to communicate
Have completed their About sections	
Encourage colleagues to complete theirs	
Contact colleagues within 2 weeks if they have not accepted invites from you	They may be having technical problems which need to be passed on
Contact colleagues by e-mail or telephone if they are not contributing. Information from the database can be made available to them via you support facilitator	
Let the support facilitator and any group you are working with know when offline for any length of time - this can be done in the notice board of a community	The expectation online is of regular contact and unexplained absence can be daunting. Working closely with your support facilitator is vital.
Visit and comment at least 3 times a week as appropriate to the groups or discussions you are supporting.	Without a comment, you are invisible to colleagues. Colleagues will be encouraged by feedback, which must be explicit online; The balance of when to comment and when not to is tricky. Best to discuss this with your support facilitator'
Let colleagues take ownership by allowing them EDITOR status and shared publishing rights while maintaining focus of conversations on the units being studied	They should be taking ownership of their learning
Summarise conversations for all Activities	It models good practice for colleagues' summaries of learning, provides closure on a conversation and leaves a concise record
Encourage colleagues to follow your good example,	It deepens the learning experience
Build trust and encourage others to do the same, through answering questions and engaging in dialogue building on colleagues comments	Learning takes place when there is flow in a conversation rather than a series of separate statements
Be as explicit as possible This is important especially clarifying your role in any given situation. Are you acting as expert, neutral observer, advisor, host, chair,	Meaning in online conversation is sometimes difficult to guess (always assume good intent)
Have fun but use irony and humour with care	The written word can be misinterpreted without face-to-face body language signals
Start up new conversations to pick up on side issues	Too many threads in written conversations are confusing
Evaluate activities if participation levels are low _ are questions too complex/ closed? _ have all answers been given? _ has reference been made to support material/web sites/hot seats and questions drawn from them?	What works well face to face may not do so online
Don't post too long a response – break up the text remember the medium your working in.	Long responses often generate a long follow up and conversations can be killed by all the points being made too quickly

Table XX Good Working Practice to encourage as a Champion Facilitators.

Give individual feedback or group as appropriate

This is as vital online as it is face-to-face

- e-mails may be sent to a group from within think or from external e-mails
- stickies are more immediate but are also transient
- consider using the conversation tool as a means of communicating to a whole group

Table . Facilitation tips, to encourage and develop participation

Important protocols that Champion Facilitators need to be aware of:

- If you are entering views into a general discussion state the context that they are there. For example, when acting as advisor.
- Always ask your support facilitator or the facilitator looking after a community before putting up any discussion/debate/hot seat in a community that they are not in charge of. Item can be placed ready in the filing cabinet.
- Be careful in the way you give advice especially when acting as an expert.
- If you give a link to any other information, such as a web site this needs to set it in a context, especially if it is external to Talking Heads. E.g. I recommend this list of web site because they *****.
- If developing a Community of Practice your support facilitator has lots of guidance on effective ways of working. For example, On the Front page put a notice board, Starter discussions/Question and answers - to give colleagues an opportunity to contribute.

Appendix 2.5.2- Talking Heads Champion Facilitator Induction and on going Support Guide.

Name of Champion Facilitator:

Champion Facilitator think ID:

Contact details for Champion Facilitator:
Address:
Phone number
Mobile Number
Email
School/Employment details:
Work Contact details:

Talking Heads NCSL/ULTRALAB Facilitator supporter:

Contact details of supporting NCSL/ULTRALAB facilitator:

Contact details for ULTRALAB:

This is a tool to aid discussion and must be seen along side the body of the section of the report: -

What Support does the Champion Facilitator need?
As appropriate, on a case-by-case basis but with equality of opportunity as key to what is provided use all or some of the following. If significant costs are involved like the offer of a laptop this needs to be discussed with project managers so it can be built into any overall project budget.
i)   A named ULTRALAB facilitator as direct support- f2f, email/ sticky/ phone support. Particularly the provision of Induction support as appropriate.
ii)   Out of pocket expenses e.g. phone bills, mailing,
iii)   Expenses for attending any F2F training re being a Champion - supply, accommodation, travel,

iv)   Administration support e.g. mail lists and email newsletters
v)   A hard copy support guide.
vi)   Laptop/ Desktop.
vii)   Buying out two days a term of their time. (Rate £200 a day to cover supply cover. This is equal to cost of a lap top for a years support)
viii)   Provision of training and up-skilling in ICT and online leadership.
ix)   Support with implementing use of think in their school.
x)   A clear contract/agreement and planning for scaffolding during their time as Champion Facilitator, sustainability and succession of the work they are doing, including linking into natural lifecycles of the educational year and time limits.

Key Roles and Expectations of the Champion Facilitator (For full detail see body of report)

- Champion Facilitators are expected to provide around 50 hours support in a school year or pro-rata if in the role is for shorter periods, such as a term or fixed term programme.

- Champion Facilitators are expected to log on three times a week to monitor developments in the communities and discussions they are supporting. The timing of these visits needs to be adjusted to the needs of the support being provided. For example, during a quiet period a quick 10 minute visit may be all that is need whilst, during a busy period, for example running a synchronous discussion an hour or more may be needed.

- In all activities you undertake it is important you have regular contact with the NCSL/ULTALAB facilitator who is supporting you. If you have any concerns about an action consult them first.

- The role will vary according to the nature of the support being provided. The role will be clarified below but could include:
  a) Championing a theme across the communities of Talking Heads; such as inclusion.
  b) Leading a Community of Practice (C o P) in a given area e.g. SEN.
  c) Taking a turn as a hot seat guest.
  d) Sharing in research activities with the full-time facilitation tea.;
  e) Or a mixture of these.
  f) Activities related to NCSL programmes. E.G. LPSH

- Undertake an induction, which will involve focusing on what skills that are needed to fulfil your particular role. To support your induction you will be:
  a) Provided with a guide and letter setting out the your role and expectations of you.
  b) A named ULTRALAB facilitator as direct support- F2F, email/ sticky/ phone support as appropriate.
  c) Training as needed in the use of think and Talking Heads.
  d) Have outlined what other support is available.

Engagement of headteachers is vital therefore an aim is to work towards having regular contact with at least 20 other headteachers helping them to be regularly engaged in Talking Heads. (Regular meaning visiting once a week)

Skills of being a Champion Facilitator see the body of the report

Guidance on Creating Communities/ Pages with Champion Facilitators see report section 2.5 and 2.6.

Appendix 2.5.3 - Research question - Champion Facilitators.

The following is case study guidance for facilitators researching the long-term impact of champion facilitators on Talking Heads and forms part of the ongoing research.

- How cost effective is the Champion 'for and /or leadership of a community' in contributing to the sustainability of Talking Heads? (Comments on funding costs of this Champion/s are welcome along with reflections on the impact of how well the community is sustained over time as against this cost.)
- How much commitment to the role is your Champion / Community Leader giving in reality? E.g. Time given. Have they put up pictures and filled in About pages, signs of activity in the community or discussions they are facilitating.
- Can you comment on the style the Champion Facilitator uses? (For example social and emotional skills, do they use of back channelling such as email?)
- Does the Champion 'for and/or community leadership of ' improve the engagement of headteachers by increasing the relevance and immediacy by the use of someone who is '' living the experience''? Does it help to ensure credibility and authenticity of the project?
- Comment on any evidence that this way of working provide opportunities for head's professional development both for Champion and other headteachers in the community?
- Do you think paid part time facilitation allows more in-depth and specialised ownership of communities and ensures relevance to practice and practitioners?
- Is there any evidence from these communities and the role of Champions in them demonstrates that they are influencing the whole of Talking Heads by contributing to making it self-generating and self-sustaining?
- What are the motivating factors for the involvement of your Champion Facilitator?

- Has there been any professional development in the ICT skills of the Champion Facilitator?
- Please comment on your/others role and relationships with Champions 'for and/or as community leaders' in the context of aiming to deliver a model that has an optimal marriage between full time facilitation and part time championing /hosting? (For example, reflect on the impact of the induction of Champions and what their ongoing support needs are and have been. How much time does it take you/others to support a champion?)
- What scaffolding are you/others providing and comment on the value of the support guide for these champions.
- Can you comment on the style you or the observed facilitator uses to support the Champions? (For example social and emotional skills, do you/they use back channelling?)
- Does adding the dimension of using a Champion Facilitator improve the quality of management and leadership of the community group involved and of the individual headteachers?
- Does adding the dimension of using a Champion Facilitator improve participation

Appendix 2.6 - Facilitator Guide- Establishing the Purpose of an Online Community

There is no off-the-shelf set of 'purposes' for establishing an online community. Some groups need to start with an online ''web publishing'' tool before they are comfortable to proceed to online conversations. What is vital is going through a process that establishes if there is a clear 'purpose' for setting up this community in an online environment and whether they are willing to progress to genuine community use. A whole range of factors needs to be explored with the members of the community and answers need to be generated from within the

group. For us to proceed the group will have to have an individual who co-ordinates the group or for there to be a group of enthusiasts who see the potential for them and their colleagues of using an online community and are prepared to undertake this role. The skill of the facilitator acting in a 'consultancy' role is to tease out the purpose and goals seeing if this will lead to a 'buy in' and commitment by the people for whom the community is intended. If after the consultation there is a clear desire to create the community then the role of the facilitator changes to one that helps to scaffold its growth.

NB: We have frequently found that the person who initiates the contact is an enthusiastic champion who want to educate their group regarding the possibilities, but may have no authority within the group to co-ordinate or move it forward.

Step-by-Step approach to collaborative community design following request made by individual or groups to form an online community.

NB: the following was specifically written for facilitating local working groups, and special interest groups. It should therefore have much direct relevance to networked learning communities as well as NCSL programmes although individual conditions will exist in these instances. Throughout, the facilitator is working as a consultant, enabling the group to determine the design processes through careful questioning and advice.

Step1: Scheduling – After the first exploratory meeting, consider both the short-term induction support needed and the ongoing scaffolding of this particular group. Even if the community appears to be self-sufficient coordinators/champions may need periodic coaching to maintain this self-sufficiency. Ensure that you (or another member of the team) have sufficient time in your schedule to give to this.

Step2: Organise a meeting with the coordinator/s and with the group if this initially appropriate. Show them some template communities and discuss the differences between a web publishing and community environment. Explain to the co-ordinator what the facilitator role entails. During the process be aware of the following possible issues:

• Explain the difference between the features of online communities and their purpose. Proposed communities must have a real purpose that will bring vitality. This is more important than the mechanics.

• Consider the challenges and sensitivity of the people involved and those in the educational world around them.

• Establish what the practices of this group are. How they work and what their aims, objectives, and purpose are.

• Consider if there is an already existing community that might meet their needs, or act as an overarching community that they can access as a resource, for example Small Schools, SEN. Are they open themselves to new members if appropriate?

• Demonstrate some online communities (Talking Heads?) and especially what a community like theirs looks like online, using a real (with permission) or template version.

• Discuss how their work might be expedited through the use of an online community and how the use of the various tools might best help them accomplish this.

• Ask how much time members will actually be willing to participate. Explain that this needs to be explicit to the membership.

• Tell them some case studies of existing groups.

• Ask them to envision what their community might look like.

• Explain what is required of the co-ordinator/facilitator.

• Offer the coordinator enrolment in the online facilitation course.

• Explain the role of "social capital" in motivating commitment and participation.

• On reflection, do the coordinator/s have sufficient time and enthusiasm (and skill) to support the community?

• Ask them what will motive participation. What conversations might they initiate online, who in the group might be enlisted to "seed" conversations, what conversations can they begin at meetings that need to continue online, what tasks might be accomplished with the help of the online environment?

• Ascertain if they have a genuine purpose. Are they likely to succeed ?

• Emphasise the importance of their ownership, and clarify agreements regarding the time you can commit to supporting them.

• Clarify the rhythm and lifespan of the group. Is it short term, do they wish to initially commit members to logging in once a week? What events calendar might motivate participation?

• Revisit the Purpose, Goals, and Commitments. Explain and plan the next steps for establishing the community, especially the induction process, registration procedures and who is going to be the main coordinator. If appropriate schedule a meeting with the group where they will be trained and will initiate conversations. Draw up or agree on a timeline / schedule.

• Collaboratively write the purpose statement for their community in the wording they will wish to have in the About field. Note smaller communities need a much stronger purpose, goal and commitment to sustain them.

Step3: This may be at the same session or at a later date.
• Carry out induction plan of action.
• If appropriate Think accounts will need to be created to suit the development of the community or promotional materials will need to be

developed to bring in current think members.

- If appropriate Training in the use of Think and Talking Heads based on the best practice from training held by the team so far.
- Design their community with them session based on the Agreement list below (tool3). Discuss which ideas from other communities they might replicate for their use. Also discuss the possibility of establishing sub-communities if that seems to meet their purpose i.e. numbers of subgroups wanting privacy to deal with issues in depth. Discuss if there is a need for newsletter updates, regular online events, a timetable/ timeline to pursue tasks.
- Plan next steps as set out in the commitments (Agreements) (tool 2)

Step 4: Implement a 'wedge' of facilitation scaffolding for the community, with the aim for community to be as self-sufficient as possible and sustainable (see section 2.6 on natural communities).

Step 5: Reach a stage where you are monitoring and helping if needed, which is not very often. Keep regular contact with the coordinator/champion/ facilitator. Build in review opportunities.

Tool 1: Clarifying purpose

A quick checklist for purpose and goals of online communities. List in no particular order.
Do they wish to:

- Develop an understanding of how online communities work?
- Develop an understanding of community software? Such as a headteacher developing ICT skills by working with community software, exploring the possibility of using it in their school for staff development?
- Support each other in their daily working practice?
- Engage in a dialogue on a specific issue. In which case is this desire shared with the group?
- Develop a shared vision and understanding on an issue/topic?
- Work on a specific task together? In which case will this community have a specific life time?
- Provide an opportunity to share good practice in text, sound, still picture or video form?
- Keep in touch with the progress of each member of a group?
- Continue conversations that have been started elsewhere such as at a face-to-face event or meeting?
- Build on systems of record keeping, such as minutes of meetings and discussions with the aim to keep them in one easy to access place?
- Have a bulletin/notice board facility, which is quick to find and contribute to?
- Have a place to put up pre and post meeting papers in one location?
- Aid access to the national discussions and hotseat guests?
- Strengthening the sense of community for the group?
- Overcome issues of geography?
- Stop the feeling of being overwhelmed by e-communications, cutting down on the number of places to go for communications, such as emails?
- Have information in one place so cutting down on the "I did not get that email so do not know what is going on"?
- Visibility for roles and tasks we all undertake within a community?

Goals for their community: It is important to tease out with the group how they see their community working for them.

- What Topics/discussions would they like to pursue?
- What tasks would they like to accomplish by the use of the community?
- Other Goals?

Experience shows that Step 2 may take several meetings with a range of the possible stakeholders before it is clear that those involved are going to buy in and establish that it is worth moving forward.

Tool 2: Clarifying Commitments (Agreements)

The use of a commitment document either formally written or informally agreed by the members is a strong factor in establishing expectations regarding the time and effort members contribute to making the community vibrant and worth participating in.

The danger we see with making this process too formal is that it can stifle the enthusiasm of those driving the community forward and act as a barrier to participation.

What these commitments (agreements) can do is establish the foundations of the online community, its procedures for operation, set up miles stones and review times so that the interaction of members is sustained or the community comes to a natural end.

Towards self-direction

A Key message for those who want to form an online community is to ask, What they are going to bring to the 'party' to make the community vibrant, worth participating in and something members own?

The following are basic requirements for a community to go ahead put in the term of those who want the community. This aims to be a reflective list that gets to the heart of what creating a new online community is all about.

Tool 3: An overview checklist for the coordinator(s)

To fulfil our community's purpose and meet the goals we have set for it we agree to:

- Plan community lifespan A few weeks? Long term?
- Set dates for reviewing the community and exploring the issues of working in an online environment.
- 'X' people being prepared to commit themselves to understanding the software functionality by coming to a briefing/training session/s.
- Appoint a coordinator/s (Champion Facilitator/natural leader) who is prepared to take the community forward by giving 'x' amount of time. A person who is prepared to liaise with the ULTRALAB facilitator re the community's development (see section 2.5 re Champions).
- What is the rhythm of participation, for example people being prepared to log on at least twice a week, during term time, reading and contributing to items of relevance to them; to contribute to the following activities/ resources depending on the purpose and goals of the community:
  1. Help to create and own the community.
  2. Maintain a Bulletin Board. Hot-linking current topic and items of interest at the top of it.
  3. Maintain a clear timetable of events and tasks.
  4. Suggest, create and run discussions/ debates/ brainstorms/ hotseats on topics agreed by the group.
  5. Close and summarises items as appropriate.
  6. Maintain formal systems such as agenda and minutes of meetings. Using tools like editable hotseats.
- Model open communication, sociability and disclosure.
- Self regulate the group's actions and responses.
- Initiate discussions and actively invite others to join in as appropriate.
- Regulate membership of the community including maintain a contact list that includes contact information outside think.
- Invite, assign, encourage and support new members whilst maintain support for existing members.

- Consider appointing an administrator.
- Promote activities happening in the wider Talking Head's communities, such as hot seat guests and encourage feedback on the overall development of Talking Heads.
- Members working towards:
  1. A duty of care for the communities well being.
  2. Using the community as an integral part of their CPD
  3. Feeling they have missed out if they have not participated in activities.
  4. Demonstrating an affinity by referring to 'we' when talking about the community.
- Having fun in the community.

Tool 4: The role of the Facilitator

The facilitator's role is vital to the successful creation of an online community which has a clear purpose, goals and agreements. When considering the time allocation for facilitating a local working group, it is useful to clarify the time and commitment required for the following:

- Supporting the co-ordinators, attending face-to-face meetings and providing online and telephone assistance.
- Establishing good relationships with the co-ordinators and contributing to a positive and relevant experience for members.
- Attending face to face training in the use of the online community tools.
- Providing advice and feedback to the coordinator/s about the online development and perceived needs of members.
- Liaison with others to share good practice and learning.
- Assisting the coordinator to ensure (where invited) that the online community becomes and remains dynamic and that all candidates are encouraged to contribute.
- Tutoring the co-ordinator in special skills, for example Facilitating hotseats and maintenance and archiving of the online community
- Contributing the growing body of research by keeping notes and writing up a case study to assist in disseminating

best practice for the development of further Local Working Groups.

Appendix 3.1 Heads focus group recommendations and actions taken

The 2001/2 online questionnaire indicated that site navigation had to be simplified urgently. To gain guidance on how this should best be achieved, a group of key informants was compiled from vocal dissidents as well as staunch allies. On the 26th of February 12 headteachers attended a half day focus group at ULTRALAB. It is understood that this group, although key informants can not possibly represent all headteachers views.

The key questions we discussed with the headteachers were:
1. How do we make TH quicker and simpler to use? ... And enable it to help you be more effective?
2. What makes for effective facilitation (role, level of support and contact)?

Outcomes of the meeting:

A development group (steering or research group) was established with the aim of helping to inform development of TH and to identify key issues and use of hotseats and experts (and links to relevant sites). They identified the unique selling points of TH is that it is only for headteachers, that there is a personal facilitator and it is interactive.

Navigation- effectiveness of use

Design of the screen – shorter, more imaginative screen, index with links
Visual map
Need to understand the differences between the communities
More effective archiving – with bullet points at the top of the

item. Possibly cybrary using A-Z format

Links to be more prominent to other specialist educational sites

Facilitation

Role of Facilitators made clearer

Named facilitator for a specific induction period – then working with whole team

Different levels of commitment from headteachers (Different levels of agreement)

Identify small group of positive people and work with them

Other

Register of interest and "Lonely Heads Club"

Talking Heads conferences

TH face-to-face sessions in regional centres

Advanced training sessions for headteachers

Action Taken

In response to the feedback, the facilitation team developed two Rapid Action Teams (RAT) to work as quickly as possible on the following two areas:

- Lean and Mean - making the site structure and navigation as simple as possible.
- Facilitation

The Mean and Lean RAT team met at ULTRALAB and implemented a number of changes.

- They designed a navigation map which is the only item on the main Community of Talking Heads page
- Navigation bars were designed for the top and bottom of each community page
- The about page of each community was clarified, and so were audience statements in each community.
- Pages were shortened and livened up.

- Inactive communities were moved out of the public domain to be archived.
- The core and Indigo core were renamed Cohort one and Cohort two.

Feedback on these changes have been very positive from headteachers and facilitators alike, with the exception of culling the dormant communities, as it has been believed by the facilitators that some of these could spring back to life. It has also been suggested that the name change to Cohort, although aiming to clarify the purpose of the communities, has depersonalised the communities further.

Facilitation RAT

The Facilitation RAT team explored possible strategies for moving forward.

The following actions are being taken forwards:
- The welcome is more explicit about the facilitators role and removes the expectation that facilitators will contact headteachers before they log in.
- The face to face training evaluation form asks headteachers to indicate their preferred mode of contact and how much facilitation they desire. It is anticipated that this data will inform future facilitation design. (issue of the data needing to be integrated with the NCSL database… and labelled with facilitator name- a potential rod in current form.)
- The New Heads Welcome community is testing the strategy of inducting/ facilitating headteachers closely for two months before moving members into the broader range of communities.
- The option to participate at different will be publicised via an NCSL brochure, explicitly stating that the large cohort communities will aim to provide topical conversations, and the smaller communities will provide support. In return for the latter, members will be explicitly asked to log in once or twice a week and contribute at least monthly.

Also:
- An archivist who will summarise key discussions is commencing on the project mid July 2002 to ease the backlog of summarising and to establish summarising protocols
- Index pages have been established in the communities.
- An experimental database has been established in the New Heads Welcome community, to allow headteachers to find each other. This is in advance of the NCSL database becoming searchable by headteachers in the autumn of 2002.
- NCSL has been approached to hold a conference for Talking Heads members after the launch of the new Nottingham building.
- Facilitators have been busy with face-to-face training for the new laptop cohort, and the NCSL is currently uncertain about conducting these ongoingly.
- Web conferencing software is currently being trailed so that advanced and beginner sessions may be conducted online.

Appendix : 3.2 Key Guidelines for Community Design

An accurate audience statement is essential on the first page of each community to enable community members to know who they are 'talking' to.

Purpose statement should be clear and obvious to ensure all joining share a common purpose. Agreements should also be made clear in each community.

The number of items on the pages should be limited and the width of the page should be determined by only two items. Ideally scrolling should be prevented where achievable

Questions on the page should be topical (related to the

headteachers year and concerns). Before being started community managers should ensure that new items are of real concern to a large number of headteachers and not simply a request for information or a minority, specialist subject.

A Q & A discussion item which allows headteachers to ask and answer questions of each other prevents unnecessary set up of one answer discussions and engenders more participation.

A contributory noticeboard is essential in large communities and overarching communities, for although the purpose of these is an exchange of information all members need a place where they can draw attention to issues/problems/difficulties.

A community with a large number of pages needs additional navigation support beyond the page on the left of the screen. This is achieved by a navigation bar at the top and bottom of every page.

Where possible links which take an individual outside the community should open in a new window to prevent the members feeling 'lost' in the system. An alternative would be to provide written instructions to members to allow them to develop a mental map of the system. However members need to feel there is some return to incentive to 'learn' the system. This may be easier with Virtual Heads members who have a strong purpose than Talking Heads members where the membership is more fluid.