Mind the Gap (Phase 2) (MTG2) Final Report November 2007: Meeting the Mental Health Needs of Students at Anglia Ruskin University

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Introduction

The primary aim of work undertaken with Aimhigher funding is to ensure that the outcomes of such work become embedded in the institution concerned, and are taken forward once the funding has ceased.
In this regard, MTG2 has been a great success.

Building on Mind the Gap 1 (MTG1), the Project was designed to start the process of developing staff, and embedding systems of support throughout our University for students with mental health difficulties and/or distress (MHD/D). The Project was identified as a key component of the work our University is undertaking as part of our combined Disability Equality Scheme action plan.

The Project has identified a significant interest amongst staff for training in this area, and INSPIRE shall – in collaboration with the Office of Student Affairs and Human Resources (HR) – continue to offer workshops and resources in the future.

This report summarises the key outcomes of the Project. Further information and resources, guidance and more detailed reports on project outcomes can be found on INSPIRE's website: www.inspire.anglia.ac.uk

Project Objectives

Project Object 1: To audit, coordinate and develop systems and inclusive practice across a number of University functions and a sample feeder institution.
Through the evaluation of internal policies and strategies, and focus groups held with 'frontline' staff from complementary student-facing functions, the Team has been able to establish links between student support functions which, in some cases, had not existed before, and in others had become broken as a result of the significant restructuring experienced by our University over the past few years. Accommodation, the Office of Student Affairs, and INSPIRE (the centre for learning and teaching) have met to discuss ways of identifying students at risk and making early interventions. 'Cause for concern' arrangements, internal information-sharing and links with external agencies have all been highlighted and are being addressed through a range of means.

Visits to a feeder college have identified that tutors assisting students in the completion of Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) forms are not specifically trained in helping students decide whether to tick the disability box, and thus disclose. We also identified that student support staff in this feeder college were unaware of the extent and nature of support that might be offered to students once they were in the Higher Education environment. Our University widening participation team (via the stakeholder group) has agreed to progress these staff development needs.

Information materials/resources for staff, prospective and current students (and parents) were scrutinised to determine gaps in provision related to the mental wellbeing of students whilst at Anglia Ruskin. The web interfaces and web-based resources of other universities were evaluated for benchmarking purposes, and to identify examples of best practice that might be usefully incorporated into Anglia Ruskin activity. (See 'Guidance and Other Outputs', below.)

Project Objective 2: To establish the training needs for a range of non-academic staff
Online Questionnaire
We received 70 usable responses from support staff to our online questionnaire requesting information about their experience of students with mental health difficulties/distress, and their associated training needs.

Just over half of respondents indicated that they have encountered students with MHD/D and offered a range of behaviours that they considered to be indicators of possible MHD/D. Most respondents had taken some action when they had observed a student exhibiting symptoms of MHD/D. Many had talked to the student and/or colleagues or had referred the student to University support services or other agencies. Other actions included: mediating through other students, referring to security or chaplaincy, undertaking staff development and reading.

Respondents identified additional knowledge, information or advice which would have helped them in responding to the student's needs. These included: support for out-of-hours staff, access to relevant details regarding the student, training on general MHD/D issues and common symptoms, help to avoid making a situation worse, knowing when and where to make a referral and 'anything to help distinguish between what might be called normal behaviour and what actually indicates a specific problem or illness'.

Bureaucracy was identified as an example of institutional processes and procedures which respondents thought might act as obstacles for students with MHD/D, together with lack of awareness and understanding of the issues. One respondent suggested, 'I suspect most of the obstacles lie in our perceptions, rather than the institution.'

Suggestions as to how these obstacles might be overcome included information-sharing – ensuring that all relevant staff are aware of students' diagnoses – the use of mentors and advocates, simplified procedures and general training for all staff and better publicity of available support.

Just over half of the respondents indicated how equipped they felt to support students exhibiting symptoms of MHD/D. Of these, almost two-thirds did not feel equipped to

identify students who might be experiencing MHD/D, less than one-third of respondents felt that they did not have the skills to adapt their approach to accommodate students with MHD/D, almost half did not know when to refer students to appropriate sources of support and just over half did not know where to refer students. However, most respondents felt that they could deal with students' emotional distress and/or challenging behaviour in their working environment.

Those who offered suggestions for further training asked for general information regarding MHD/D and how to recognise the signs. Some respondents requested additional advice on how to deal with specific conditions, and information about where to refer students for further help.

Focus Groups
Two focus groups were held with support staff. Staff with roles in security, registry, finance, careers, work placement, marketing, the students' union, library and administration attended focus groups to discuss organisational development and training needs for support staff. These meetings allowed staff to share their experiences and learning. They stated that all front-line staff need some training and to know what to look for and how to respond effectively, eg to understand the needs of students with autism. Role and context-specific difficulties were identified eg security staff are trained to deal with aggression in ways which might not be an appropriate response if a student's behaviour is the result of MHD/D. Further, staff in security roles are often contracted, and the responsibility for training rests with the employing organisation.

Issues of duty of care versus confidentiality were also raised. Staff needed to know where rights to privacy cease and actions to ensure personal safety may take priority. Who should be notified when a student loses their judgment? What permissions are required?

Staff appreciated the opportunity to meet each other, and the need for improvement of communication across services was identified as a key area that needs to be addressed. For example, staff involved with students in widening participation activities stated that they had no idea what happens once students start at University. Finance identified that they are often the last straw for a student in crisis. They appreciated that terse letters and raising sensitive finance issues could exacerbate distress, particularly if these were experienced on a Friday and the student was left without support over the weekend.

Staff also identified that there should be support and a debriefing process for staff and students who have been involved in a crisis.

Project Objective 3: Deliver staff development to academic and non-academic staff
During MTG1, academic staff reported their need for further development on how they could adjust practice to support both students with MHD/D and their classroom peers. Mind the Gap team members, the Office of Student Affairs and INSPIRE team members piloted staff development for academic staff, which gave rise to further areas in need of work.

Subsequent to the MTG2 support staff survey and focus groups, staff development events were designed and delivered in coordination with relevant staff in our

University, including mental health specialists and colleagues from the Office of Student Affairs, Faculty of Health and Social Care (FHSC) and HR.

We held three four-hour workshops, which were attended by 29 staff. After introductions and a statement from each person regarding the outcomes he or she desired from participating, members of staff were provided with some findings from the Project, followed by a small group session where staff contributed key case studies from their own experiences. Each group selected one of the case studies to swap with another group. Groups then considered the case studies before bringing them back for plenary discussion.

After lunch, any remaining questions were listed for further follow-up. The discussions were documented and produced as 'collated wisdom' to be circulated to the participants after the events.

Our evaluations of the events demonstrated that staff who attended found them extremely useful. They appreciated the opportunity to share experiences and solutions, and to be made aware of the level of support which was available to them and students in our University. All the evaluations were very positive: 'Would like to know about more courses like this. It was VERY practical and useful. Thank you', 'Thank you for arranging this session. Would like more!'

Our staff development workshops will continue to be offered beyond the end of the Project. Further, we are developing an 'inclusive practice module' to be delivered via the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA). We shall continue to support the delivery of this which – it is planned – will be primarily web-based.

Project Objective 4: Developing management processes to support staff in meeting the needs of students with MHD/D, and non-traditional students in general
Our experience with equality and widening participation issues demonstrates that, in order to be effective, organisational development through staff training must be underpinned by robust management processes and performance requirements.

Adjustments to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) are still some way off, however, the Team continues to work with HR in this regard. This original MTG objective remains an objective of our new 'Equality Proofing the Curriculum Project', which is sponsored by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) through its 'Developing and Embedding Inclusive Practice' strand.

Guidance and Other Outputs
Website Review
The team reviewed 92 university websites (English universities with more than 2000 students) to benchmark their web-based provision for the support of students with MHD/D. This work identified a few examples that informed the design of our new 'inclusive practice' website – 'teachinclusive' – http://www.anglia.ac.uk/teachinclusive

All the Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) websites were visited to determine the nature and extent of the provision of information relating to students with MHD/D, using the following five indicators:

1. Is the term 'Mental Health' mentioned on the website?
2. Is there a link to a Mental Health page on the home page?

3. Is there a link to a Disability page on the home page?
4. Is there a link to a Student Support Services page on the home page?
5. a) Was a Mental Health page located, and, if so, how?
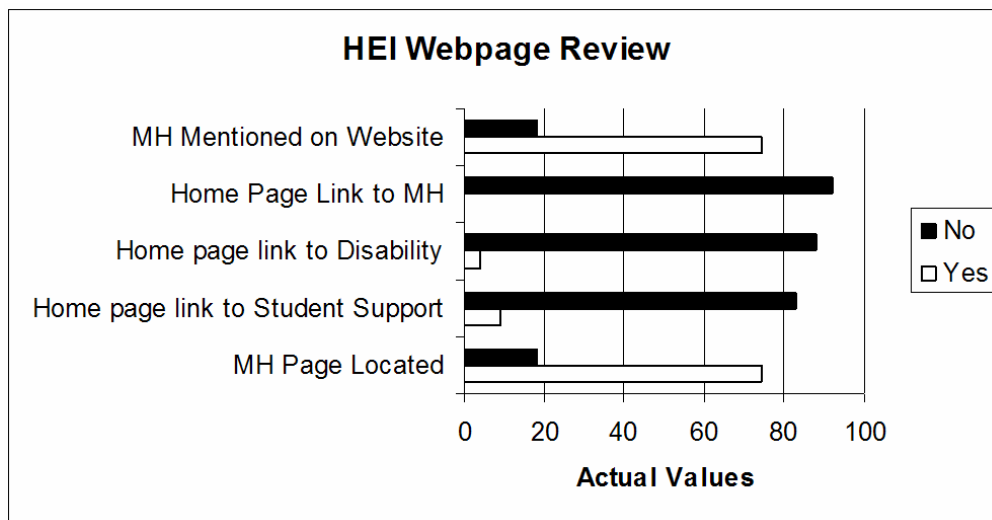   b) How many clicks from the Home page was the Mental Health page?

Figure 1: Indications of support for MHD on HEI Web pages

Eighteen institutions do not refer to Mental Health anywhere on their website and none had a direct link to a Mental Health page from its home page. In the absence of a direct link to a Mental Health page, it was felt that students with MHD/D may opt to look for support via the Student Support Service's Disability page. However, only four of the HEIs involved in the study offer a direct link to their Disability page from the home page.

The third most likely entry path for a student looking for information about support for MHD/D is via the Student Support Services pages. Just less than one in ten of the HEIs in the survey offer such a link.

In addition, only two of the HEIs offered links to both Disability and Student Support Services pages. Furthermore, other links – particularly to Current Student content – were successfully followed to locate MHD/D web content.

With or without a direct link to a page containing information for students with MHD/D, the HEI websites were explored to discover if such a page existed. Three different methods of locating web pages were employed, in various combinations, by the HEIs:

- Site Search Engine
- Following Links (i.e. Disability, Student Area, Student Support Services and so on)
- Site A-Z

Thus, if links were available, these were followed until a page concerning MHD/D was located. If such a page could not be located using this method, or if no such links existed, the Site A-Z page was explored. In the absence of links or an A-Z option, the site search engine was employed. The terms used to explore the A-Z pages and the search engines were 'mental health' and, should this be ineffective, 'disability'.

It is possible, therefore, that appropriate sites may have been identified using some or all of the above methods, but searching was terminated once the page had been located by whichever method proved successful.

The most effective method for tracking down information was the site search engine. Only one HEI does not include a search engine on its website. However, many HEIs omit an A-Z option that, in part, accounts for the low success rate displayed in Fig. 1.

Another indicator of HEI concern for access to information for students with MHD/D is the number of clicks away from the home page the appropriate web page is located. The number of clicks recorded, however, reflects the number of links followed either directly from the home page, or via the search engine or via the A-Z. The number, therefore, should only be considered indicative.

The modal response is two clicks. Combining two and three clicks represents more than half of the websites that host MHD/D web pages. Only eight HEIs locate their MHD/D web pages more than five clicks away from the home page.

The indicators were cross-tabulated by HEI to determine if any pattern emerged showing particular approaches adopted according to status (either actual or presumed). However, no particular pattern of provision by status was found.

Quality of Website Content
The quality of information contained on university web pages offering information concerning students with MHD/D varies widely. The type of information provided ranges from the inclusion of the phrase 'mental health' on a generic Disability web page to lengthy documents offering definitions, policies, contacts and advice. The research team and stakeholder group arrived at a rough definition of the quality of web-based MHD/D information as follows:

- 'Comprehensive' universities are those that have a dedicated Mental Health page that includes definitions of mental health issues and have both general and specific advice and (usually) a named contact.

- 'Typical' universities have a Mental Health page that has no real depth to it.

- 'Partial' universities either have no specific Mental Health page (in most cases the phrase 'mental health' is mentioned as a list of conditions on a Disability page) or has a dedicated page that has no useful information on it.

Website Construction
Review of the Anglia Ruskin web resources and discussions with the stakeholder group identified the opportunity through this Project to create a leading web resource at Anglia Ruskin. The review of other university web-based provision highlighted a range of web-based support for students with MHD/D and university staff, on which we could base our own resource. The redesign of the Anglia Ruskin University website for students with MHD/D has taken into account the need for a centrally located information resource that is easily accessible by all students.

The final site version was built from scratch by INSPIRE using HTML and Cascading Style Sheets (CSS), utilising features such as access keys, and is optimised for print and screen readers. It uses a design that harmonises the Anglia Ruskin design brief

and the direction of the mock-up. The information included in the redesign is comprehensive and pertinent. The tone of the content is welcoming and supportive and does not focus purely on the instrumental aspects of evidence and finance (as is the case at several universities). The site combines staff and student portals and will provide information, interactive tasks and student contributions. This site has been designed to be something that enlightens, motivates and inspires staff, and which embraces the use of new technologies (like Really Simple Syndication (RSS) and interaction), whilst still being as accessible as possible. The Beta version of the website is available at http://www.anglia.ac.uk/teachinclusive

Brochures
We reviewed brochures and guides issued to staff by other universities to inform the development of our own staff guidance: 'Supporting Our Students' Mental Wellbeing: A Guide for Staff', a copy of which was delivered to every member of Anglia Ruskin staff, and which is available for download from INSPIRE's website: www.inspire.anglia.ac.uk. The Guide was illustrated by photographs of students who gave specific consent to appearing in this publication and contains a flowchart which can be pinned to the wall of offices. Out-of-hours staff were provided with visiting cards with appropriate directions and telephone numbers. As identified through our focus groups, we also printed cards with essential numbers for students for distribution by staff when required.

Case Study Video
One of our stakeholder group members with disclosed MHD/D provided us with a powerful case study of her experience at an English university. The project team took this as a basis for a staff development resource. The student's account was adapted, and fictional accounts were written and attributed to members of University staff. Members of the MTG2 team acted and filmed this to provide a spark for discussion during staff development activities. The video – 'Hearing the Student Voice: Supporting our Students' Mental Wellbeing' – has proved to be a powerful learning and teaching aid and is available to view on INSPIRE's website.

Dissemination
All staff were provided with a copy of the Guide at the beginning of academic year 2007-2008.

The MTG findings and outputs were disseminated internally at Anglia Ruskin's Learning and Teaching conference on 15 June, 2007.

Further, Jaki Lilly and Tony Brand ran an interactive session at the HEA conference in Harrogate in July 2007, where they screened the role play, which promoted successful and thought-provoking discussion with representatives from other HEIs with regard to their universities' provision for students with MHD/D, and their universities' help for staff supporting students with MHD/D. It is planned to contribute a further session to the SEDA conference in May 2008.

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PRADSA – Practical Design for Social Action

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PRADSA is a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC), as part of its Designing for the 21st Century programme from 2007 till 2009.

This project is taking forward the values, methods and findings of the interdisciplinary research cluster 'Technology and Social Action' (T&SA) project funded by the Design for the 21st Century initiative in 2005. This cluster initiated active collaboration between researchers, innovative information and communication technology (ICT) designers, and activists in social action organisations. Our research encompasses the voluntary sector, community informatics, trade unions, national and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), charities, and the growing open-source software movement. The cluster focuses on a key dimension of the changing business, social and environmental context in which design operates, namely the design of technologies and practices in support of social action and social change. Two key findings from the cluster were that:

- In using technology to effect social change, design must be understood as profoundly sociotechnical, concerned as much with social and organisational arrangements around technology as with devices or software. Design is often conducted as a form of bricolage and improvisation, orchestrating diverse materials and people to develop new arrangements. Approaches and methods are required which can take account of the complex and dynamic interrelationships between people, organisations (both formal and informal) and technologies. This project is exploring such approaches and is developing resources to support these methods.

- Much innovation is driven by people adopting novel and emergent roles (ambitiously dubbed the 'architects of new sociotechnical relations'), bringing together facility with technology, creative design and use, domain expertise and social facilitation skills to orchestrate novel sociotechnical networks and create new social or organisational forms. Here, particularly, distinctions between technology designer and technology user become very blurred. Similarly, the notion of designer as 'auteur' breaks down as design outcomes emerge through complex collaborative dynamics between individual and group. This project aims to understand these people and the 'domain ecologies' in which they operate.

The primary beneficiaries for the project are technology and organisational designers working within the social action sector. We aim to develop both a community of engaged practitioners and researchers working together, and a set of portable assets (tools, methods and digital assets) that can be appropriated and used by other concerned designers. The research will also provide insights into the complex nature of designing technology for people and organisations that will be relevant in other (business, government) settings.

Our researchers come from multiple disciplines, including: software design (Dearden), interaction design and journalism (Light), organisational psychology (Olphert, Damodaran), information management and e-learning (Walker), online community design (Ramondt) and community information systems (Plant). The team brings together a track record of academic publication and engaged action research.

1. Research Questions or Problems
Our goal is to develop and extend the capability of social action organisations to creatively design new practices by appropriating and adapting ICTs. To achieve this aim, we have set ourselves three objectives.

1. To develop a new understanding of designing in social action settings grounded in detailed contextual studies of design in practice.
2. To develop an engaged community of practitioners in ICT and social action collaborating online and face-to-face to:

*   identify and tackle key issues in effective sociotechnical practice in this space;
*   reflect on and collate best practices; and
*   design future practices and e-practices in the context of informing the (global) not-for-profit and social action sectors.

3. To create a collection of practical resources to support the work of practitioners, including workshop materials and easy-to-use (open-source) online community communications systems.

2. Research Context
Technology design and use is highly context-sensitive. A number of factors characterise social action settings that simultaneously both constrain technology use and enable distinctive responses to technological opportunities. These include:

*   primarily social (rather than economic) objectives;
*   occasionally, involvement in social conflict;
*   dependence on un-coerced or voluntary contributions;
*   values of inclusiveness and democratic participation;
*   relative scarcity of resources;
*   conflicting pressures, as campaigning organisations are drawn into the delivering services funded by governments and public bodies.

These distinctive characteristics imply a need for a discrete line of enquiry around innovation in technologies and practices for social action contexts.

Findings from a Delphi consultation conducted by the T&SA cluster (Dearden, Walker, Watts, 2005) suggest that social action organisations encounter more difficulties in designing effective practices to manage and use technology effectively, than as a result of limitations of technology per se. Particular problems identified by practitioners included:
*   identifying and reconciling contradictory goals of different actors;
*   insufficient consideration of social and organisational aspects of ICT design and use;
*   lack of understanding of the policy and political contexts of ICT design and use;
*   forecasting the organisational and social consequences of ICT use.

Hence, our concern is to understand innovative design in social action as a sociotechnical process with a sociotechnical focus.

Designing sociotechnical systems has long been recognised as a 'wicked' problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973), involving multiple stakeholders and having no single 'best' solution. Methods have been developed with the aim of supporting the process (e.g. Mumford, 1983; Checkland, 1990), but these are mostly suitable for 'bespoke' information systems being designed for specific groups of users within a clearly delineated context. For social action in the 21st century, the design problem has changed, demanding creative bricolage, selecting and adapting existing technologies for users with specific purposes and contexts. In this new design paradigm, much of the available guidance about designing sociotechnical systems is no longer applicable.

Emerging Roles
One consequence of the new design paradigm is a blurring of distinctions between the roles of 'designers' and 'users'. Responsibility for creating and sustaining effective sociotechnical systems becomes diffused between the multiple participants in the decision-making process. Light (2005) proposes that '…new roles are needed if we are to get the best out of technological change: mediators between technologies and the people involved in using them; mediators with vision, technical competence and good people skills; architects of new sociotechnical relations.' Evidence suggests that such roles are emerging. Researchers examining a variety of settings (e.g. Orlikowski *et al*, 1994; Okamura *et al*, 1994; Nardi and O'Day, 1999; Damodaran & Olphert, 2006, *in press*) highlight the existence of individuals who orchestrate technology use, promoting and aligning particular understandings of technology and designing practices for users in specific 'information ecologies'.

The findings of the T&SA cluster suggest that such individuals are critical to design for Technology and Social Action, and many of the practitioners in this project can be characterised as such. Our goal is to understand and support the practices and ecologies in which these people conduct their design activities, and to develop a community and resources to support their work.

3. Research Methods
Our methods combine a broadly ethnographic approach, examining detailed case studies, with participatory action research, working with reflective practitioners who are active as innovators in their different spaces.

Ethnography
Ethnography can be defined as 'the study of people in naturally occurring settings or "fields" by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally. Methods include: in-depth interviews, discourse analysis, personal documents and vignettes, participant observation, video, photography and film, etc. When used in an ethnographic research context, these multiple forms of data collection build in triangulation' (Brewer, 2004).

We shall undertake a series of ethnographic studies in which the Research Assistant will work with different social action groups as a participant/observer, exploring their

day-to-day practices and cultures. The data collected will be analysed using standard qualitative data analysis tools (e.g. NVivo) that are already available within the cluster.

A variety of theoretical approaches may be explored in analysing the data. Network-based conceptualisations of relationships between people and between people and technology, in social network analysis (e.g. Haythornthwaite and Kazmer, 2002); in organisational studies (e.g. Barley, 1990); in socio-technical interaction networks (Kling *et al*, 2003) and in actor network theory (e.g. Brigham and Corbett, 1997) offer potentially useful perspectives. Romme (2003) offers another useful perspective of organisation as design.

Action Research
Action research is a self-reflective spiral process of observing, reflecting, planning and acting. It is 'a critical evaluation of practice within a democratic framework' (McNiff, 1994) by the participant practitioner, where the context of practice provides the case for study. Action research is therefore used to enhance practice, or to test assumptions of theory in practice through implementation and evaluation. The project will conduct two interrelated pieces of action research.

Firstly, we shall conduct a series of facilitated workshops with a selected group of practitioners exploring specific issues arising from our previous research cluster findings. Themes running through the workshops will include: group-based design methods, digital creativity at personal and organisational levels, evaluating technology initiatives, generating sustainable networks, communication and organisations. The exploration and use of open-source solutions will form part of this programme. To support these workshops, and as outputs from these workshops, we shall produce a range of tools and other assets that can be used by others to support similar activities in their own practice. Elements and key findings from the workshops will be collated using video-recorded interviews, photographs of key elements, and other appropriate digital recording media. All these elements will be made available online.

Secondly, to support the face-to-face workshops and maintain continuity and community, we are undertaking a series of exercises with the practitioners by designing, creating and using a facilitated online space: www.technologyandsocialaction.org The space combines and links free and open-source components such as wiki, blog, content management, social networking, mailing list manager and voice-over Internet Protocol facilities. This facility will support both private discussions, public dissemination of research outputs, and engagement of practitioners who are not able to join in the face-to-face work. One output from this action will be guidance for social action organisations about the selection and use of such tools.

Project Structure
The project has a portfolio structure with three distinct but closely intertwined 'mini projects'.

Mini Project 1: Understanding social action innovation in context
This mini-project is undertaking enquiries into the work of technology and social action practitioners, using a mix of ethnographic techniques. Prior to the field work, an extensive review of existing projects and literature have been undertaken. Outputs are used to inform the collaborative workshops.

Mini Project 2: Practitioner workshops
A series of six face-to-face events are being held over the duration of the project, working with a selected group of experienced practitioners to explore their practice, and to design and develop resources (both electronic and physical) to assist them and others in their work. Outputs and findings will be recorded and made available online. Time for reflective analysis and for developing re-usable resources as products of the work are built into the plan.

The workshops so far explore a variety of themes:

'Workshop One: Key themes for Technology and Social Action' was held at Loughborough University, in identifying issues of importance to members.

'Workshop Two: Putting Tools into Action' was held at the University of West of England in September and focused on action research, a case study exploring the use of Web 2.0 tools and group decision-making processes.

'Workshop Three: Technology and Social Action Research Summit' was held at Loughborough at the end of November 2007, and focused on the project's action research and evaluation processes.

'Workshop Four: Designing for the 21st Century: Using Web 2.0 Technologies (and Social Networking Tools) for Social Action' was held in London in March 2008.

Mini Project 3: Online spaces
To support networking between the workshops, and to promote wider dissemination of materials, we have developed a Drupal website: http://technologyandsocialaction.org, which also aggregates conversations occurring in our Google mail list. Members also use Google docs, iGoogle, Skype, del.ic.io.us and a variety of other tools. We are also about to commence our 'hot-seat' series, in which a key researcher or practitioner invites the international social action community to explore key practice and research issues.

Leonie Ramondt's Reflections
The PRADSA project provides a context for a rich dialogue and exploration in the domain of socio-technical development. The project could not be achieving this without the Principal Investigator Andy Dearden's collaborative management style. Drawing together a project team who are under considerable time pressure within their respective academic roles, he manages to provide sufficient clarity and direction to ensure that work progresses effectively.

The technology and social action community is a disparate group of people, ranging from academics, and coordinators and activists from unions, medium not-for-profits, through to local neighbourhood associations and small dissident groups. Views and needs are difficult to align, as, for example, the discussion on privacy illustrates. For some, conversations in private online spaces are wasteful; knowledge must be shared widely and therefore should occur publicly on the web. For others, it is essential to build community, knowing clearly who the audience is. This allows uncertainties to be shared and opinions voiced and explored (Chapman, Ramondt and Smiley, 2005) without fear of having to give account of these in a different context, with a different audience. Both views have merit, although it can be argued

the latter more formative approach has a richer potential for building knowledge through dialogue (Senge, 1992).

The PRADSA online community includes a significant percentage of early adopters of technology who are adept at testing out new software tools as they become available. Their messages are quick to read and quick to respond to, as they are primarily about a social exchange of information. At the same time, topics regarding deeper strategic issues, such as power and decision-making, deserve a depth of reflection not easily accessed in the time-sliced activity of the day. These conversations are therefore more easily lost. The question arises whether these are better addressed face-to-face, via a blog that potentially accesses the global community, or via an online event or programme, so that participants know to put aside time to sufficiently immerse themselves.

At the same time, online communities and their technologies are proliferating more rapidly than ever. From immersive game communities that converge vibrantly and dissolve again (Williams *et al*, 2006), to social networks such as Facebook, millions of conversations are occurring both synchronously as chat and asynchronously in emails and fora. In this climate, it is a challenge to create a compelling purpose that sustains participation over the longer term. It may be that, as we head towards the ecological web of Gord McCalla (2005), that we become smarter about linking people with the relevant skills, needs or interests, rather than expecting to contain them within a specific community membrane.

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