Background:

A group of 65 faculty and staff interested in distance learning have been meeting on an informal basis for nearly three years. The meetings have been oriented to presentations and discussion about things related specifically to online teaching and learning. When the opportunity to conduct a Virtual Community of Practice (VCoP) became available, a subgroup from our original group was formed.

The 11 invited participants were individuals who had shown an interest in introducing online collaboration to their teaching projects. The participants in this VCoP represented a cross-section of academic areas including: business, liberal arts, gerontology, education, occupational therapy, medical education and engineering.

There was a USC staff group of four who also participated in the VCoP. Their interest was in using this opportunity to conduct training and education around the pedagogies underlying collaboration AND showcasing a variety of online modalities for feedback.

Additionally, we secured a student in the Ed.D. Program at Pepperdine University to serve as our assessment consultant. We also had the support of Vicki Suter from NLII.

Group Activity Summary

First Meeting: September, 2004

The first meeting of the group was done in person in order to do some bonding and learn the technology with staff by their side. Most of the participants had not experienced the online environment in which we were going to be conducting both the synchronous and asynchronous meetings. The focus of the first meeting was to conduct a set of activities grounded in the Appreciative Inquiry approach in an effort to achieve mutually-agreed upon themes for our collaborative efforts. While conducting the activities, the technology was gradually introduced (Icohere’s Bridging Community).

The themes that emerged for our group’s focus were:

1. Provide continuous feedback in order to conduct proper evaluation and assessment of collaborative efforts.

2. Identify ways that all points of view can be respected in collaborative efforts. We want to learn how to identify and appreciate diversity of students’ experiences and prior knowledge.
3. Strategize how to bind participants to project goals and visions and how to celebrate achievement of milestones toward those goals. It was noted this ties to the second theme: the greater the breadth and depth of the group, the better the problem-solving will be in group projects.

Toward the end of the first meeting, the participants were put into groups of three and assigned a particular learning theory on collaboration to study together. Their deliverable was to post a billboard that visually depicted the key concepts of the theory. They were to post their billboards in the Bridging Community. They were also asked to give feedback to each other about the work and what was gleaned from the billboards.

Second Meeting: October, 2004

This was the first time the group met synchronously online. We utilized a platform offered by our Business School called Interwise. It features Voice over Internet Protocol (VOIP) as well as an interface that allows the group to “see” who is online, who has questions, and a little chat area. The meeting featured a PowerPoint presentation on assessment and then some small breakout discussions on lessons learned from the first assignment. There were some technical difficulties when the group was instructed to convene their breakout groups in the Quick Meeting space of Icohere. Most members could not find their way back into Interwise so the meeting ended abruptly.

Third Meeting: November, 2004

Interwise was once again made available to the group; however, the day this meeting was scheduled to be held was the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and that proved to be an especially difficult day for good participation. That, coupled with some technological glitches with Interwise, prompted a quick cancellation of the meeting.

Fourth Meeting: December, 2004

Originally, the group had not planned a December meeting but due to the cancellation in November, we agreed to hold on before the holiday break. We all agreed to keep the technology simple and that was to utilize the NLII Phone Bridge and the Icohere Bridging Community. We asked two of the teams to present their learning theory and conduct group activities that would demonstrate how to apply these theories into practice.

Next Meeting: January, 2005

There will be one more meeting of the group utilizing Icohere and the Phone Bridge. The remaining two groups will be asked to present. We will conclude our meeting with a discussion as to whether or not we stay together beyond the scope of the NLII support.
Outcomes

Anticipated and Real Outcomes

1. Planned: Distribution of Summary Findings to the Full USC DL Network

   Reality: The group has kept the DL Network updated and informed through oral reports at the monthly meetings. This summary report will be distributed and made available to all members at the February 16 meeting. There are currently 70 members signed up for the DL Network and they represent virtually all schools on campus.

2. Planned: Update of the Center for Scholarly Technology’s Tools & Techniques Database

   Reality: The status of this database is currently pending as a merger of departments occurs. Thought being given to affiliate with similar databases outside of USC, including those endorsed by NLII (i.e. MOATS) so this can be included in that database if it is felt to be worthy.

3. Planned: Workshop Spin-offs

   Reality: Department merger is still underway so it is too soon to commit to using this model as a way to train faculty on facilitating online collaboration; however, the approach is being considered. What is especially nice is that this model allows faculty to become learners. Staff that support this effort can organize the learning around learner-centered principles, thereby letting faculty have a value-added experience.

Unanticipated Outcomes

1. Moving Theory Into Practice: Factors that Underlie Successful Online Collaboration

   Members learned about five pedagogical theories including Appreciative Inquiry, Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory, Problem-Based Learning, Cooperative Learning and Cognitive Apprenticeship. These theories all tied to collaborative learning and served as an impetus for the participants in the community to learn something and then practice teaching it. They each created online activities that featured their assigned theory.

2. Hands-On Practice with a Variety of Online Meeting Platforms

   In addition to the space provided by NLII (Icohere’s Bridging Community and Phone Bridge), our group had the opportunity to meet utilizing a commercial product
(Interwise) that supports meeting via Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP). Plans are in the works to try others should the group decide they want to stay together.

3. Deepening of Collegial Relationships

While all the members of the group were familiar with one another, the opportunity to work in a small but focused effort gave everyone a chance to know each other better. These relationships are already fostering new professional collaborations beyond just those focused on distance learning (grants-oriented).

4. Group Setting of Goals

As mentioned above, the group did identify three goals they felt were crucial to successful collaboration. Our efforts were geared to meet these goals. The one that was explicitly tackled was the second one, in which we identified a way to acknowledge each participant’s strength as unique to making the group stronger. The group was all given a copy of the book “Now Find Your Strengths,” which they read, and then took the Strengthfinder test. The results showed a lot of overlap in the strengths of our participants, but we did discover some individuality as well. This activity made for a fun and lively asynchronous discussion. The group felt this was a good icebreaker for our collaborative to supporting getting to know one another and it was different from the standard type of personality identifiers like Myers-Briggs.

The other two goals are still in the works to accomplish. The first is feedback. We did use the discussion forums to review what we had learned and what we liked, but participation was spotty. The second is getting buy-in to group goals. Judging from the feedback in the final survey, this has not occurred to the complete satisfaction of the group. Some chalked it up to poor communication which indicates that a stronger job of facilitating the VCoP is required. Another possibility to deal with this is to attempt a face to face meeting to renew commitments and, perhaps, bring in new, and more committed, members.

5. Survey data acquired

Three surveys were conducted during the project period. The results from these surveys are providing critical feedback to guide the directions the Center for Learning will be taking on faculty training and needs related to facilitating online collaboration. Additionally, the data is helping us determine the technological needs of the synchronous meeting platform that will be chosen by the University to support on a wider scale.

The next section of this summary report rolls up the “lessons learned” from survey feedback.
Lessons Learned

1. Participant Expectations Not Fully Met

The responses from the 8 members who took the final survey indicated that the effort, overall, was worth the investment of time. However, comments indicated that it was not clear from the beginning exactly what was to be fully gained from the community so many felt that the experience was not as fulfilling as it could be. That said, 7 of the 8 indicated they would like to keep the community going even though we are no longer supported by NLII. The interest comes from the group feeling that momentum was starting to build and we are just now getting ready to dive into more substantive and relevant activities. It took the group time to feel comfortable with the technology and see the potential for the use of technology in their collaborations.

2. The Participants Need to Feel Ownership

The group was driven primarily by one staff person. While a strong facilitator is important to a VCoP, in terms of communication, the group really needed to have more ownership in what activities were held and what issues they wanted to address. Because it was treated more like training, participants did not feel a sense of obligation to peers to participate in the various small group activities. The uneven involvement impacted the fully-committed members too since they did not get the full benefit of collaboration they were expecting.

On the flip side of this issue, the participants did see the challenges of group work when assigned to students. They feel the big difference is that students are incentivized by grades to participate while this is not the case in a VCoP around professional support. It was noted that online collaboration should incorporate the use of peer review in the grading process in order to hold members of the team accountable to one another. It might be interesting to introduce this concept for practice in our VCoP and see if it stimulates more involvement

3. Asynchronous Activity Difficult to Sustain

We had fairly good participation in all but one of the online activities (the November session was postponed to December due to poor attendance and technical difficulties). However, there were assignments of discussion and projects in between the synchronous sessions. Those were to be conducted in the Bridging Community. The group participated at a minimal level, if at all. There were several email reminders sent out to urge participation but, in the long run, the group did not make this work a priority.

4. Small Group Breakouts Inconsistent

Participants were placed into teams of three at the end of the first session and asked to prepare assignments requiring 2-3 hours of collaborative time. All groups did their
work but, again, not all members of all groups participated. There was also a lot of confusion about the final deliverable. This confusion paralyzed some groups and caused delay for others. The lesson learned here is that communication is essential and the simpler the instructions, the better. Examples were offered but they were not clear enough. The participants felt, in the long run, this lesson learned was one of the most valuable as they think about the essentials of facilitating their own students into online group work.

I would like to note here that there was one activity assigned to the participants that did not require collaboration. They were to each take the Strengthsfinder Test and then report the findings to the Discussion Board in the Bridging Community. It is interesting that this is the one and only activity that got 100% participation. When probed about this, the group felt it was fun and did not require the hassle of coordinating with others just to find the time to do the work.

5. Theory to Practice

With such a diverse cross sections of disciplines represented in the group, it was difficult to find common ground on activities that could be considered applicable to everyone’s teaching needs. This type of group may be more effective if participants came with similar teaching outcomes in mind. However, the group did seem to value the insight they got time to time from their fellow participants with different teaching philosophies. This is something to identify more closely in the group and discuss in terms of setting a value system.

6. Faculty Development through VCoP Is an Evolving Process

It’s clear to me that some members of the group need to be asked about their true desire to carry on if the group wants to keep going. A lot of promises were given but not always followed-through which left the collaboration experience spotty. With the Bridging Community in Icohere going away, there will be a transition time that will provide a natural break in terms of reflecting on what our next steps are to be. Some thoughts that will be brought to the group: will some members leave? May new members join? Should members take turns organizing the monthly synchronous meeting?

The next few months will be critical in determining if the investment of this time has been worth it from a staff support perspective. I think more focus is required in terms of what the participants have in common. I also think the participants need to demonstrate greater ownership in the community. If this cannot be exhibited, then I think this approach as a way to develop faculty skills needs to be reconsidered.