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The eLIDA CAMEL Designed for Learning by Community

by Jill Jameson

A Design for Learning (D4L) project that *grows* an intentional e-learning community of practice (CoP) in Higher and Further Education (HE and FE) can stimulate challenging, illuminative processes to foster shared understandings about learning technology innovations, promoting authentic dialogue between practitioners. Technological and social insights gradually emerge in a *designed* CoP, symbolised by camels riding across the desert to meet together in the oases of partner hosts. Honest peer-group exchanges, facilitated by a *critical friend*, improve professional e-learning practice.

Background

The old joke that a camel is a *horse designed by committee* is challenged by James Surowiecki's notion of the *wisdom of crowds* (Surowiecki 2005). Is there such a thing as collective wisdom or are crowds, by and large, stupid? Surowiecki advises that loosely connected groups of people only work well if they aggregate results from randomly diverse, truthful individual opinions. The key thing to share is *genuinely independent* views, not slavish imitation. This article discusses the *structured diversity* of shared good practice that can be enabled in CoPs (Wenger 1998) in e-learning, reporting key findings from the JISC-funded (2006-07) project, e-Learning Independent Design Activities (eLIDA) Collaborative Approaches to the Management of e-Learning (CAMEL).

The goal in fostering good collective intelligence, Surowiecki says, is *not* to breed mediocrity via bureaucratic consensus or herd people into overly tight networks, but to 'tap into people's disagreements', strongly encouraging a variety of diversely independent views. Too much group interaction can have negative consequences for quality collective judgement if it results in mindless copying. Yet individuals alone do not achieve as much on their own as in small, effective groups (Surowiecki 2004). So a balance between individual autonomy and group interaction is needed in well-structured communal approaches if we *want* to create a camel.

Why design a camel? Well, this graceful-ugly animal has begun to symbolise mutually supportive dialogue and exchange between *critical friends* in a community of practice designed for an e-learning project. The majestic yet gruelling ride of the camel from oasis to oasis across the desert has gradually become a metaphor representing a collective professional journey to share thoughts on improving e-learning practice with partners from other institutions.

CAMEL (Collaborative Approaches to Management of E-learning) was originally set up in 2005-06 as a project funded by the Higher Education



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Funding Council for England (HEFCE) Leadership, Governance and Management Programme, led by JISC infoNet and supported by ALT, JISC and the Higher Education Academy (Ferrell and Kelly 2006; JISC infoNet 2006; Kelly and Riachi 2006). The innovative CAMEL model for an e-learning community of practice has, since then, increasingly gained prominence across the UK in numerous e-learning contexts. The model has been outstandingly successful, spawning around 20 new applications of CAMEL since it began to report its results in 2006.

Below, I give a brief overview of findings on the CoP aspects of the first major successor to CAMEL, the JISC eLIDA CAMEL Design for Learning (D4L) project (2006-07). But first we need to remember why the original CAMEL was so important.

The JISC infoNet CAMEL Project

The CAMEL project originates from the work of Seb Schmoller, Chief Executive of ALT. CAMEL was built from an exemplar Seb described from a 1985 visit to Uruguay in which he learned about his uncle's farming self-help group. This group comprised eight members who met monthly, visiting each other's farms to develop improvements in agricultural practice. *Know-how* was shared with the help of an expert facilitator. A commitment to collaborative learning and honest critique about improvements in practice was established. During each visit, partners toured the farm, met as a work group, shared meals and informal social events, and, in the course of the visit, shared proactive critique to help improve agricultural practice.

The CAMEL CoP project founded on this approach set up: (1) a collaborative Project Initiation Document (PID) to establish community ground rules; (2) minutes of visits to record outcomes; (3) organised facilitation by an expert; (4) formal evaluation; (5) an emphasis on *tacit* knowledge and mechanisms to share *know-how* within the group. Gradually, CAMEL tested this model, discovering along the way that something creative and professionally-liberating was being developed together. In the final CAMEL visit at the University of Greenwich (July 2006), Seb talked about the original farmers' self-help club, highlighting similarities between educational practice and agriculture:

"There is a big parallel between education and agriculture, not in the sense of the technology or process, but in the sense of how being successful at it involves an enormous amount of tacit knowledge and understanding about how many things can work with each other in a coordinated way and the success of it has a very long time-frame. You can't really look up in a book how to run a good institution: it's a sort of 'know-how' that you acquire over a period of time that's very similar to agriculture." (Schmoller 2006)

To articulate and share expert *know-how* about e-learning practices, using lessons from CAMEL's farming origins, it was realised that visits should be:

- Collaboratively planned;
- Documented before and afterwards;
- Focused on things that mattered;
- Expertly facilitated;
- Formally evaluated;
- Strong in emphasising tacit knowledge;
- Focused on making tacit 'know-how' explicit. (JISC infoNet 2006)

An emphasis on authentic, practice-based, professional dialogue, collaboration, good planning, critical friendship and honest analysis therefore emerged from CAMEL. This included the recognition that collaborative work in a community of practice is "... not just about good practice, it's about practice, warts and all – and the warts are more interesting than the practice sometimes" (JISC infoNet 2006).



The JISC eLIDA CAMEL

This *mélange* of influences derived from CAMEL was imported into the JISC-funded project, e-learning Independent Design Activities (eLIDA) for Collaborative Approaches to the Management of e-learning (CAMEL). The eLIDA CAMEL, led by the University of Greenwich, merged key aspects of CAMEL with the JISC-funded eLISA (2005-06), also led by Greenwich. Supported by ALT and JISC infoNet, the eLIDA CAMEL included all original CAMEL institutional partners (Loughborough College, Leeds College of Technology, the Universities of Greenwich and Staffordshire) to build on the CoP structure and relationships formed in CAMEL.



The eLIDA CAMEL was designed to test the CAMEL model for a second time, aiming to investigate whether the CoP model would continue to be productive when applied to the work of Design for Learning (D4L) practitioners. The project was successful, completing work in December 2007. It was clear that the CAMEL

model had worked well again. The eLIDA CAMEL collected 21 case studies, 101 student responses and a D4L data collection, including learning activity sequences, surveys, reports, photographs and video from team members on the implementation and evaluation of tools and systems to support design for learning in post-16/HE contexts. Activity sequences and processes were tested by practitioners in different institutions and brought together into a *CAMEL* CoP, supported by a critical friend, Professor Mark Stiles of Staffordshire University, to help practitioners reflect on, synthesise and disseminate D4L developments. The project trialled D4L sequences with practitioners in London, the South East, Leeds and Loughborough using LAMS V1.1, V2, Moodle and briefly considered RELOAD.

The project was structured into two main components: (1) *Pedagogic*: the *eLIDA* aspect focused on design for learning pedagogic evaluation, including the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation

of D4L activities by practitioners; and (2) *Social*: the CAMEL aspect focused on the collaborative social face-to-face and on-line e-learning community activities. These included reporting on practitioner's use of D4L in shared activities using the CAMEL model.

In an earlier paper (Jameson et al. 2006) we distinguished between *intentional* project-based communities of practice (Pór 2004, Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob 2004) and CoPs that emerge naturally as self-organising systems (Lave and Wenger 1991, Wenger 1998). *Growing* an effectively designed intentional community of practice requires explicit commitment to a range of shared objectives, values and agreed processes such as those outlined above, or, predictably, the experiment is likely to fail.

The eLIDA CAMEL project confirmed the findings of CAMEL that stable relationships of trust, power-sharing and flexible approaches are necessary for an effective CoP, and that garnering and sharing "tacit knowledge" (Polanyi 1967) is important in helping people consciously to improve practice (McDermott 2001, Mason and Lefrere, 2003; Jameson et al., 2006). CAMEL-tailored interpretations of the "critical success" factors of CoPs outlined by McDermott (2001) and "structuring characteristics" of CoPs described by Dubé, Bourhis and Jacob (2004) were therefore included, in variously adapted ways, in this successor project.

The eLIDA CAMEL team is piloting learning designs in LAMS and Moodle with partners in a community of practice with seven F/HE and school partner institutions

Design and Instantiate
Case study A+ design
Students work on the Extended Essay as a part of their IB course. This learning design is intended to prepare students for this research task and to generate thoughts at the beginning of the project. The students in the class were able 17 years old and have to pass the Extended Essay component.
Description of class by learning designer

Deliver and Run
+ Case study B
Post-16 students at Barnet and Greenwich using LAMS and Moodle learning designs

Share and Critique - Camel model
Case study D
On IB Learning Design:
"This is an excellent learning design which goes through the first stages of the IB extended essay. Information given is clear, logical and succinct and gives students a good framework. Tasks are varied and interesting and build on students' previous knowledge... I thought students would like the simple but effective interactive quiz. I couldn't see the first set of shared resources, the IB essay guidelines... maybe this needs looking at... it might have been better to have Google search as the last rather than first resource... it seems more logical to access specific sites first. The learning design definitely meets the learning outcomes. Well done!"
Example of critique between CAMEL skills classes in the journey

Review and Validate
+ Case study C
Cardiff Grammar Student Vasos UA

Key: Case study A = reflective writing before designing by teacher, Case study B = reflective writing by teacher after implementing design; Case study C = student evaluation of design by learner, Case study D = collaborative implementation and critique of learning design.

Professionalism in Communities of Practice

One of the key features of intentionally designed CoPs (as opposed to spontaneously, self-generated CoPs) is that they foster proactive professional dialogue. This is particularly useful in an era in which learning technologists increasingly feel that their autonomy of professional status and judgement is being eroded in an *audit culture*. It seems that CoPs provide a network for professional practice to thrive, as eLIDA CAMEL participants reported.

Project partners gave written feedback in [surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) after each visit and detailed observation notes were also taken of interactions

between partners at meetings. Observation minutes recorded items that partners listed as strengths of the project. These included the time given to build up strong foundations for supportive working relationships and to build trust and confidence. Partners reported that meeting times worked well, while informal evening meals in relaxed gatherings fostered relationships, broke down barriers and built trust.

Observation notes recorded that partners felt the project successfully fulfilled many tasks that might not have been achieved by other methods. Participants said that although the initial list of tasks was "daunting to many partners", they "felt less overwhelmed, due to the supportive element of the team and team leaders" (JISC infoNet 2007). They said that, "at the outset, having ten partners in one project seemed an unmanageable task but the CAMEL model helped it work", reporting that the "collaborative nature of the project made it a real success, as the human face-to-face sociability element was vital... there was no competing, just a supportive environment". They reported that the number of partners was not too big to hinder relationship building or impact on the length of meetings, but also "not too small: partners could gain valuable insight into other organisations, how they worked, their successes and barriers" (ibid).

Observations recorded that participants felt team leadership was positive in "steering the project, following aims, meeting milestones, giving all partners a voice at each meeting". They appreciated the "open" way in which they could contribute to meeting agendas and encouragement towards friendly collaboration (JISC infoNet 2007). Time between meetings was viewed as sufficient to conduct tasks. Strong feelings were expressed about maintaining the integrity of the CAMEL model. JISC infoNet reported that the resulting success was "directly attributable to the project remaining true to its philosophy". Partners said they felt they were genuinely "telling their story" (ibid).

Participants also noted that:

"the critical friend role was very helpful. Meeting each other gave important insights into other organisations and opened doors. Each partner brought something valuable to the project table. The foundations were built at the outset and each partner had something they wanted to share, so they learnt many things from other organisations, small things, things that work, things that don't work" (ibid).

Overall, key areas of success were linked with "designed features" of CAMEL, what Dubé et al. (2004) refer to as "structuring characteristics" of CoPs:

- Partners felt that the project was built with honesty and trust.
- The success of 'designed' features were appreciated.
- It was important to state at the outset the vital elements of the model.
- There had been careful consideration of the size of project team.
- Minimalism was employed for tasks – processes were not that complicated.
- The nomadic feature of the project was a real success.
- The project's success lay in the fact that it was "bottom-up not top-down".
- The celebratory nature of the project was an important element.

- Total honesty about what worked and what did not work was important. (JISC infoNet 2006)

At the conclusion of the project, partners wrote in the project wiki that they would miss the “building of bonds with members of the team” and the “encouragement and thanks extended to me and my team for all our work”. They said they would also miss “feeling our efforts are valued”, the “constant support and positive attitudes of partners” and “enthusiasm for using technology to transform teaching and learning, which isn’t shared by some senior management within the institution”. They would also regret no longer having the project’s “encouragement to succeed and drive innovation ...the acknowledgement and praise of my team’s work” and “an independent voice which raises important questions”. A number of partners reported that “the use of the CAMEL model in this project has been invaluable”, while one practitioner said she “relied on support from the team when my mentees and I had problems” and would miss this. Feedback recorded in the wiki was overwhelmingly positive.

Conclusion

In recording and analysing data from eLIDA CAMEL, it became clear that a community of practice had effectively developed to trial design for learning. The project fulfilled its aim in acting as a *seedbed* for D4L innovations in the classroom. Practitioner D4L case studies and student feedback indicated that e-learning innovations using LAMS, Moodle and related tools had been effectively achieved, beyond initial expectations. Serendipitously, the many successes of the project in part derived from long-standing relationships of team members and the work of key partners in quietly providing an infrastructure of friendly confidence and support.

Both collaborative engagement and individual design decisions remain important factors in e-learning innovations. In an e-learning era dominated by web 2.0, open source software, social networking and CoP knowledge management, informal social/ situated learning in communities has increasingly been emphasised (Hiltz and Goldman 2005). The CAMEL CoP model is of much significance in this context.

The progressive bringing together of the eLIDA CAMEL CoP resulted in new understandings about D4L practice in the classroom. Project partners and students rated the work of eLIDA CAMEL highly, recommending that the CAMEL model should be applied in other contexts. The team said that having an expert *critical friend* was important and positive in challenging and questioning people’s achievements, incorporating proactive, honest and friendly critique. The inclusion of the *critical friend* was a key ingredient in the successful development of a nomadic model of communities of practice in design for learning. The project also said it is crucially important for the defining features of the CAMEL model to be retained, for continuing success. Sometimes, in the right circumstances, small groups *can* tap into collective wisdom: a CAMEL CoP can be effectively designed.

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