

JISC
Paul Lowe, University of the Arts London discusses
Communities of Practice
Transcribed 18th February 2011

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I run a Masters programme in Photojournalism and Documentary Photography and we've developed an online version of that, which uses kind of community in practice concepts as its underpinning metaphor, so the idea is that it's a much more horizontal course, which is much more about the tutors on the course, the participants on the course, people coming in from industry, us all kind of working together really, in a collaborative endeavour to engage with the issues around our practice area.

And I think what that, one of the most important things about that is to surrender your own sense of being the sage on the stage, all that kind of philosophy of being a teacher. You are much more like a co-practitioner and it's more of a peer to peer exchange where I fully expect, and I would be failing in my job if the participants on my programme were not going to be my professional peers in a couple of years' time. So we do that, it happens all the time, because there are people who go through our programme, go back into industry, work at a very, very high level and we are constantly engaging with them as professional people and we invite them back into the classroom as well.

So we built up a kind of pedagogy of collaborative online learning using a variety of online tools, web-conferencing, Twitter, Wave, Ning, social networking so on and so forth. So what we did, we kind of used that model that we developed, we applied for the funding from JISC and we basically rolled that out into our professional practice community to build a community of practice around Photojournalism, we're particularly interested in the ethical business questions; we're not really interested in what makes a good photograph, well that's obviously part of what we are engaged in, but what we're really interested in was, what are the key issues facing our industry at

the moment? What are the kinds of really problematic, difficult problems, complex problems that we're trying to deal with?

And it's obviously underpinned a lot by Etienne's thinking, particularly this cultivating community of practice which, I think one of the interesting things about this is, and Etienne said this a lot, that this is a theory that started out, as I'm sure you are aware, as an observational, analytical theory as a way of making sense of the way that people learn socially. So looking at learning as a social process. It's become, in many ways, instrumentalised, it's been turned into a sort of 'how to' guide, as he jokes himself, he says he gets people ringing him up all the time saying, 'Oh I'd like 12 communities of practice by next Thursday. How much is that going to cost?' You know, it's almost like kind of creating a shopping list.

Having said that, obviously he and his colleagues, people that work with him have built up a lot of experience in the rollout process, the building, maintaining, cultivating and growing communities of practice, and I'm sure most of you are aware of this book (Etienne Wenger 'Cultivating Communities of Practice'). But also his newer book, 'Digital Habitat', which came out co-written with Nancy White and John Smith. If you haven't seen that one, it's a really good buy, it's really worth buying, and really worth reading. A lot of really good 'how to' information about particularly in the virtual environment. A lot of it is actually available as a PDF just to download anyway.

So I'm sure most of you are aware, but I think one of the three key elements in a community of practice are the domain, in other words, a topic that you are interested in, the fact it's about practice, it's about *doing* things, about getting your hands dirty, getting stuck in; and it's obviously about a community.

But one thing we've just been talking about, I'm actually working with Etienne on a workshop programme at the moment in a virtual environment, and one of the questions that's just emerged is, 'How do you create a constellation of communities of practice, a series of communities of practice that overlap with each other, where perhaps you have two communities which share the same domain, the same subject, but they have a different form of practice, or two

communities that have the same form of practice but in different domains. So you might have neurosurgeons and heart surgeons, they are all surgeons, but actually their practice is quite different. And can you create what he calls 'constellation' or 'landscape' communities of practice that overlap with each other? That's one area, a very interesting area to explore... One of the things I think this project has begun to play with are the boundaries between communities of practice and this idea of brokerage, and I think that touches on what you were saying about, how do you keep a community of practice fresh, how do you bring in new people, and how do you send your ambassadors or your scouts out, as it were, into other communities of practice to learn from them by what they are doing about things?

So it's very much for us about taking what we call 'aspiring entrants', and I'm sure you're familiar with this idea, and mixing them together with established practitioners and as Etienne says, that's creating kind of generational encounter.

We think that's one of the ways to keep a community in practice fresh, is the new members, you know, this idea of Kevin Kelly's of nobody is as smart as everybody; the new member is going to have something to bring that's unique, from a different community maybe, and I think that's a good way to energise an existing community, let the new members bring in their expertise, their understanding, from a different area of practice, into your community, and that's a great way to kind of get some freshness and some revitalisation into it. And this is what, and I wish he'd come up with an easier phrase to say than 'legitimate peripheral participation', but this is the idea of, you know, when you are starting out in a new area, you being to learn the rules of the game by actively participating in that community, and that participation legitimises your presence, in fact your kind of entry card, you're getting your membership of the club.

Now I think what's very interesting about this is the way that the web or social networking is accelerating this process enormously, and I think it's allowing us to be much more efficient lurkers in other people's communities. So I think this process of being able to go into someone else's community,

hang around for a while, have a listen in to conversations, find out what's going on, bring yourself up to quite a nice level of understanding and then take all that back again to your own community, I think it's been massively enhanced by social media. So blogging, Twitter, following people's Wikis and Waves, all these different sorts of tools, it's a fantastic way and I've done this myself on multiple occasions now, I've kind of scouted out or entered into another community, found out what's going on there and come back out again. And you know, we start to call this 'pollination', it's like being a bee, flying off into someone else's flowerbed, taking a bit of nectar from it and flying back to your own nest and spreading that pollen around. So this is a very interesting concept, this idea of brokerage and working on the edges of communities.

And obviously it's all about tacit knowledge, the bulk of what we're trying to deal with here is that kind of soft squidgy hard to pin down sort of knowledge, it's a lot about community based knowledge in that way. And for me it's clearly mostly about dialogue, debate and discussion, it's mostly about talking about what we do, really trying to open up a discussion around these issues. And most of what we're concerned with, and I think this is true of many communities, is developing the professional identity of the individuals, but also the community itself. Our practice area is under a lot of stress at the moment, a lot of pressure from the external world and digitisation, the impact of new media, the impact of citizen photojournalism, we're constantly trying to redefine what is *our* identity as a professional practice area? We are under a lot of pressure from external forces that are trying to sort of almost degrade or destroy the idea of the profession of journalism, so how do we respond to that and how do we make sense of that?

These are just a few, I was brainstorming a bit about ways of trying to think about the kinds of categories you might want to start thinking about if you are trying to build a community, and for some reason I got caught with the idea of a lot of 'Rs' and so these are sort of the rounds you might want to work in, the kind of rhythms at which you might want to meet, both physically or online, the sorts of relationships that you need to build, roles

that people might have in the community, being quite clear about that, what kind of resources you might have or you might be able to utilise, and respect is an important part of this so what respect you have for your community members, and what kind of responsibilities does the membership of that community entail? If you join a community, what do you expect of the community and what can the community expect from you?

I won't go into these in a lot of detail but they are just things to throw out that we can maybe discuss if you have got time at the end.

I'm going to take you on what Etienne would call a 'virtual visit' now, into the community that we built. You know we're going to go on a sort of tour of what we did and how we did it. It's called OPEN-I, which stands for Open Photojournalism Education Network, and it's essentially, it's an invitation only network but we made it very easy for people to invite other people, so we personally invited, when we began it, around the first 150 to 200 people, since then pretty much all the invitations have been from that group and we've now got about 1,000 members altogether in the community.

It's a global network, it's very important for us right from the very beginning this was a group that was complete and inclusive and it included practitioners from all over the world, from Africa, from Asia, from Latin America as well as First World America, UK practitioners as well. So we were quite careful at the beginning and made sure we'd invited people from that kind of global space.

Just to give you a flavour of the kinds of things we're talking about, of the practice that we are actually involved in, these are some photographs by a colleague of mine, Ed Kashi, he's a fairly active member of the community and is a National Geographic photographer, he also works on long-term documentary projects in America, this is a project about aging in America that he's been working on. This is a project about Iraq and Kurdistan that was shot for National Geographic. This is the project he's just finished in the Niger Delta, oil exploitation in the Niger Delta.

So just to talk a little bit about how we actually built the network or we built the community. We very much followed, to be honest with you, Etienne's sort of guidelines here. This is, as some of you may know, this is Etienne at the

Mediating Boundaries Event that JISC helped us do back in May this year, which is a great kind of one-day event where we sort of play with lots of these ideas, particularly around boundaries.

So the first thing we did, we identified the group of thought leaders within our practice area. About 12 people, some of them were personally known to me, they were friends or working colleagues and some of them were recommended by that little small network. And so I went out and we did a series of interviews, both face to face, we had a couple of lunches that we hosted and then we did some Skype interviews, which we recorded, and from that we kind of brainstormed the issues, and I was asking questions like, 'What are the key issues facing our practice industry today? What are the really big problems? What are the big opportunities? What are the new business models? What are the ethical issues? What's the kind of road map for our industry at the moment?' and from that we kind of mapped out a landscape, as it were, or a terrain of the questions that we were interested in dealing with, and we kind of came up with the beginnings of an agenda for the first sort of incarnation of the first cycle of the community's activities, about what we might want to engage with, what we might want to discuss. And some of the big themes that came out were obviously the impact of digitalisation, the way that's completely changed working methods, a lot was about business models, where the old model was that you worked for a magazine or a newspaper and that was pretty much it, and you were published in the Sunday Times or whatever, the new model is that it's much more open, people are mostly freelance, they work for a wide variety, different kinds of clients, NGOs, magazines, some of them go back to doing wedding photography to survive; it's a much more complex, much more fractured model now.

And obviously a major issue that we're facing is the issue around ethics, both in terms of the ethics in digital manipulation, but also, more importantly, the ethics of representation.

Just to give you an example of the kind of difficulty of the problems we're working with, this is a photograph that we discussed, or an issue that we

discussed, from Haiti; it's a French photographer who took photographs of the sort of basically the removal of the bodies of the victims from Haiti. So this will give you a sense of the kind of complexity of the issues that we're trying to negotiate.

The heart of the community, we ended up, we expected the community to actually have lots of different spaces in which you'd interact; in the end, it's pretty much narrowed down to the live webinars being the key focal point of what we do, and we realised quite quickly that there are other spaces where people are discussing, things like blogs for example, have massively taken off in our practice area. There are 4 or 5 or 10 recently written blogs, written by professional photographers, they've kind of taken over from discussion forums and other sorts of more text-based, chat-based discussion. So our discussion forums, for example, didn't really take off.

That goes back to the point I was making this morning about being very flexible and being agile and not over predicting things, and if you've got some things not working, fine, concentrate your efforts somewhere else.

So most of our efforts now are, our current situation, I'm running these webinars, and we typically run them twice a month and they last about two hours each time and there we tried all sorts of different times of day for them, we tried all sorts of different days of the week and it doesn't really seem to make a great deal of difference to attendance, it's typically between 30 and 50 people per session, with a nice mixture of, some of them are students, some of them are professional practitioners, some of the people work with photography and some people are academics and critics of photography. And we've got quite a nice demographic in that way. When we launched the network, the first hundred or so people we invited were not students, we waited until we'd built up a sort of sense of enough professionals engaging, enough people that people recognised, they knew their names, and it was only after about the first month or two we started allowing our own students to come into the space. We were very careful in managing expectations, we didn't want the professional practitioners to see

this as a student University site, nor did we want the students to see it as we were trying to get free lectures for them to come into their class.

So we've been careful with the branding, it's not branded with University branding, there's nowhere on the site that says, you know, 'You are now in LCCJISC' or anything like that; it's mentioned, but it's mentioned in a very subtle, quiet way in the 'about' page.

So I think one of the key things that we've been able to do, as the institution, and this is looking at the University in the broadest sense, there are a group of academics and people that are engaging with the issues around the practice of being a photojournalist who are not practitioners, and we've been able, I think, not just my variety but a variety of institutions globally, we've been able to act as what you might call a critical friend to the industry. So collectively, we've been able to ask practitioners some really quite tough questions about why you are doing what you're doing, how you are doing what you're doing, what are the implications of that? And so we've been able to really act, as I say, as this kind of critical friend, and it's a great role for the University to act, we're not necessarily going to be getting anything out of it directly, but you are able to kind of interrogate the professional practice arena in a very interesting way.

And so what it kind of creates is the kind of 'talking shop' for our industry, and what it's done is brought together, in a sense it's brought together several communities of practice; I talked at the beginning about this idea, a group of people have the same domain, the same practice, but in different communities, so there's the community of academics, the community of students, the community of professional practitioners, the community of photo editors and people that work with photography; we've created a space that kind of spans all of those different communities and a space where they can come together and talk about practice in a very open way and in quite a sort of fine grain way as well as a very general way.

So some reflections on the whole process and I guess we'll open it up for some discussion.

I think one of the key things, I said this in my session this morning, we essential leverage an existing investment, that was both in terms of the technology, in terms of we used Wimba, which is the University's web conferencing platform that we pay for, but more important than the technology, I think the leverage, the pedagogic or the teaching and learning investment we've made in developing a methodology of webinars and blogs and Twitter, so we kind of knew how to use those tools already, we'd developed that kind of expertise, and we just took that out into the professional practice area, and so it's that kind of conceptual investment, if you like, that we've made, that we leverage very, very effectively. I think that's a really important thing to think about, don't reinvent the wheel, don't start from scratch, take something you've already worked through, you already know how to do, and try and roll that out into a broader community.

And the other thing that's worked very, very well, obviously, and this is I guess where we get our ROI in terms of the teaching and learning, this is where the project is essentially becoming self-sustaining, it's giving us fantastic insights into what industry wants and needs and is doing at the moment. And that means our feedback loop between what we're teaching on the course and how we are preparing our students for professional practice and the practice world is very, very short. Now we can see that, for example, multimedia is really, really taking off in the practice area, we can go find the key leaders and ask them questions about what they are doing and that feeds straight back into our teaching and learning. So it's really, really provided huge benefits from our points of view in terms of keeping the course current, up to date, very reflective of professional practice.

And obviously it's also a space for our students to actively participate in that broad community of practice for being professional, and it's acting as a kind of transition zone for them, from the Academy, from the University, into professional practice, they are able to make connections, friends, their identity on the network is as a photographer, not as a student, so they are able to very quickly segway into the professional practice community, it's almost like an alumni network for them, they just step straight into that other

network, they are connecting with people, they are able to communicate with their peers.

One thing that worked very, very well was, as part of the JISC project we had a paid evaluator, so it was excellent to be able to get that constant iterative feedback on the project. We had a kind of continuous process of asking people how they were going. The evaluator didn't know very much about photography, but was a well-trained academic evaluator, and she sat in on most of the webinars, which she found fascinating, but equally she was able to kind of look at the interactions that were happening, levels of interaction, who was interacting and who wasn't, and so on and so forth.

The feedback has been very, very positive from more or less all the different people that are involved in it, and you know, it's kind of confirmed a lot of what I've been saying so far and certainly confirmed why we started the project up. It's been a very, very good driver for all sorts of people in all sorts of ways and for them to develop their professional practice.

But one of the key things we got back was feedback from academics saying, 'What's great about this is, I've got my theories about what happens in practice, I know that to go out to practice and ask them very directly, 'I think this is the case, do you agree with me?'...'?' and so it's been a great way for the academic community to get really good data from the horse's mouth, as it were, and I think that's one of the key things that we can do, we can act as the 'broker', as it were, between the kind of research academics and professional practice, and act as a space in which those two areas can come together. A lot of the time we're arguing about, 'How do we bridge the gap between industry, professional practice and the University? How do we 'translate', as it were, that space?' And I think this is a great way to do it, by using this kind of approach.

The fact that it's in real time is really popular, people really like the immediacy and the energy, the emotional energy of being in a live webinar, but they also like the fact that it's your own time, they can go, they can download it, they can listen to it later on, we host the archives of the webinars as videos on

Vimeo, so there's a good chance for people to go back and listen to them again and get a sense of what's been happening.

And this idea of in-between time, I'm really beginning to play with a lot, this sort of almost real world, 'almost real time but not quite' space, which is what I call Twitter space really, this sense of being almost in real time information feedback loop that you can get.

I'm just going to finish by talking about some of the roles that we played in this process, and some of the roles that I think are key to creating a small-scale community of practice, as we did. One is obviously the community coordinator, I think that was me and I effectively worked about a day a week on the project, and I now work about half a day a week on it, which we've managed to find funding internally for, basically on that, because of this issue of feeding back into the curriculum, alumni development etc. etc.

One of the ways we managed to make it sustainable was, I went out and found partner organisations that were interested in hosting webinars for us, so we've now got 4 or 5 different other groups external to our institution, who, on a regular basis, will do the kind of leg work of finding people to participate and they will host the webinar, we'll provide the technical support and the platform for them, but they'll actually do the work and recruiting the speakers, publicising, putting it out on their websites and so on. And we've now got a kind of regular coterie of other people who are able to provide us with contents essentially, so it works very, very well.

For me, I essentially have been the technology steward as well, this is Wenger and Co.'s kind of latest sort of latest incarnation of one of the key members of a virtual community of practice, someone who is able to sort of act again as the broker between the technology and the community, help the community identify one of the most important, or one of the most valuable tools it might utilise or might develop.

The project evaluator was very, very important, it was great to have someone whose job it was, was to actually, with some rigour, put qualitatively and quantitatively assess what we were doing, and we got great feedback from

that, particularly the first year of the project running, it really helped us a lot in terms of keeping ourselves on track in that sense.

And probably the key person in the process was the project administrator, they were paid, I think, half a day a week through the whole process, and having someone to tidy up all the boring loose ends, behind the scene stuff, keeping the Ning site tidy, making sure that people were reminded when the webinars were, during the webinars, having a second person who is able to handle the technical issues behind the scenes, those sorts of issues were very, very important, but the sorts of things it's quite hard for people to get someone to do as a volunteer. By having someone who was paid to do that, it meant those jobs got done, and in having someone that you can tell to do a job because they are being paid for it, is a really valuable thing to have in a community of practice.

One of the big problems, I think, instrumentalising them, and this is an issue that Will raised at the beginning was, you know, there's a lot of lip service paid in institutions to community of practice, particularly at the moment, it's the latest buzzword, but it's very rare that they are properly funded or supported, and a lot of people are expected to do it almost as, you know, out of nothing, and it's very important to kind of write the business case almost, that it needs a certain amount of staff support in order for it to work.

So I'll leave it there with some time for questions. We've got, I guess, 10, 15 minutes? So I'm very happy to answer any questions or if we've got a Google Docs started, just before the session started, with some questions we could maybe engage with you a bit anyway, because it seems we've got quite a lot of experience anyway in the room, so I'll hand it over to you to open the discussion.

Q: What would you see as being the difference between a community of practice and a user group?

PL: That's a very good question. I'll just get Etienne on the phone, shall I? (Laughter). I think it's... I think one of the first things to make sure is that

when we're talking about community in this context, it doesn't have to be a touchy feely cuddly warm space, it can actually be quite a spiky, unpleasant space, because when Etienne is talking about community in this context, he's kind of adopted the word in his own terminology, so it's not necessarily the community in the sense that we tend to think of community as being something very, very positive and very cosy. So I think it's that sense of an engagement, a collaborative engagement with the practice in the domain that goes beyond the user group, I guess, it's sort of that sense of just going that next step beyond the user group into something that's much more vibrant and something more kind of, that has more energy to it, I suppose.

Q: I think some of them turn into pressure groups, don't they? I mean, that's quite a legitimate sort of ambition, if you like, in setting up communities.

PL: Absolutely. I mean, that's one of the key things, in the beginning, is the community of practice model the one that you want, or actually do you want a user group or do you want a pressure group or do you want something else? So I think it's important. As I said, one of the big problems with it at the moment is, because it has become instrumentalised, lots of people are sort of applying this term very, very loosely and vaguely without really any precision and not really trying to think, 'Is the community of practice what I need, or do I need some other form of...?' you know, whatever it might be, it might be a staff development programme or a pressure group, as you said.

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Q: I think the other thing to remember about communities of practice, I just know from my experience, is the fact that they form for a time and they focus on a particular area and then they disband and become 'other groups'?

PL: Absolutely. I think the temporal aspect of them is a really important thing to enlarge on, and in some ways to celebrate, you know. A community exists

because it has a reason to exist, and whilst that reason to exist is there, it can be very, very powerful and very, very energetic, but if that reason no longer exists then trying to keep it going can often be a very sort of, a completely useless exercise, and that's a really good point to think about. You know, is there a latent community there that you can begin to build around? If there's not then are you actually going to be successful? What's the point? Or if there's a community that's already kind of lost its way a little bit, can you resurrect it by having this more strategic intervention as a community? Then that's a really...

I think what I'd come back to is, what Etienne said many times before, that this is a theory that's based on an observation of how people have learnt socially for a very, very long period of time, hundreds of thousands of years, that this is not something that is a relatively new phenomenon, it's something that, it's just... He's just kind of given it some shape and some focus, but it is a way of working collaboratively, collectively, and learning collaboratively and collectively, that goes back a long, long way, in fact his original research, as I'm sure you are aware, the community he was working with would never have seen itself as a community of practice, it was a group of claims assessors in a factory in an industrial setting in America. And many communities of practice, in fact, there are probably many more authentic communities of practice that don't even know that they are, the ones that have been invented and instrumentalised and set up and sort of 'created', as it were, so I think that's a really important thing.

Q: You had your '7 R's' model and another one that struck me was about rewards and really interesting things about communities of practice, everyone who's a member of the community actually gets a completely different reward out of it, and maybe that's one of the things which differentiates it from user groups is that, you know, different members of the community get completely different... Return on investment was something you talked about for the students or for the University in terms of students, whereas your actual

experienced practitioners will get a completely different reward out of it and that might be kind of intrinsic reward that Brian was talking about earlier on.

PL: I think that's a very interesting point as well and it comes to the point we were making earlier about, 'How do you keep a community fresh?' So as long as the rewards of membership are driving that individual, as long as you're getting something out of it that's valuable, then it makes sense to continue with it. If you can find ways to make sure that the range of members in the community are getting a reward out of it, then you can keep that sustained and keep that going.

I think, with the sort of more established core members, making sure that they're aware that this is a sort of space where they can question their own practice rather than just regurgitating, is the key thing. So you're right, maybe after 2 years you go through the same set of questions again, but after 2 years you probably *should* be going through the same set of questions again because things have moved on in that 2 year period, and I think part of the philosophy should be that the core members want to have their practice questioned as much as the peripheral members want to learn about the core members practice, so I think that's a good way to kind of keep it fresh, is it encourage that sense of, you know, we're really going to open up what we do, open up the process of what we do. I think to me that's one of the key things to try to encourage, is a space where you're talking about the process of what you do, rather than the product, so you are really trying to talk about how that thing happened or how you worked through it or what you did, rather than, 'Here's my bit of research - Results.' It's much more interesting to talk about the path that you, the journey you took...

Q: On that point, you mentioned Nancy White as part of that group, you know, like yourself who have been privileged to meet some of those individuals. It was particularly interesting in one cohort of undergraduates' work based learning on an Honours Degree. One of them was quite interested, and we were doing a module on online communication and

technology, and one of them was quite, how can I say...? He wanted some more answers than we could give and we didn't feel qualified enough and we didn't say that... Well, yes, we did say that, but what he did was, he communicated directly with Nancy White, and Nancy is quite a good communicator, she'll answer very, very quickly. And back came the answer, and of course he'd informed the whole community group of students...

PL: I think that's a really good point, but you know, saying, 'I don't know the answer but I'll find somebody that does' is a really powerful way, and I think if you've got that community of practice mentality, the idea that you would go to another community of practice to find that answer, and they would allow you to enter to ask the question is a really interesting point, and I think this... I'm coming back a lot to this thing that Etienne has talked about, about constellation of community, what he calls 'walking a landscape of a community of practice' or 'communities' of practice, and it's almost like a kind of roadmap or map that you can explore, and some communities you climb to the mountain top and you survey everything, and some of them you just walk in the foothills and you get a flavour of their particular activity, and I think in many ways for me it's been a very useful way of conceptualising my professional identity and I think that's a really key thing to think about, and a lot of it, we just scratched the surface of that today, but a lot of thinking is actually about, how do you define yourself in relation to a community of practice, and how do they legitimise your personal and professional identity? And I think that's been a very interesting point, because personally I've really experienced that in the last couple of years the more I've got involved in the learning technology community, the BCE community and my own professional community as a photographer, you know, and you can see your own personal professional identity developing and growing and getting confidence in that by kind of being a bit more aware about these sort of boundary brokerage sort of issues, definitely.

Q: You talked about sustainability and that's obviously an issue if you're starting out in a community, you know, you need a resource, but you talked about some partners that you've identified. What kind of partners were they or are they, that are actually...?

PL: They are, let me just show you... We've reached out to a variety of different partners; one is an online, it's a physical and online magazine about our industry, it's called 'Photo 8', and it's a kind of biannual publication and they have a blog and a website and also produce a physical magazine, so every time they produce a new magazine they'll run a webinar to talk about the latest issue, so they've been one very good partner. Another one has been a very active blog site which is about political commentary on photography, so it looks at the role of photography within politics, particularly in America, they've started hosting what they call 'Salons' for us, so it's basically that they bring together 3 or 4 well known critics and they'll discuss some actual individual photographs in terms of their political content, so we did a whole session on the Gulf of Mexico, the disaster, the oil spill for example. We've been working with a group called the World Press Photo Organisation, who are a major sponsor of photographic education outside the higher education sector, and there's a very well known photo agency called Magnum, they've been running workshops and training sessions with us, so it's a variety of different kinds of stakeholders. It's been partly me going out and looking for people and partly them coming to us in a sort of negotiated dialogue. But I think if you can find 4 or 5 external organisations that are interested in the same sort of things as you and provide them with the infrastructure to engage with an audience, then that's a very effective way of doing it.

Q: Just to wrap things up, Paul, can I just ask you one final question then we'd better had downstairs to the final panel? Obviously OPEN-I was an online COP that you set up from scratch, and let's not underplay the role that you've had personally in doing that, you just talked about your partners when

actually you're the one who's got those contacts and brought them in. But how much potentially could you now step away from it, and how, and this comes back to the sustainability question here, you know, would that community still exist without your driving force?

PL: I think not yet, and that's a very important thing to think about. I think if we put enough energy into creating the inheritance, as it were, it probably could, but that would mean... At the moment, what I'm engaged in is keeping the community going, not that, so if I was going to step away then I probably would need to spend several months on engaging enough people in it to make sure it runs.

One of the things we're looking at doing is turning it into a sort of alumni led organisation, so I think one of the next stage is we are going to suggest to recent graduates from the course that they begin to take on some of the ownership of the agenda of what we are doing and they are beginning to sort of host the webinars, host the sessions, and that's our next step really because we're now looking at the next, 'What are we going to be doing in 2, 3 years down the line? How are we going to keep this community going?' so handing over a certain amount of that 'ownership', as it were, to our alumni and also potentially to one of these other partners that we've been working with is a major, well it's the next step really.

Q: I've had a couple of MBA students run projects while they do their dissertations on alumni associations, and by far and away, the strongest alumni associations are run by the members.

PL: Yes, absolutely. I think that's a really interesting point...

Q: Alumni is actually a 'topic' that is going to be funded under the forthcoming BCE work, so...

PL: If anybody wants to contribute, I've just opened a Google Doc with a few of the questions we threw up, that's the URL for it if you like adding some stuff to that...

Q: Do you tweet that?

PL: I will do, yes.

Q: Using the alumni example again, we did the very same thing with recent graduates from the online course who came in and actually were almost like intern lecturers for a short amount of time in a seminar. But the whole thing, just going back to the comments about sustainability, we found that, and I'm sure sitting around here, there have been similar experiences, the inputting issue with an online community be it a community of practice, be it a professional group or just students or whatever, is that there's an initial tremendous amount of scaffolding. In the case of undergraduates working to their final year, in third year, you can all step back, and watch the strong members of that community, from running things. Your input is less but maybe more concentrated as a summariser at the end. That's where, after three years we found we could step back, we couldn't *leave* but we could step back.

PL: Yes, that's kind of the model I'm looking at moving towards.

Q: I think that's when the community starts coming into its own, self-sustaining. But the one speaker downstairs, I think it was Paul McCain? Anyway, he was one of the speakers, and he did say that you are in for the long haul...

PL: Yes, Brian McCaul, absolutely, yes.

Q: And you totally endorse that?

PL: Absolutely, yes.