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Evaluating the development of a community of e-learning researchers: from short-term funding to sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports an evaluation of a special interest group created to support e-learning researchers. The study aimed to examine the ways in which short term funding is used to support the development of a community and the sustainability challenges facing this emerging community of practice when initial funding ceased. The iterative, formative evaluation process drew on statistics of community membership and use of the online community space, and surveys responses. The challenges faced were found to be similar to those common to any community of practice, i.e. the determination of domain, the identity of the community and the processes of communication within and across community boundaries. Wenger's communities of practice model was shown to be useful in diagnosing key tensions between the individual and the collective, between expert and novice researchers and between the core membership and the periphery of the community. The implications are discussed for the creation of project funded communities.

Keywords: experiences of e-learning special interest group; ELESIG; higher education; education research; communities of practice; e-learning researchers; Etienne Wenger; sustainable communities; evaluation; web based communities; UK; United Kingdom.

Introduction

Although arising from the study of learning within organisations, communities of practice have increasingly attracted the interest of professional developers from a range of contexts. Indeed, the possibilities suggested by Wenger for communities of practice to be seen as a way of creating and sharing knowledge between professionals (Wenger, 1998) has encouraged those involved in professional development to look at the creation of communities of practice (Donnelly, 2008). Technology makes it possible to easily bring together interest groups and there are now online communities being deliberately created for student healthcare professionals (Moule, 2006), learning technologists (Sharpe and Roberts, 2007) and Kimble, Hildreth and Bourdon (2008) have collected together examples of school teachers, headteachers and adult learners. The study of such project-centric, artificially created online communities raises interesting issues about what happens to the community when the project finishes.

There are now many guidelines available which give advice on how to start up online communities (Kimball and Ladd, 2004; Lock Lee and Neff, 2004; Preece, 2001; Stuckey and Smith, 2004). Schlager, Fusco and Schank (2002) describing their work with 'Tapped In' (an online education community of practice), acknowledged the tensions between a project-centric view and the defining features of a community of practice (p.153).

> Many …projects view an online CoP primarily as an outcome or by product of their own efforts, rather than as a larger entity in which their efforts can take root, bloom, and propagate. This *project-centric view* of CoP (the project *is* the community) lacks (and in many cases conflicts with) essential elements stressed in both the CoP and education reform literacies.

The challenge then is to find the balance between allowing the community to emerge naturally and directing its activities. Schlager et al. (2002) encourage us to go back to the essential elements of a community of practice. For example, a created community might use Wenger's defining characteristics of a community as design guidelines:

- organising networking events and activities for *mutual engagement* (community);
- planning opportunities to discuss the *joint enterprise* of the group (domain);
- publishing the outputs of the work of the group to make its *shared repertoire* explicit (practice).

Those who have been using online communications to support learning and development, have drawn on the communities of practice framework to issue design guidelines for networked learning (e.g. Cousin and Deepwell, 2005; Schwier, Campbell and Kenny, 2004). However, there is some disagreement about the success of such designed communities. In a study of a community of tertiary educators, with a domain focus of information technology, Koeglreiter, Torlina and Smith (2008) suggest that communities of practice usually emerge naturally and that *'formally appointing leaders or setting formal agendas is often seen as de-energizing'* (p.166). Palinscar et al. (1998) have argued that 'artificially constructed' communities of practice can be successful, although care must be taken to avoid direction of a community, which should instead be enabled, facilitated or supported.

Other 'essential elements' of community are not so easy to design in, but may be having as much impact on the community's success. The communities of practice literature offers much help here. For example, communities need to establish their own identity, but the identity the emerging community negotiates may not be the same as the one the project intended. Communities create their own boundaries, but projects may set this for them. Communities put forward their own leaders, projects recruit them in advance. Considering the popularity of communities for professional development, it is important that we understand the interactions, and possible competing interests, of communities and projects.

Schlager et al's view of communities as a place where project outcomes 'can take root, blossom and propagate' is also of particular interest to us (ibid). Groups brought into being by short-term start-up funding are often done so with little thought given to their continuation. What happens to groups after the end of their funding? We know that communities face common problems, such as clarity about their domain, practice and community and tensions within their community (Barab, Barnett and Squire, 2002; Barab, Makinster and Scheckler, 2004). How do these issues affect their sustainability?

The potential for sustainability of artificially created communities could be related to how they view their work as a community of practice rather than as a project to set up a special interest group or network. The current paper is a case study of a community launched through a short term project. The case study is used to identify the issues that face 'artificially created' communities as they attempt the transition to a self-organising community of practice.

Background

The case under investigation is a special interest group of e-learning researchers, ELESIG, which was set up in January 2008 to build capacity for undertaking evaluations of the learner experience within the higher education sector in the UK. The aims of the group were to:

- Identify and exploit synergies between existing learner experience projects.
- Build capacity for undertaking learner experience research within the funder's programme of work and the sector more widely.
- Establish a supportive and sustainable network of practitioners who are undertaking learner experience research.
- Improve understanding of the skills and strategies needed by learners to participate effectively in technology rich environments and courses.

The project was initially funded for six months to start up the group. The funding was used to appoint a Community Lead, organise three face-to-face events and cover organisational expenses. A core team was established, made up of two representatives from each of three collaborating founder institutions, the Community Lead and an external 'critical friend' from the funding body. In this sense ELESIG was 'artificially created'. However, the intention was that ELESIG would become a self-sustaining network, which would support investigators as they develop their research.

An online community presence was set up on a commercial social networking site. The Community Lead was responsible for the online site including welcoming new members, seeding and facilitating discussions and organising webinars. The core team took an active part in attending events and participating in online activities. This type of organisation reflects Wenger's forms of participation in communities of practice. It allowed for different levels of participation from very active participation at the core to occasional participation. It allowed for novice researchers to participate legitimately from the periphery of the community, learning from more experienced researchers (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and setting themselves on a learning trajectory which will eventually result in full participation (Wenger, 1998)

Within the first six months, three face-to-face workshops and two webinars were organised for ELESIG members, each exploring a different issue related to e-learner experiences and each in a different location of the UK. In addition, community members were encouraged to form online working groups around areas of joint interest. Community members were encouraged since the first meeting to share useful resources in various formats, such as videos, photos, slide share presentations, websites and journal articles. Thus within the first six months all three aspects of a community (practice, domain and community), were addressed by the core team.

By the end of the funded period ELESIG had attracted far more interest than had originally been anticipated. The following analysis of evaluative data collected during the funded period, aimed to help the project team understand the issues around the sustainability and the options for possible continuation of the community.

Data collection

The case study method was chosen as a way of observing and recording the phenomenon of community activity during and towards the end of a short-term project (Yin, 1994). The case study made use of multiple data collected as part of the evaluation of the project during its funded period (January – July 2008).

Participants were drawn from the members of the ELESIG community. Membership was indicated by self-registration on the online site, and grew steadily from a core of eight to over 200 during the study period. The majority of members are from UK universities and most visits to the site are from the UK, although within the first six months the site was visited by participants from 44 different countries.

(Insert Figure 1 here)

More detailed information about the participants was provided through an online survey conducted in July 2008. The survey aimed to assess the priorities of the community and seek members' views to inform continuation planning. Of the 212 community members listed on the site at the time of the online survey, 46 (21.7%) responded to the survey within the time frame of nine days. Of these respondents, 28 identified themselves as female and 10 as male. The majority of respondents were in the age range of 46-60 years (53.8%), and 33 (15.6%) were from the UK. Thirty-one respondents (67.3%), came from universities, two colleges were also represented (0.04%), and there was one independent consultant (0.02%).

The online survey respondents were those who had been involved in several ELESIG activities. Forty-four (95.6%) of the respondents have engaged with one or more ELESIG activities, including 25 (54.3%) who had attended one or more face-to-face events. Thirty-three (71.7%) had introduced themselves online and 25 (54.3%) had taken part in online discussions.

As well as the online survey, data was collected on the use of the community's online site, including statistics on community membership and contributions made to the public online community space in discussions, small group forums, webinars and resource sharing spaces. A feedback sheet was distributed at the first face to face event. This was returned by 28 of the 48 delegates.

Findings

Despite being initiated as a funded project, ELESIG now demonstrates the three elements of a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002): the domain is research into learner experiences of e-learning, the community is the membership of researchers investigating these e-learner experiences and the practice is the sharing of their research. Seeing the group as an emerging community allows us to analyse the continuation issues it faces using the theoretical framework and literature of communities of practice.

Domain

The domain of the community is demonstrated through topics which community members were interested to hear about and discuss. Ultimately this led to the creation of new knowledge through new resources. At the start, the project team defined the domain through presentations at the launch event. Of the 23 responses to rating the launch event on the feedback form, 21 delegates rated the event as good to excellent, and 2 as average. Delegates found the presentations valuable.

> *The presentation and discussion of "becoming digital: who's e-literate now?" very enlightening. (feedback form 16)*
>
> *The content from the first presenter, on the reason of why learning experience is the focus. (feedback form 8)*

Members were then encouraged to post details of the projects they were already engaged in on the project wiki. During this six month period, details of 38 research projects were posted. In this way members contributed to developing a shared understanding of the nature of the domain.

Community members were also encouraged to form online working groups around areas of joint interest. Of the 17 online groups that were set up,12 were created by the Community Lead or another core team member, with the remainder being initiated by wider community members (Table 1).

(Insert Table 1 here)

The group with the highest membership was 'Online Research Methods' (22 members), but the most active group was 'Interviewing' with 44 posts within a three month period. Whilst this group was created by the Community Lead, its success can be largely attributed to the lead taken by one community member. This member made timely responses to posts and posted relevant and valuable sources of information which encouraged lively discussion and sharing of information and expertise between the eight community members who were active in this group. Following a period of online discussion, this group continued to work together on creating a resource for the community on the site wiki.

An original aim of ELESIG was to build capacity for undertaking learner experience research. The interviewing group and indeed most of the groups have focused on the expected domain of research methods to help community members undertake learner experience research. The community members were also encouraged to create other subgroups which explored areas they were interested in. This led to the creation of groups such as 'Evaluating Learning in Immersive Virtual Worlds' and 'Designing for Complexity'. In order for the community to establish itself as a community of practice, it needs to be defining its own domain in this way.

Community

To develop and be sustainable, a community of practice needs a self-renewing membership with a core group of active members. The membership of ELESIG includes both experienced researchers with recognised expertise and researchers in the early stages of their careers, including research students. There was evidence of engagement in the forums by these new researchers. The reason for this is related to ELESIG having the opportunity to offer this group a level of focused training support

that is not available elsewhere for this research area. It also carries a significant benefit for the development of the research area itself, since many new researchers are themselves close to the student experience.

Degrees of participation varied from the core team, to active community members, to peripheral community members. Degrees of participation also changed as time progressed. Table 2 shows that participation was highest following the launch of the project and the number of actively participating members remained relatively consistent, but did not increase with increasing membership, thus resulting in increasing numbers on the periphery. In addition, due to the project-centric approach adopted for this six month period, there was no increase in numbers in the core team during the first six months, so that by the end of the funded period, the core team accounted for only 3.7% of the community as a whole.

(Insert Table 2 here)

In Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of practice model, the peripheral participation of the majority is accepted as legitimate learning and development. Seven respondents in the final online survey commented on the value of observing from the periphery and reading the online resources and discussion.

> *My main participation – apart from brief postings of profile and a couple of viewpoints - has been to read others' contributions. I think for me the value is the immediacy of the communications, the opportunity to hear what colleagues are doing right now and what areas they identify as important for development (survey respondent 24)*

Sustainable communities of practice also need to have external links and participants had started drawing new people into the community.

> *The discussion thread is excellent and I have subsequently referred other researchers to it (survey respondent 10).*
>
> *[ELESIG] needs to reach out to wider academic community and those involved in education development (survey respondent 40)*

It is noticeable that in these interactions, the *social* interaction is low.

> *Have introduced myself and have asked other members questions, but sadly have had no response (survey respondent 15)*

Most significant though were the findings from the final survey which explicitly asked members to offer to take responsibility for community maintenance functions that would be required after the end of the funded period. Members were asked whether they would be prepared to actively participate in or contribute to a range of ELESIG resources and activities. Of the 40 who responded positively to the request to contribute, respondents were most interested in participating in online discussion (n=37, 92.5%), sharing resources online (n=31, 77.5%), participating in an online event (n=30, 75.0%), presenting work at a face-to-face event (n=26, 65.0%) or in an online event (n=26, 65.0%), collaborating on papers for conferences (n=25, 62.5%) and providing feedback on others' research projects (n=20, 50.0%). A small number of respondents expressed an interest in joining an expanded core team (n=10, 25.0%).

Practice

The practice of the community was demonstrated through the sharing which took place in the face to face events, online activities and creation and sharing of resources. Such sharing of practice was wanted and appreciated by the community members. The feedback forms from the launch event showed that community members were most interested in further sharing of research, research methods and the student voice. Delegates appreciated the opportunity to network, meet other community members face-to-face and discuss and share their research ideas with others as shown by these extracts from the feedback forms:

> *Meeting with lots of new colleagues interested in the student experience. Exchanging views, reviewing new models/ideas. (feedback form 20)*
>
> *Learning more about what is going on in the sector. Meeting people are who doing similar things with their projects and getting new ideas. (feedback form 21)*
>
> *Meeting others beyond [the online social networking site]. Recognising the importance of individuals coming together. (feedback form 5)*

The online site hosted a rolling programme of activities and forums including two scheduled 'webinars' with invited guest speakers and facilitated discussions. Eight topics have been discussed in the webinars and of these, three have attracted the highest number of posts to any of the online forums with 50, 49 and 54 posts respectively. Numbers of community members attending the online webinars were small but successful forums were valued. The comments contributed to the online survey showed that sharing of practice, access to experts and the creation of a lasting resource were all regarded as useful.

> *I think the priorities that I would like to see ELESIG pursuing are around the sharing of practice and perhaps developing resource databases, bibliographies, wikis etc. (survey respondent 37)*

In addition to the scheduled webinars, 55 forum topics were established on the community site within the first six months. Forum activity was at its highest for the first week after the launch. The highest number of posts made by community members was to the two introductory forums – 'What was your first experience of computer technology?' which attracted 30 posts, and 'Introduce yourself' which attracted 32 posts. The majority of forums were started by the Community Lead or team members, with six forums being started by wider community members themselves.

Members were encouraged to create or upload resources which represented the practice of the community and would be of use to other members. Resource outputs made available to all included: materials from the events, details of 38 learner experience projects which represent the community members' interests and activities, factsheets on interviewing and using surveys in learner experience research created collaboratively by subgroups of members, summaries of key online discussions, short films representing the experience of learners today created by groups of members at the summer symposium, videos and photos (the majority of which were taken at community events) and abstracts of papers submitted to the special issue of an academic journal organised by ELESIG.

Discussion

This study aimed to identify the issues that face communities created through projects as they attempt the transition to a self-organising community of practice. We found that although ELESIG had succeeded in creating a recognisable domain, community and practice, within the funded period, it was still unclear at the end of the first six months whether ELESIG was a community of practice, a special interest group or a professional network. The data revealed some key issues which would need to be addressed for clarifying the identity of ELESIG and ensuring sustainability.

The data collected show that a small core of active participants converged around the project team. Within the core team, membership remained consistent but membership of the active community group was constantly changing. This active group valued the networking opportunities and created and used the resources available. However, they were still largely participating in ways constructed for them by the project team. There were isolated incidents of individual members being highly facilitative in defining the domain and creating the shared repertoire. The majority of the group members were not visibly active, although did value observing and referred other people into the community and its resources. When asked, some members were willing to become more involved in taking on community maintenance tasks.

Schlager, Fusco and Schank (2002, p.154) point to the difficulties facing online communities established through 'insular, highly structured, top-down' activities. They suggest that these lack sufficient focus on the informal channels of communication and trust building needed for co-operation within a community of practice. In the current study, it was noted that social interactions seemed to be lacking in ELESIG and, as this is an essential part of mutual engagement, there were attempts to create opportunities for self-developed socialisation between members. A third face-to-face event (the 'summer symposium') was organised to include an overnight social event. The lesson here is that perhaps organisers of artificially created communities of practice don't allow enough time for the emergent community to engage in the informal interactions, which will ultimately lead to mutual engagement.

The focus of activity around tasks set up by the project team meant that activity was working towards pre-defined aims. Joint enterprise needs interpretation and negotiation of aims. Given that ELESIG was created as a funded project, these aims were not originally negotiated. However, members were invited following the first face-to-face event, to comment on what they hoped to gain from being a member of the community, what topics they would like the community to focus on and what changes they would suggest for future events. They were also asked in the third face-to-face event to help plan for future development and sustainability. Perhaps the lesson here is that for joint enterprise to be a reality the community needs to agree a process to monitor and re-negotiate its aims as it develops.

There was evidence of resources being created, used and recommended by members. We have seen that ELESIG is starting to develop a shared repertoire through the resources being added to the community website and through the resources generated at face-to-face events. As yet only a small proportion of these, such as the factsheets on interviewing and using surveys in learner experience research (which were created collaboratively by subgroups of members), reflect a history of mutual engagement. Most of the resources have been created outside the

community and uploaded into the community online space. The lesson here is that a shared repertoire requires a community of practice to develop a sense of common purpose within which meaning can be negotiated between community members.

We have seen that although ELESIG demonstrates some features of a community of practice, it is still emerging and has yet to reach maturity. At the end of the first six months the development of ELESIG was somewhere between what Wenger (1998b) describes as the 'coalescing' stage, where members are still '*exploring connectedness, defining joint enterprise and negotiating community'* and the 'activity' stage, where members are *'engaging in joint activities, creating artefacts, adapting to changing circumstances, renewing interest, commitment and relationships.'* The research has identified three key challenges for sustainability of the ELESIG community: collaborative research within the community, increasing and maintaining levels of participation and re-negotiation of the community's identity.

Collaborative research within the community

Looking to the future, the first challenge for the ELESIG community lies in the nature of the domain itself (research into e-learner experiences). Communities of practice depend on open sharing of practice and mutual accountability, through which meaning can be negotiated and knowledge created. The traditional view of research is that it is a competitive, individual activity, where academic advancement often depends on individual research credentials. Deepwell and King (2009) in their study of two multi-institution, multi-national education research projects point out that individual academics have little need of a sense of belonging to a project group for developing their sense of identity and are used to working autonomously. This could be seen as being at odds with the work of a non-elitist community of practice. In a study of an adult basic education course where learning takes place in a community of practice, Harris and Shelswell (2005, p.176) point out,

> *'…formal education systems predominantly measure and reward, individual achievement'* whereas *'… a community of practice is measured by its overall productivity and sustainability, to which individual community members make diverse but equally valuable contributions.*'

In the list of 38 learner experience projects which have been posted to the ELESIG online site, there is only one example of a cross-institutional research project and many are individual research projects. If ELESIG wishes to promote collaborative research in the interests of capacity building (one of its original aims) and encourage mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire within a community of practice, then it faces a number of difficulties. For example, the meaning of collaboration in relation to academic research is not always clearly understood (Katz and Martin, 1997). Currently ELESIG is attracting membership from individual researchers such as research students, and existing teams of researchers, most of whom are working on government-funded research projects. The nature of the domain of the ELESIG community suggests a need for a clearer focus on expectations within the domain to encourage further collaborative and cross-institutional research and support its development.

Increasing and maintaining levels of participation

When ELESIG was launched as a six-month project it was never envisaged that the group would attract such high levels of interest, nor that the online site would so

rapidly attract a large number of members including members from outside the UK. The evaluation of the first six months of the community shows evidence of decreasing participation in face-to-face and online events. The challenge for ELESIG will be to sustain and promote interactive communication and participation across the community and beyond community boundaries. To do this, whilst keeping in mind the challenges posed by the nature of the domain, ELESIG needs to be alert to possible tensions between a) the individual and the community as a whole, b) expert and novice researchers, and c) core and peripheral community members. Tensions within communities of practice are not uncommon (Barab, Barnett and Squire, 2002; Barab, Makinster and Scheckler, 2004) but these three tensions, whilst experienced by many communities, may be particularly significant for ELESIG in relation to participation and communication.

The tension between the individual and the collective in ELESIG may be related to the way in which researchers view their practice as individual or collective, as already discussed. The nature of this balance will determine the type of community that ELESIG becomes and the community identity. Klein, Connell and Meyer (2005) and Klein and Connell (2008), have suggested a four-way classification of communities of practice, where communities can be structured according to stratified or egalitarian principles and within this, the predominant knowledge activity of the community may be sharing or nurturing. They also argue that *'… the class to which a community belongs tends to determine the rapidity with which knowledge within the community evolves and the degree of pluralism, as opposed to homogeneity, that the knowledge exhibits'.*

Using Klein and Connell's (2008) classification, ELESIG could be seen as a 'stratified-sharing' community, where more experienced members, principally the core team and community experts, helped newer members and where core team members were concerned with best-practice identification. With the withdrawal of funding, ELESIG needs to make a shift in its identity and become a self-sustaining community of researchers which would exhibit the characteristics of an 'egalitarian-sharing' community. In an egalitarian-sharing community help is sought by and received from all members of the community, all members are concerned with best-practice identification, the community attempts to maintain and develop the knowledge base, and innovation from new knowledge is brought into the community. Within ELESIG there is already evidence of the development of a more 'egalitarian-sharing' culture, since some research students have started online groups and are encouraged to present their work both online and at face-to face events. In addition a number of 'expert' researchers have already shared their work with the community.

The possible third tension relates to the balance between the core membership and the periphery of the community. Currently ELESIG has a strong core membership but, although numbers in this core group are growing, this membership remains very small in relation to the number of community members as a whole. Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002) suggest that there are three main levels of community participation, the core group (10-15%), the active group (15-20%) and the peripheral community (65-75%). However they make no reference to online communities in relation to these figures. In her Online Community Toolkit, Nancy White (2001) has written

> *There are usually a small group of people who quickly adapt to online interaction and provide a large proportion of an online group's activity. Some*

speculate that 10% of the membership make up 90% of the community activity. These individuals visit frequently and post often.

It can be seen that within ELESIG the percentage figures are lower than those suggested by Wenger et al. (2002), but more in line with those suggested by White. Since ELESIG runs three face-to-face events a year perhaps a figure higher than 10% could be expected because these meetings should encourage activity. In addition, only the core team within ELESIG are consistently active. The active members outside the core team are a changing group, who engage as suits their needs.

However, within a community of practice there will always be different levels of participation, and the legitimacy of peripheral participation is a strength of communities of practice (Harris and Shelswell, 2005). White (2001) describes these peripheral members as 'readers or lurkers' who '*are the unseen forces that DO affect a community'*. Lave and Wenger (1991), in their work on legitimate peripheral participation, were interested in how newcomers become included in a community of practice. By launching an online site to support members, ELESIG has attracted a diverse group of members from all over the world, which is the cause of the high numbers of members on the periphery. It now needs to consider how it will meet the needs of these members and increase the size of active membership.

(Re)negotiation of the community's identity

At the end of the funded period ELESIG was still being managed as a project, with a now unpaid core team too small to cope with increasing numbers of members, many of whom are keen to share experiences and practice and engage more fully with the community, as evidenced by the online survey results. ELESIG's original identity as a government-funded special interest group was no longer appropriate. At this point. ELESIG needed to redefine itself and review its mission, goals, vision, values, objectives, strategy and leadership.

According to Wenger (1998, p.145), *'Issues of identity are an integral aspect of a social theory of learning and are thus inseparable from issues of practice, community, and meaning'.* This focus on the importance of identity is supported by the work of Gongla and Rizzuto (2004) who suggest that there are four possible reasons why communities of practice might fail or disappear. These include drifting into non-existence, the necessity to redefine themselves, merging with other communities and becoming organizational units. The last two reasons do not apply to ELESIG; neither does the first since the data collected shows that membership of the ELESIG online community continues to grow. The key issue for ELESIG when funding was withdrawn was how to define itself.

There already exists interplay between the identity of individuals and the identity of the community as a whole. Individual members, through their research and interaction with the community as a whole negotiate and establish their individual identities and these in turn shape the identity of the community as a whole. However, this process of determining the community's identity is currently ad hoc, rather than being negotiated by the ELESIG community as a deliberate process.

Conclusions

We have seen that ELESIG faces a number of challenges in its community development. It needs to exploit the social and collaborative working characteristics of a community of practice in order to contribute to increased research capacity in the sector. To do this, it needs to clarify its vision for the future and members will need to view research as a community activity rather than as an individual activity. It must also maintain momentum and levels of activity despite lack of funding. Finally it needs to develop and grow its inclusive practices learning from both core and peripheral community members.

The challenges ELESIG faces are not uncommon within communities of practice, but will not be overcome unless ELESIG is able to transform itself from a project into a genuine community of practice. First the community needs to negotiate and agree a common understanding of the concept of 'community of practice'. Cox (2005) argues that there are a number of ambiguities in the terms of 'community' and 'practice' which make defining the concept of 'community of practice' open to a number of interpretations. Finding and defining a new identity will not be an easy task for ELESIG, given that it is making the transition from a government-funded project to a non-funded voluntary community of practice. Wenger (1998, p.229) writes:

> *Communities of practice…… cannot be legislated into existence or defined by decree. They can be recognized, supported, encouraged and nurtured, but they are not reified, designable units.*

The experience of the ELESIG community to date bears this out. The implication of this case study for institutions of higher education is that any institution launching a project with government funding, which includes elements of building a community, must think to the future when funding will be withdrawn. It should consider its responsibilities to the community it creates and the challenges it will then face in sustaining the community and members when it no longer has funding. These challenges are not insurmountable, but may involve reconsideration of the identity of the community in relation to its domain, community and practice and whether the community offers opportunities for mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire for all its members.

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Figure 1: Growth of ELESIG membership. March 6th to July 23rd.

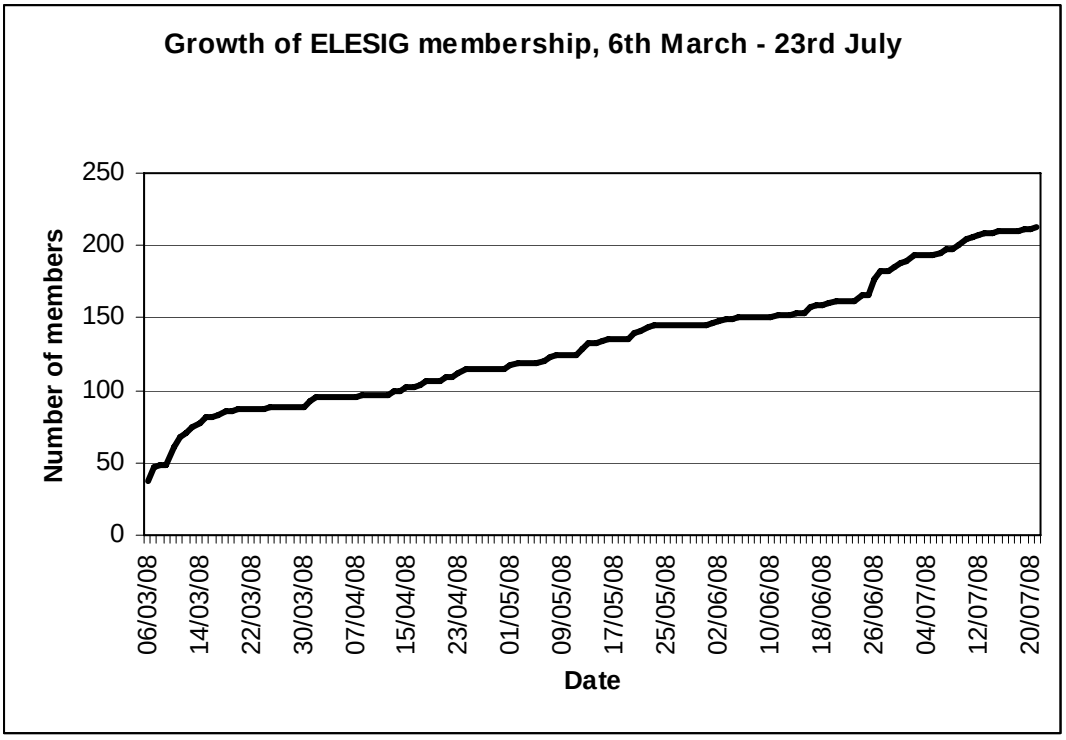

Table 1: ELESIG online groups

Name of Group	Initiated by	No. of members
Research in FE and ACL	Team member	12
Frameworks	Team member	5
Online Research Methods	Team member	22
Evaluation of online assessment	Community member	5
E-Literacies	Community member	15
Web 2.0	Community member	11
Reading Group	Team member	10
Evaluation Group	Team member	3
Symposium Planning	Team member	7
Committee of Enquiry	Team member	5
Interviewing	Team member	17
Qualitative Research	Team member	21
Effective e-Learning	Team member	16
Surveys	Team member	8
Evaluating Learning in Immersive Virtual Worlds	Community member	13
Designing for Complexity	Community member	5
Elesig Team	Team member	4

Table 2: Changing levels of participation. March – July 2008

	March 6th 2008**	**March 6th to 31st 2008**	**March 31st to May 30th 2008**	**May 30th to July 31st 2008**
Online membership*	38	93 (on March 31st)	145 (on May 30th)	218 (on July 31st)
Delegate numbers at face-to-face (f2f) event		48 (10 of these did not join the online site)	20	32
Members taking part in online webinar (not already accounted for in f2f event)			8	7
Members active in online groups (not already accounted for in f2f events or online webinars)			16	17
Total number of active members		38	44	56
Active members as percentage of community		40.8	30.3	25.7
Percentage of active members excluding core team***		32.3	24.8	11.0
Core team as a percentage of whole community	21.1	8.6	5.5	3.7

* Membership of ELESIG is determined through self-registration to the online site
** ELESIG officially launched with face-to-face event on March 6th
*** Number in core team = 8