



Towards a Professional Community of Inquiry

A report to the MoE
on the T4T4T pilot

AUTHORS:

DEREK WENMOTH

HELEN GILMORE

ANN TREWERN



technology | *innovation*
learning | *research*



Final report for the Ministry of Education on the
T4T4T pilot, conducted during 2004, submitted by
CORE Education Ltd.

CORE Education Ltd
PO Box 13678
Christchurch
New Zealand
<http://www.core-ed.net>

Derek Wenmoth - project
coordinator
Helen Gilmore - researcher
Ann Trewern - researcher



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Executive Summary

T4T4T was conducted as a 15-month pilot of a web-supported professional development programme, designed specifically for the use and benefit of New Zealand tertiary education teachers. The programme was called 'Teachers for Teachers' and is referred to as T4T4T. It is based on an original project developed and implemented in the UK for school teachers called T4T, or 'Teachers for Teachers'.

The broad aims of the T4T4T pilot project were to:

- establish in the tertiary institutions a professional learning community of tertiary teachers with a common purpose of improving teaching and learning in tertiary contexts, and
- contribute to our knowledge of what fosters effective e-learning and online professional development in a variety of tertiary contexts.

The pilot programme was conducted by Core Education Ltd (formerly Ultralab South) for the Ministry of Education in New Zealand. Core Education Ltd (formerly Ultralab South) had responsibility to project-manage the T4T4T pilot, and appointed a coordinator to manage the day to day running of the pilot, coordinate the mentor-researchers and facilitate the internal research component of the programme.

Core Education Ltd (formerly Ultralab South) is an independent educational research and development organisation based in Christchurch, New Zealand. The special area of interest of Core Education Ltd (formerly Ultralab South) is exploring the intersection between emerging pedagogies and cutting edge technology, and developing understandings from this about the impact of these pedagogies and technology on learning.

This report is a summative report on the project as a whole, and contains the conclusions of the research project that was run in conjunction with the pilot.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the development of the T4T4T project, including how and why it was established as an online community of practice for tertiary teachers. A full description of the technical environment that was used is also provided, including explanations of the changes

that were made and extra features that were added in response to feedback from participants.

Chapter 2 provides the key research questions for the project and details the research methodologies and data collection and analysis methods used in both the internal and external elements of the research.

In order to establish whether or not the aims of the project were achieved, seven key research questions were addressed using a combination of both internal (i.e. participant) and external (i.e. non-participant) research. The research questions were:

1. To what extent, and in what ways, did the T4T4T programme of professional development promote inter-institutional collaboration and professional community among tertiary teachers with common interests?
2. To what extent, and in what ways, did the T4T4T programme promote within-institution collaboration and professional community among tertiary teachers with common interests?
3. To what extent, and in what ways, did the T4T4T online community programme contribute to tertiary teachers' understandings of teaching and learning in tertiary contexts?
4. To what extent, and in what ways, did the T4T4T online community project enhance tertiary teachers' confidence and competence with regard to teaching and learning in online contexts (i.e. e-learning)?
5. What strategies and modes of operation were most effective over time in a) fostering and b) sustaining participation in an online professional development in the pilot context?
6. Was the T4T4T online professional development programme more effective in certain types of tertiary institution, or with certain groups of tertiary teachers, than in others?
7. What were the 'scalability' implications of the pilot, both fiscal and functional, in relation to subsequent roll-out to staff at other tertiary institutions?



These questions frame what is presented in chapters 3 to 6 of this report.

Chapter 3 explores the various ways in which the T4T4T online community programme contributed to tertiary teachers' understanding of teaching and learning in tertiary contexts, what was revealed about traditional teaching and online facilitation, and what strategies were adopted to try and meet the diverse learning needs of participants in the project.

The approach taken in this section has been to explore what happened, and observe how people have organized themselves within the T4T4T environment through

- online contributions to the learning environment and
- participant feedback from surveys, meetings and discussions.

The first section of this chapter explores the evidence that accumulated on the site about what teaching and learning contexts were developed within T4T4T and what learning opportunities have occurred for these tertiary teachers. Contributions to discussions in four of the major learning spaces set up on the site have been analyzed for the range of professional knowledge that has been considered through the discussions.

The second section of the chapter explores and attempts to develop an understanding of what has been both implicitly and explicitly revealed through T4T4T about teaching and learning in tertiary contexts and online facilitation.

The key findings that emerge in this chapter include...

1. The dichotomy between the teaching-and-learning nexus and the demands of research in tertiary institutions directed tertiary teachers' primary focus away from improving teaching and learning.
2. External professional development initiatives such as T4T4T need to be tied closely into institutionally based initiatives if they are to be attractive and effective.
3. Subject- and discipline-based interests and approaches dominate teaching contexts at tertiary level.
4. For individuals many positive outcomes were derived from the networking abilities provided by T4T4T.

5. For the mentor group, the T4T4T experience was significantly different from that of the participant group.
6. Many issues experienced by participants in T4T4T, such as time, locating information and issues of trust related to developing online competencies, are generic across dialogic networks.
7. Many participants shied away from the open structure of the project environment and the democratic approach of participant-developed and -driven curriculum and indicated a preference for greater structure and tasking.
8. Many participants and some mentors did not develop a personally relevant understanding of what T4T4T was about, nor of what it could do for their own learning.
9. Many of the mentors developed significantly new understandings of online leadership roles and found themselves facing challenges they did not expect when they entered the project.
10. Mentors found their role particularly challenging.
11. Many of the issues faced by mentors reflected their personal understandings about and orientations towards learning.

In the final section of this chapter, key points about learning and teaching and online confidence, revealed from the data analysis, are considered in terms of the various participant groups involved in T4T4T, the programme offered, the tertiary context and the T4T4T model.

Chapter 4 explores the patterns of participation in the T4T4T environment in an attempt to illustrate the ways in which collaboration and community were developed and supported within and beyond institutional boundaries. It considers the work cycles, expectations and commitment of tertiary teachers to the T4T4T project and investigates to what extent a community of practice was established to support the collective learning of all participants. Some similarities and differences in participation among the different types of tertiary organisation involved are discussed in order to identify whether the T4T4T online professional development programme was more effective in certain types of tertiary institutions. Some factors in the T4T4T pilot are revealed as having a major impact on the degree and nature of individual participation, as well as on the outcomes of the project as a whole.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The chapter focuses on online contributions to the learning environment and participant feedback from surveys, meetings and discussions. The first part of the chapter explores how community and collaboration were developed over the T4T4T programme. The second part explores the supports for and barriers to community and collaboration that arose during the course of the programme.

Key findings that emerge in this chapter include:

1. Interaction was significantly higher in the inter-institutional areas than in the intra-institutional spaces.
2. T4T4T enhanced individual and collective opportunities to 'inquire about tertiary teaching and learning' in cross-institutional interaction. Participants found out about alternative practices and perspectives and compared them with their own.
3. Highly active contributors to the T4T4T knowledge base were found across the institutions and in both mentor and participant groups.
4. Mentors felt they struggled to bolster and maintain interest in T4T4T by participants. Although some believed that maintaining interest was difficult in some institutions compared to others there is no real evidence that this was the case. Successful and less successful examples of online involvement are reasonably equally distributed across the four institutions.
5. The mentors were a strength of the programme. They were a key factor in gaining the level of participation that was achieved. There was enough diversity within the fourteen members of the mentor group to ensure variety in the ways in which the mentors approached their task and in the strengths that emerged. The research component of the mentor role encouraged a 'community of inquiry' approach to T4T4T among the members of this group.
6. The T4T4T programme was allowed to develop according to input from participants. This democratic philosophy encouraged mentors in particular to be involved in and committed to the project.
7. A wide range of philosophies about learning

- and about the teacher's role in the process emerged among participants in the project. Some approaches fostered commitment and deep involvement in the project, while others prompted participants to withdraw.
8. The Interact software successfully allowed autonomous approaches to be developed by the community, including the discussion area, and other files for community leaders. The systems developer must be commended for his highly supportive role in assisting the mentor group in developing workable solutions to technical and other problems that emerged during the project.

Chapter 5 explores what strategies and modes of operation are most effective over time in both fostering and sustaining participation in an online professional development community of tertiary teachers.

The chapter is in two sections. Section one discusses the notion that fundamental to the design of the T4T4T experience was the development of a strong culture of inquiry about teaching and learning. This section explores how this understanding is a key determinant of success for participation in T4T4T.

In the second section a range of factors that were revealed in the T4T4T pilot as contributing to the success of T4T4T for individuals, as well as to the outcomes of the project as a whole, are summarized. These include environmental/ contextual, pedagogical and technical factors.

The similarities and differences in participation among the different types of tertiary organisation involved are also discussed to identify in what ways the T4T4T online professional development programme was more effective in certain types of tertiary institution, and with certain groups of tertiary teachers, than in others.

Key findings that emerge in this chapter include:

1. Implicit in the T4T4T model was the notion of 'teacher as inquirer.' This is a significantly different conception of teacher learning across the individual's professional life span from that implied by the more traditional distinction of 'expert and novice' that is a more dominant model for professional development.



2. Strength was observed in the cross-institutional interaction which enhanced individual and collective opportunities to 'inquire about tertiary teaching and learning' and find out about alternative practices, and perspectives and compare them with their own.
3. The overall concept of the T4T4T model was that of a democratic, grassroots, gradually evolving process of inquiring into practice. Individuals actively participated in and contributed towards their own and the collective understanding of the group through questioning, observation and the challenge of alternative practice. The model has strengths and great potential for tertiary settings.
4. In an online environment such as T4T4T where the 'teacher as inquirer' is a fundamental concept, teacher leadership and group membership look very different from what they look like when teachers are trained in workshops or professional development projects.
5. In T4T4T, discussion, conceptualisation of issues, and reflection (within tertiary institutions and personal practice) that interrogate underlying images and assumptions of knowledge and practice, reached a depth unlikely to occur in any other environment.
6. There were considerable strengths inherent in the research aspect of the mentor role. Examining practice from an evidence-based approach is important for this role. The setting of a long-term task effectively asked mentors to think about and commit to the process early on.
7. Although the interface was changed and provided something of a barrier to participation at one point, overall the technology worked well for the group, allowing democratic and grassroots approaches to gain momentum and allowing the participants to develop the notion of 'inquiry'.

Chapter 6 addresses the issue of scalability for the T4T4T pilot, anticipating that there may be opportunities in the future for a wider implementation of this model or a derivative of it. Consideration is given to both financial and functional implications, and an implementation model suggested by the mentor group at the end of the project is described and discussed.

In this section seven key scalability concerns are discussed. These issues have been identified through the analysis of data as reported in the previous three chapters, and through the cumulative feedback from mentors. The seven concerns are:

- Institutional readiness
- Coordination
- Mentors
- Participants
- Online environment
- Technology
- Finance.

Chapter 7 is a brief summary of key recommendations made from the synthesis of these chapters, and highlights particular areas of importance to inform future implementations of T4T4T.

