



**GÖTEBORG UNIVERSITY**  
***Centre for School Management Training***



**Online Learning Communities – a way to  
achieve  
lifelong learning for professional groups?**

**The examples: principals and educational  
management trainers**

**Presented at**

**Developing Caring Learning Communities – Challenges for  
School Leaders in Creating Learning Communities that care  
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# **1.Introduction**

## **1.1 The working situation of the Swedish principal**

The Swedish society is developing away from an Industrial Society into an ICT-society. High demands on the educational system to provide an education suitable for people living in a postmodern society are formulated. Principals are key persons to get the new ideas implemented into schools. The work of principals has become more complicated the last few years in consequence of the introduction of school governing by objectives and decentralization. To handle staff problems and to initiate and implement school development issues are two important and difficult tasks for a principal. Therefore it is of great importance that a principal have colleagues to discuss questions of these kinds with.

## **1.2 The OLC concept**

The Online Learning Community (OLC) concept usually stands for a group of people who share the same interest to collaborate by using the web. The OLC is characterized by the knowledge exchange in the community rather than distribution of information. It might be regarded as a complement to person-to-person meeting but also as a new medium for cooperation between people where new qualities of human cooperation can be achieved. It is argued that computer supported collaborative learning means that we are witnessing the emergence of a new paradigm based on different assumptions about the nature of learning (Koschman, 1996). It is also possible that an OLC may become a caring community where people respect each other and help each other to grow as learners and as persons (Sergiovanni, 1999).

## **1.3 How is lifelong learning obtained?**

Is it possible that Online Learning communities (OLC) could become an important mean by which lifelong learning for professional groups can be obtained? That is the question I have been interested in and performed studies on during the last few years. My main interest has been focused on the professional group of principals as I myself have worked as a principal and now am engaged in the Centre for School Management Training at Göteborg University, Sweden. I am also a member of the OLC research group at the IT University of Göteborg.

# **2. OLC for professionals: the example Principals in training in Sweden**

The Centre for School Management Training, Göteborg University is an institute that trains principals giving a 3-year long program consisting of workshops and guidance. In order to intensify the training a web-based conference system is introduced for the participants and educators to use. The system gives opportunities to get into dialogue with fellow participants and to publish own documents to be scrutinised by others. The conference system has for many of the participants meant the introduction to a new and unknown technique.

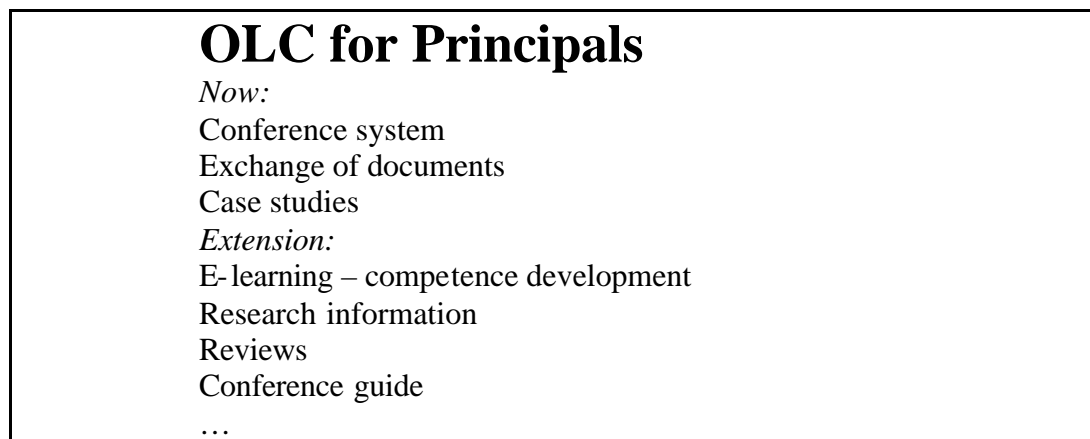
## **2.1 OLC for Principals – does it work?**

The aim of this study has been to investigate how the participating principals are reasoning about the conference system- how they have experienced the system, if they have achieved some kind of collaborative learning using it and what future development of the conference system they would wish. Interviews have been made with a sample of 18 principals.

Here is a summary of the conclusions of the study:

- The principals have made limited use of the conference system referring to lack of time, the advantages of personal meetings with colleagues and attitude of uncertainty to using a textually based system.
- The principals have experienced moments of collaborative learning together with their colleagues. Important presumptions for computer supported collaborative learning are the ability to reflect, to formulate written thoughts and to have the courage to give feedback to colleagues.
- The principals regard long-term problems, which require deep thinking, as the best area of use of the conference system.
- The principals would wish that in the future the applications connected with the system should be enlarged (i.e. extension with e-learning, reviews, conference guide and [URL:s](#))

Fig 1:



## 2.2 Discussion of the result of the investigation related to research

Many principals say that their lack of time is a mayor reason why they have not been so active using the conference system. But the conference system tries to solve the problems of the principals of not having enough time. They can decide for themselves when to use the system. Everything put into the system remains there and it is up to everyone, whenever time is available, to contribute. Maybe sometimes it may be the principal's way of giving priority to other tasks in his/her job that can cause lack of time to join the system. Everything that is acute is acted upon first and many principals do not enough take part in activities that aim to increase their professional skill.

The web-based conference system may become an arena of reflection. The work of a principal often gives opportunities to reflect at the very moment when something happens (reflection-in-action) but very seldom causes a systematic reflection afterwards (reflection-on-action). The latter gives an important way to improve one's professional performance. Especially if it is connected to collaboration with supporting colleagues. The discussion forum is an arena to discuss important problems in the profession of a principal. There is a danger that principals are too involved in everyday action and reaction and neglect the long-term perspective.

Many principals compare the meeting face-to-face with the web meeting and find the former superior to the latter. It would also be possible to regard the web meeting as a complement to the face-to-face meeting. When considering deep collaborative reflection some principals even think that a web-based interaction would be to be preferred.

One important aspect of the web-based conference system is that it is a text-based medium. Referring to Vygotsky it is possible to say that we think through the language and language is of form of thinking. By writing we can sometimes generate ideas that we have not been aware of before. It is also possible to say that language *mediates* the world for us. According to the socio-cultural tradition mediation means that our thinking and our conceptions are products of our culture and its intellectual and physical artefacts. To be successful in today's working life is very much a question of being able to use cognitive resources that are built in artefacts, one of the most important artefacts being the personal computer (Bliss, Säljö & Light, 1999).

The principals argue that in order to be able to give their inner thoughts on subjects discussed in the conference system you have to know personally your fellow discussion partners. This process of getting to know each other and cooperate in setting the rules of collaboration is called the *grounding process* and is very important in order to obtain functioning computer supported collaborative learning. This is in line with what Dillenbourg (1999) pointed out and he also stressed that collaborative learning is achieved when the interaction between the members is such as it *triggers* the learning mechanism in the group.

When the principals recall their memories they say that they have experienced moments of collaborative learning in the sense that their thinking has been affected by the thoughts of the other members but very few consider this process as resulting into completely new ideas. In accordance with the ideas of Argyris and Schön (1978) I would characterize this as single-loop learning rather than double-loop learning. Single-loop learning has strong connections with the historic traditional ways of problem-solving in their organisation while double-loop learning is characterized by the fact that traditional thinking is abandoned and new structures must be created. Very few principals could tell about a situation in which their thinking had been challenged by the others and very seldom had they themselves challenged their fellow principals.

It is necessary for the success of the system to reach a level of collaborative learning. In other cases the principals will not use it. The success of the system is critical to the learning process and that learners have knowledge, which is valuable to other learners (Nuldén, 1999).

For many of the principals using the conference system it meant the introduction of new and unknown technique. I think there is a need for a web discussion introduction course consisting not only of how to handle the computer program but also how to reflect and to express views in a written media so that other people respond and give feedback. It is also important that people feel free to express preliminary thoughts and standpoints in order to test them against the views of other people. This will help the collective construction of knowledge and speed up the process of collaborative learning.

According to Vygotsky every human being has a zone of proximal development (ZDP), which is defined as the difference between what a person can achieve alone compared with what he/she can achieve together with a mentor or capable colleagues. Through interaction with others a person can reach a higher performance intellectually and practically. Others mediate the understanding, which helps you to understand. Collaborative learning means that a

group of people can create solutions, which every single person on his/her own would not be able to do.

The idea of collaborative learning together with colleagues is important for becoming aware of the collective base of the professional role and it gives an opportunity to describe the practice in which the profession is exercised. As a result of this the language of the profession might be developed.

There are difficulties in getting web-based collaborative learning to work well. Jobring (1999) points out that collaborative learning does not happen immediately. It must be practised. It is necessary for the participants to spend considerable time familiarizing themselves with the tool and communicating with each other. This implies that collaborative learning needs to take place over a long period of time before any significant benefits can be materialized.

### **3. OLC is a mean for life-long learning?**

#### **3.1 Lunarstorm – Swedish OLC for youngsters**

Half of the Swedish population of young people between 14 and 24 years have joined an OLC called Lunarstorm, which started in May 2000. Every week 35% of the members of the community are participating in the activities there. They meet their friends on the web; they discuss different matters that young people are interested in. To meet one's friends in this virtual environment is as natural as for older people to meet at cafes or in staff rooms. Lunarstorm means a way of social training as well as it develops the communication skills - to communicate using a written language, to publish photos on the web and to manage to navigate in complex ICT-system. How much the activities on Lunarstorm that might be regarded by adults as learning can be discussed. But the interesting thing is: what will happen when these youngsters have grown up and work in professions like teachers and principals? Will it be quite a natural thing to join and use an OLC in order to gain in proficiency?

#### **3.2 The concept of Learning when related to OLC**

Due to rapid change in the development of society it might be so that knowledge that led to superior performance in the past actually leads to inferior performance in the future. Much knowledge seem, in the perspective of rapid technological change, to only be valuable for a limited period of time – after this period the specific knowledge can be useless and even counterproductive. The question is whether we can allow us to learn like we do today or we have to expound our meaning of the concept learning. What we witness today is a change in our way of looking at learning because of the introduction of new technology using new mediating artefacts (Spohrer 2000).

To be a successful professional you have to be able to handle change – to be an active and conscious participant in what is taking place in your professional area. You must have an eye for problems lying ahead and be able to cope with the unpredictable. You will face a complex working situation in the future. To be able to manage all this learning is necessary. Suitable learning methods are preferably found among process-oriented methods rather than among traditional step-by-step (linear) methods.

Learners are not to be seen as empty vessels to be filled with formal knowledge with didactic teaching, but rather as coming to learning situations with valuable resources for learning and with knowing their own learning needs (Usher, 2000).

A need-driven learner process is to be preferred. Learners should be exposed to multiple views and should also apply multiple strategies in approaching problems. It is important for the learner to realize that the understanding of complex material is never completed but instead never finished (Koschman, 2001).

Self-guidance of ones own learning process is desirable and natural for an active, conscious and need-driven learner. In guiding one self to improved knowledge it is clever to exchange experiences and knowledge with others through constructive interaction and collaborative reflection. Collaboration means focusing on the social nature of the meaning making process. The socio-cultural perspective describes knowledge as a cultural-historical process. Social constructivists believe that through social negotiation (dialogue) is the learning process moved forwards. (Jonasson, 2000).

In order for the OLC members “to learn to learn together” it is important for them to notice when learning appears, to ask pertinent question about the past collaborative sessions and to be observant on the dialectic relationship between individuals and communities (Visser, 2001).

The ideas presented above are well in line with the concept OLC, which uses an electronic medium to mediate between the members of the community by providing a virtual meeting place. The collaborative activity generates a shared content, which is available for all members – thereby creating a memory of the community.

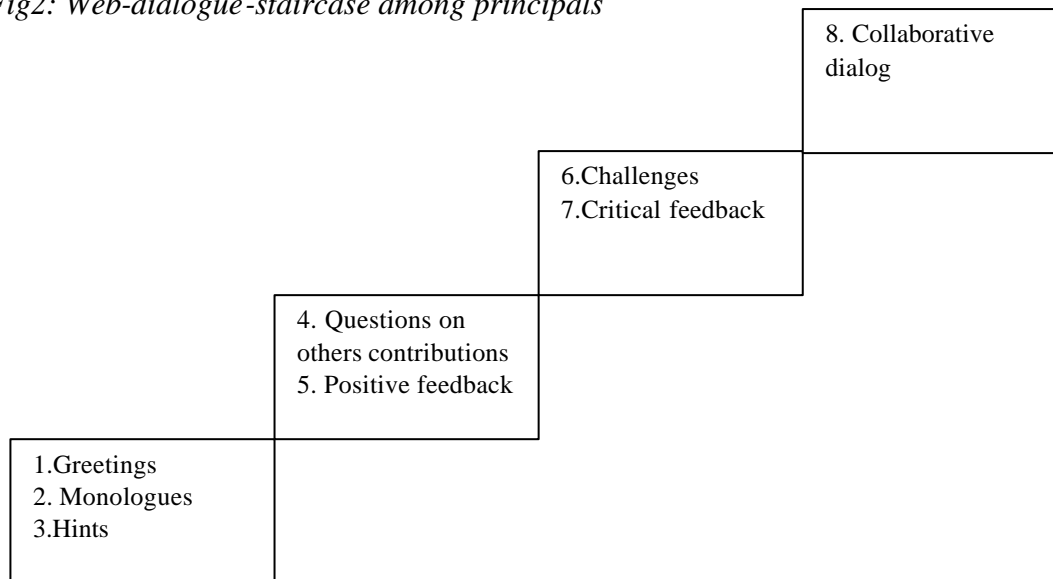
A learning community ought to be characterised by commitment and professionalism where ideas are valued. The members continually learn how to solve problems together. The age of a self-sufficient professional who learns independently in privacy and non-interference is out of date and replaced by the more powerful collective capacity of learners in cooperation (Johnson, 1999).

### **3.3 Conclusions and requests for further research**

What was mentioned above supports the idea that the OLC-concept is at the core of the described change in way of looking at learning and efforts should be made to intensify research in the field of lifelong learning using OLC.

My investigations concentrate for the moment on the question how a positive development from the start of a new OLC concerning the collaboration among the participants is achieved. My view for the moment is that there are a number of steps to be taken and certain obstacles to be overcome before a true collaborative dialogue can be obtained. Stages of polite greetings, monologues, everyday hints, positive feedback had to be passed before challenges and critical feedback can occur in due time leading to true collaborative dialogue. These ideas are shown in the “staircase-figure” below:

Fig2: Web-dialogue-staircase among principals



One aspect of collaboration of this kind is that you learn how to function in a (virtual) team. That probably means that certain stages of group development have to be passed through before a well-functioning group can be created. It could be an interesting topic for further research.

One crucial point is how to get a sustainable OLC. In many OLC there is a tendency that the activity diminishes after a certain period of time – what are the main causes for this? Can a professional monitoring of an OLC avoid this? Moreover, the management of an OLC for professionals how should this be arranged? These are areas where request for further research is vital.

There is a risk that the collaboration inside an OLC community might be too concentrated on the everyday knowledge of the participants so that new ideas from outside the community don't have a possibility to influence the discussion. Therefore it is important to consider how to build into the community channels which give access to input knowledge. This can maybe be done by taking part of research reports, inviting guest participants or arranging e-learning courses inside the OLC community. A brainstorming tool can also be introduced into the OLC –concept (Stenmark, 2002).

It would be interesting to study the learning processes both inside every single OLC-participant as the community as a whole – both an individual and a collective learning process is taking place. It would also be interesting to study the connection between those two processes. I think that one of the advantages with collaboration is that it is possible that communication precedes individual thinking and learning. By communicating and comparing your own vague thoughts with the thoughts other people on the same matter it is possible to realize other perspectives. Through genuine and continuous connection with other people's brains it is possible to enhance ones own capacity to think. This will be a powerful individual benefit for those who actively join the networking society.

Talking Heads is the online community run by the National College for School Leadership in the UK. It provides school leaders with the chance to share best practice and debate current professional issues. There are also opportunities to participate in online conversation with

leading UK decision makers. Facilitators support members of the community by giving advice and guidance about using and making contributions within Talking Heads. Research on the activities in Talking Heads is an important source in order to obtain well functioning online communities.

#### **4. International OLC for school management researchers and trainers?**

Is OLC something, which could be used by educational management trainers? Questions like: What is the reason what the principals have learnt at the course they don't implement at their schools? Should training of principals be arranged in cooperation with management programmes for company leaders? How could OLC be used to improve quality and increase interactivity in the training? Could collaboration using OLC between principal trainers with different cultural background support the effort to promote learning communities that care? Could questions like these be focused in an OLC for school management researchers and trainers for the benefit of the individual participants professionally and for the European school system as a whole?

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