

Teacher professional conversations – the oz-Teachers story

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The oz-Teachers listserv, an email list for teachers, ran continuously for 20 years, from 1995 to 2015. It provided the technical infrastructure for professional communication with the majority of its members being Australian teachers based in classrooms across the country. An analysis of the list archives provides us with interesting insights as to how teachers learn from and within communities of their peers and how such communities offer social and educational affordances to allow teachers to generate and enhance their own learning. This paper begins with a brief review of the response to the announcement of the list's closure. It then moves to a report of the types of communication which emerged from the list over time with comparisons drawn from extant research, namely, an early analysis of email lists and a more contemporary study of teacher communication through microblogging. We identified 14 categories with eight of these being paired, namely, as asking/seeking and responding/giving. The key finding of this analysis was that the list, and its professional discussions, were sustained through reciprocity and collective intelligence, that is, sharing of information and resources and that this was evident through the life of the listserv.

Introduction

The oz-Teachers listserv closed on January 1, 2015 after 20 years of connecting and supporting teachers across Australia through a virtual professional community. The oz-Teachers story has been told through a number of papers and presentations since its inception in 1995 (see, for example, Duncan-Howell, 2007; Lloyd, 2007; McKeown, 1996; Nykvist, Lloyd & Masters, 2007; Stokes & Masters, 2000; Wild, 1999).

oz-Teachers began as an initiative within the Faculty of Education at QUT to provide teachers with meaningful ways to make use of the Internet including an easily- and freely- accessible email list to allow them to make professional connections with others and to draw on critical understandings around the notion of “collective intelligence” (Lévy, 1997). It was contemporaneous with similar list communities such as e-chalk (based in Western Australia, see Atkinson, 1999) and UK-Schools

(see Wild, 1999). In 2007, in a position paper to mark the 12th anniversary of oz-Teachers and the launch of a new website and logo, an analogy was drawn to explain that:

There is an axe in a museum in New Zealand, which is said to have belonged to the Maori chieftain, Hone Heke. This axe is still regarded as being Hone Heke's despite having had several handle and blade replacements. We like to think that the oz-Teachers of 2007 is similar (in spirit and action) to the RITE Group [Research in Technology Education, at QUT] of 1992 - despite its comprising of different people and taking on a markedly different appearance. What continues, despite these changes in personnel, profile, technology and funding, is the essence, here not of the interchangeable components of the axe, but of the need to support teachers in working online in meaningful ways. The motto of the oz-TeacherNet was 'teachers helping teachers' and this has not changed.

(Lloyd, 2007, p. 1)

Oz-Teachers moved between servers and platforms over time and has had different directors, list moderators and project officers, but its purpose remained consistent. It was noted in 2007 that:

...the main focus that oz-Teachers has kept central to its development ... is the needs of its members. ...the one issue that is common to all is that educators lead extremely busy lives and are often seeking a community that is supportive, but not too time consuming.

(Nykvist, et al., 2007, p. 327)

This paper, and the QSITE2015 Conference presentation which it complemented, will shape its discussion around the three affordances noted by Kirschner, Strijbos, Kreijns, and Beers (2004) as defining the usefulness of electronic collaborative learning environments. These are:

1. *technological affordances*, which refers to usability, that is, whether the system "allows for the accomplishment of a set of tasks in an efficient and effective way that satisfies the user" (p. 50);
2. *social affordances*, which are the properties of an online environment that "act as social-contextual facilitators relevant for the learner's social interaction" (p. 51); and
3. *educational affordances*, which determine "if and how a particular learning behavior could possibly be enacted within a given context" (p. 51).

This paper begins with a discussion of the response to the announcement of the list's closure before providing a brief overview of the types of interactions that took place with particular attention to the period from 2004-2014. It is based on simple conversational analysis techniques and draws on a coding of messages gathered from the oz-Teachers archives through inductive open coding methods.

The long goodbye

On October 13, 2014, Margaret Lloyd, then list moderator, sent a message to the oz-Teachers list with the subject line, *Farewell to the oz-Teacher list*. The message announced that the list would close on January 1, 2015. It offered the reasons for the closure with particular reference to the increasing difficulty that the voluntary team had in maintaining the server and resisting increasing web governance and security issues pressed by its university host. The message acknowledged the work of the current and previous oz-Teachers teams and gratefully recalled the original designers who set it all in place back in 1995. There was much behind-the-scenes activity in late 2014 to help relocate those whose lists were hosted by oz-Teachers, most of whom had come to oz-Teachers when EdNA (Education Network Australia) closed.

The response to the closure announcement was immediate. The messages, which appeared in response to the announcement, are revelatory of the impact the list had had on its members. The following takes a closer look at a small selection of these messages with the member's name withheld (replaced by simple identifiers). The first message to be posted to the list after the announcement, said:

*Sad news indeed but many thanks to all concerned for such a wonderful service.
Let's make the most of our remaining time together.*

(Alpha, October 13, 2014, 11.02am)

Alpha's message summed up – or perhaps initiated - the tenor of many of the responses which followed – sadness and surprise mixed with an acknowledgment of what had been a positive medium for communication. Similarly, Beta said that:

*Can't imagine life without oz-Teachers! It was always comforting knowing that
someone would answer a query no matter how easy/trivial it seemed.*

(Beta, October 13, 2014, 6.20pm)

Another offered:

*Thanks Marg [Lloyd], Shaun [Nykvist] and Nathan [Beveridge] for
maintaining the service. And thanks to Michelle [Williams], Lindy [McKeown],
Michael [Ryan] and Peter [Kendall] for the work several decades ago that
established the original list. If a replacement host capable of supporting
Mailman can be arranged, can the archives be retained? There is a significant
collection of wisdom there, and quite a few good arguments.*

(Gamma, October 13, 2014, 11.29am)

What Gamma's message adds is a more specific vote of thanks to individuals before pragmatically and quickly moving to a direct question about how the archives might be preserved. This, in and of itself, is an indicator of the inherent value of the knowledge generated by the discussions on the list, here referred to as a "significant collection of wisdom" and an illustration of the previously cited concept of "collective intelligence" (Levy, 1997) and, further, fundamental notions of conversation as learning (see Sharples, 2005). It is also a clear indicator of the educational affordances of the list both in terms of contemporary argument and an ongoing record of the resolution (or otherwise) of those arguments.

Some of the early responses also gave an indication of how the members made use of the oz-Teachers list, particularly in relation to the list's social and educational affordances. For example:

I am really sorry to hear! I really liked the ease of having emails coming through linking me with other interstate colleagues. I could only imagine how hard it was to compose this email. (Delta, October 13, 2014, 11.29 am)

I would like to add my thanks to all those wonderful people who set up (Hi! Marg in particular) and maintained Oz-Teachers, plus everyone who has contributed to it. I have been contributing to the list for a surprisingly long period of time, and this has included my (relatively) more recent career as a classroom teacher. The list has always been an amazing way of sharing OR going 'I need HELP ... er, advice urgently.' I refer to the list at work every couple of weeks. Particularly when I get asked how I came up with a fantastic teaching idea, I usually respond 'There is this thing called the Oz-Teachers email list...'. So before I disappear into the madness of report writing season yet again and the server gracefully goes off line for the last time, it is time to celebrate what has happened on the list and as a result of the list. (Epsilon, October 14, 2014, 7.22pm)

The content of these messages align strongly with Trust's (2012) findings that:

Teachers engage in PLNs [professional/personal learning networks] to grow professionally, learn from others, and contribute to a community. Teachers are motivated to engage in PLNs because they can solicit help and support, demonstrate their knowledge by helping others, and converse with individuals about new information and feedback. (p. 37)

Delta described how the list was used "socially" to link to interstate colleagues while Epsilon spoke of the list "educationally" as being "*an amazing way of sharing OR going 'I need HELP ... er, advice urgently'*" (emphasis in original). Epsilon also reported a frequent reference to the list and advocacy of its use to colleagues. It is, in fact, the educational affordances of the oz-Teachers list that may be its greatest contribution, particularly in regard to self-generative personal and professional learning (see Franke, Carpenter, Fennema, Ansell, & Behrend, 1998). One of the messages to the list in response to the closure announcement declared that:

I know I can attribute a great of my own personal and professional growth over the last 20+ years to the membership of this list. You guys are all amazing and it's been a privilege to be sharing both electrons and neurons with you all. (Zeta, October 13, 2014, 12.29pm)

This strongly aligns the oz-Teachers community with the meanings now ascribed to PLNs where individuals' learning networks are comprised of individuals of their own choosing who "can guide ... learning, point ... to learning opportunities, answer ... questions, and give ... the benefit of their own knowledge and experience" (Tobin, 1998, para. 1). Zeta corroborated this by offering that "people here have been my colleagues, my sounding boards, my think tank, and some of the finest educational minds in this country" (Zeta, October 13, 2014, 12.29 pm).

Further to this, Eta named specific individuals who had had an impact on his thinking and commented on who he looked to for advice or information in particular areas. He offered that:

On the oz-Teachers list, as we presently know it, I have enjoyed that banter, I have benefited from the information, I have been challenged by the thoughts and in many cases Oz Teachers has brought a smile to my face. To those who I haven't met face to face but consider my friends because of this list, thank you.

(Eta, October 4, 2014, 8.16pm)

Eta may here be inadvertently articulating the alignment of social and educational affordances present in the oz-teachers community and noted in research (see, for example, Kirschner et al., 2004; Skyring, 2014b).

Finally, *technological affordances* were evident in the messages responding to the announcement of closure, through messages concerned with the technology itself. Delta's previously cited message acknowledged the convenience of email as a means of communication corroborating the view of Atkinson (1999) that:

Email lists provide a popular form of communication for professional development purposes, mainly because Internet users tend to check their email every time they obtain a network connection, or return to their desk in the case of permanently connected desktops. However, users do not always remember to visit a specific website to access web based bulletin board delivery of messages. (para. 17)

Interestingly, changes to the platform were occasionally raised on the list with a particular push to move to Web 2.0 tools. Nykvist et al. (2007), also promoting the notion of the convenience of email, noted that:

Hence, the one technology that has survived all the new technologies is the asynchronous tool of email. The notion of changing the basic communication of oz-Teachers subscribers from an email list to that of a web-based forum has arisen as a discussion topic on several occasions ... however members always decided against it, due to the extra time it would take to log into a forum and then read each of the messages. (p. 327)

There were other references to the technology platform itself in the messages following the closure announcement. Theta, a long-time member of oz-Teachers, offered that:

Two decades of service for one technology platform is indeed a huge contribution and thinking about it, a longer contribution than Pagers, Laserdisks, Zip drives, Palm pilots, Walkmans, Tamagotchi, VHS, Microsoft DOS, floppy disks, zip drives, dot matrix printers, the html 'BLINK' tag, car phones, Atari, Napster, Kazaa, the Concorde, dial-up modems, and cassette tapes.

(Theta, December 30, 2014, 1.34pm)

Initiated by Zeta within 12 hours of the announcement of the closure of the oz-Teachers email list, was the formulation of the oz-Teachers Google Group, which has continued the community's discussions. It may be found at <https://groups.google.com/d/forum/ozteachers>. Eta, offered that "I do look forward to a continued dialogue in a different forum" and, after having referred to the members of the list as "family," added that "*I do think the family is ready to leave home and live somewhere else in the world*" (Eta, October 14, 2014, 8.15pm).

All messages, which can be categorised as part of the "long goodbye," were characterised by their warmth and gratitude for what the list had given the members in terms of creating a positive social learning environment that continued to remain current over time. The last word goes to Iota who offered that:

In the excitement of the new crowd sourced solution emerging, I've neglected to add my thanks to everyone associated with Oz-Teachers – both members and managers. I've been blessed to be part of this group and in spite of my role constantly changing over the last 20 years or so (to the extent my family have given up asking me what I do for a living), this list has never failed to be relevant and highly valuable. ... I've learned so much from the regular and less regular contributors to the list. ... you have all made my professional life so much richer because of your generosity. Looking forward to continuing the learning journey together!

(Iota, October 15, 2014, 11.14am)

Talking to each other for two decades

Research has shown that teachers have adapted differing communication media to meet their individual personal and professional learning needs (see, for example, Hakkarainen, Palonen, Paavola, & Lehtinen, 2004; Pettenati & Cigognini, 2007) and that such learning emanates from conversation (Sharples, 2005). Despite the medium and the era, teachers' professional conversations return to common themes albeit in different and continuously changing contexts.

Wild (1999) in one of the first comparative analyses of teacher professional mailing lists – oz-teachers and UK-Schools – offered that messages posted to the lists fell into three simple categories: dialogue, information and question. He noted further that, "within these categories, the content of messages was either technical or educational in focus: technical content typically addressed the operation, function or application of various technologies; educational content was related to the practice, theory and administration of teaching and learning" (p. 118).

More recently, Skyring (2014a, 2014b) found, in her study of microblogging for professional learning, that the teacher contributors were engaged in: sharing resources, for example, a website, book, or video; on-sharing a resource posted by someone in their network; sharing information from a conference or workshop using a hashtag; saving a resource posted by someone in their network; returning to a saved resource posted by someone in their network; following a link posted by someone in their network; using hashtags; engaging in a conversation with someone in their network; searching for content; asking for a resource on a specific topic; reading activity updates of others in their network; and acting on something they have read in a

microblog post. In essence, this set of behaviours is consistent with Wild’s (1999) simple categories of asking, sharing or commenting.

To answer, for the purposes of this paper, the question of what we have found to talk about, we adopted an inductive open coding method to look in detail at the past decade, that is, 2005 to 2014. This means, that while we were aware of the findings of previous research (Skyring, 2014a; Wild, 1999), we did not begin with predetermined categories and allowed the codes to emerge from the data. We identified 14 categories with eight of these being paired by the actions of asking (seeking) and responding (giving): advice, help, information and resources. The remaining six categories were concerned with: making comments/instigating discussion, promoting events or competitions and expressing thanks or personal support. A small percentage in each set of monthly messages could not be coded. These categories showed greater nuance than those suggested by Wild (1999) but were clearly aligned. They were similarly aligned to those suggested by Skyring (2014a, 2014b) but lacked the specificity of behaviours afforded by microblogging, particularly using hashtags and the immediacy of sharing information from a conference or workshop. The common threads through these categorisations are sharing and arriving at a shared understanding of a problem through multiple perspectives.

Table 1 presents a mapping of messages, according to the emergent categories, from:

- August 2005 – which carried the highest number of messages ($n=522$) in any calendar month (2005-2014) posted by 111 individuals;
- February 2009 - which carried the highest number of messages ($n= 467$) posted by 135 individual list members in what was the highest volume year in that period ($n= 3925$); and,
- July 2013 - which carried the highest number of messages ($n= 117$) posted by 37 individual list members in what was the lowest volume year in that period ($n= 905$).

Table 1
Tally of messages in August 2005, February 2008 and July 2013 sorted by category

Category		August (2005)		February (2009)		July (2013)	
		# messages ($N=522$)	% messages	# messages ($N=467$)	% messages	# messages ($N=117$)	% messages
Advice	Seek advice	11	2.11%	10	2.12%	2	1.71%
	Give advice	25	4.79%	34	7.22%	10	8.55%
Help	Ask	15	2.87%	14	2.97%	4	3.42%
	Offer solution	35	6.70%	40	8.49%	8	6.84%
Information	Seek information	11	2.11%	8	1.70%	4	3.42%
	Give information	62	11.88%	137	29.09%	19	16.24%
Resources	Seek resource(s)	19	3.64%	6	1.27%	3	2.56%
	Give resource(s)	68	13.03%	56	11.89%	15	12.82%

Comment/Discussion	193	36.97%	96	20.38%	32	27.35%
Event/Competition	13	2.49%	11	2.34%	13	11.11%
Motivation/Inspiration	17	3.26%	3	0.64%	0	0.00%
Thanks	25	4.79%	26	5.52%	5	4.27%
Support - Personal	12	2.30%	13	2.76%	0	0.00%
Other	16	3.07%	17	3.61%	2	1.71%
Total	522		471		117	

The data presented in Table 1 can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, it is possible to look at the frequency of categories. It is of significance that the same categories, despite slight differences in order, were the most frequently noted in these months. Table 2 summarises the most frequently occurring categories in the three months selected for analysis. These are: Comment/Discussion; Information – Give; and, Resource – Give.

Table 2

Most common categories August 2005, February 2008 and July 2013 ordered by frequency

Category	August (2005)		February (2009)		July (2013)	
	% messages	Frequency (order)	% messages	Frequency (order)	% messages	Frequency (order)
Comment/Discussion	36.97%	1	20.38%	2	27.35%	1
Information - Give	11.88%	3	29.09%	1	16.24%	2
Resource - Give	13.03%	2	11.89%	3	12.82%	3

It is also of significance that, in each of these months, these categories covered the majority of messages: August 2005 (323 messages, 61.88%); February 2009 (289 messages, 61.36%); and July 2013 (66 messages, 56.41%). It can therefore be said that the main activity of the list was to provide commentary and discussion and to share information and resources.

Second, it is possible to look at the categories in terms of action and direct reaction, or stimulus and response. The clearest instances are:

Seeking and giving advice (relating to employment or workplace situations)

- August 2005: 11 requests (2.11%) were met with 25 responses (4.79%)
- February 2009: 10 requests (2.12%) were met with 34 responses (7.22%)
- July 2013: 2 requests (1.71%) were met with 10 responses (8.55%)

Asking for help and offering a solution (relating to technical questions)

- August 2005: 15 requests (2.87%) were met with 35 responses/solutions (6.7%)
- February 2009: 14 requests (2.97%) were met with 40 responses/solutions (8.49%)

- July 2013: 4 requests (3.42%) were met with 8 responses/solutions (6.84%)

Third, as for the categories for advice and help, there is also causality between the requesting and receiving of resources and information. However, we noted instances where resources and information were shared spontaneously, that is, not in response to a direct request. The activity relating to resources and information can be summarised as follows:

Seeking and giving information

- August 2005: 11 requests (2.11%) for information compared with 62 instances of sharing information (11.88%)
- February 2009: 8 requests (1.7%) for information compared with 137 instances of sharing information (29.09%)
- July 2013: 4 requests (3.42%) for information compared with 19 instances of sharing information (16.24%)

Seeking and giving resource(s)

- August 2005: 19 requests (3.64%) for resources compared with 68 responses (13.03%)
- February 2009: 6 requests (1.27%) for resources compared with 56 responses (11.89%)
- July 2013: 3 requests (2.56%) for resources compared with 15 responses (12.82%)

These statistics, consistent over time, bear out the contention that the members of the oz-Teachers list have supported each other through the solicited and ad hoc provision of advice, resources or information. In this, it is useful to revisit Beta's remark that "*someone would answer a query no matter how easy/trivial it seemed*" (Beta, October 13, 2014, 6.20pm); Eta's gratitude for being informed, challenged and amused by the discussions on the list ((Eta, October 4, 2014, 8.16pm) and Iota's acknowledgement of other's "generosity" having enriched his professional life ((Iota, October 15, 2014, 11.14am). The disproportionate number of responses to requests, even when drawn from such differing monthly volumes, indicates that this responsiveness, better termed as reciprocity (Couros, 2006; Rheingold, 2012; Skyring, 2014b), is a common and critical characteristic of this and other vibrant professional communities. Reciprocity, in this context, refers to where an individual not only seeks to learn from others but also helps others within their network to learn (Plickert, Côté, & Wellman, 2008). It is based on an unwritten principle of exchange rather than one of consumption (Couros, 2006, 2010).

Sharing was consistently rewarded with a generic "thank you" message to the list. In August 2005, "thanks" were evident in 4.79% of all messages, while they represented 5.52% in February 2009 and 4.27% of all messages in July 2013. Such expressions of appreciation are clearly an important aspect of the social cohesion of a list community. In the same vein, in February 2009, there was a thread of 19 messages (categorised as seeking/giving advice) revolving around a request for advice on securing a teaching post. These messages were characterised by their mixture of personal empathy and practical professional advice. In this, the messages showed the kind of reflective and critical dialogue "where 'apparent conversational immediacy' is blended with

‘tempered thought’” (Haley-James, 1993, cited in Wild, 1999, p. 127). Interestingly, the code “Support –Personal” was noted in two of the months selected for analysis. The first of these was in August 2005 where messages, with the thread “The Baby? At Last ☺” were sent as congratulations to mark the birth of a baby ($n=12$, 2.3%). The second was February 2009 with messages instigated by the Black Saturday bushfire in Victoria (February 7, 2009). There was an outpouring of concern for the members of the list based in Victoria ($n=13$, 2.76%).

Lastly, the three months analysed for the purposes of this paper all exhibited a similar proportion of messages categorised as Comment/Discussion. As noted in Table 2, such messages were clearly a mainstay of the discussion on the oz-Teachers list: August 2005 (193 messages, 36.97%); February 2009 (96 messages, 20.38%); and July 2013 (32 messages, 27.35%).

These messages frequently took the form of a broadcast statement of opinion which then initiated broader discussion. For instance, in August 2005, a lively thread with the subject line “Nelson on Education” discussed the views expressed by the then federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Hon. Brendan Nelson (55 messages from 21 individual posters over 9 days (August 10-18)). This thread had been initiated by one post reporting on the Minister’s launch of the Australian Science Festival and moved from commentary on this event into broader discussions of the then proposed national curriculum. In February 2009, a similarly lively thread was concerned with the validity of the concept of “digital natives.” This had been initiated by a broadcast posting with the subject line, *Significant new article by Marc Prensky* pointing members to the publication of an article.

Although the final observation in this analysis, the Comment/Discussion messages are far from being of least importance. We equate this kind of broadcast message to the kind of stimuli that maintain conversations and friendships in the real world. Even when strangers meet, the conversation will be instigated by reference to current events, or sport, or the weather. It should not be surprising that list communities behave in the same way and adopt similar social moirés. The key difference is that of trust, that is, of individuals having sufficient confidence in others to raise sometimes quite contentious or provocative issues. It could be conjectured that the trust engendered through the more routine functions of a list community, such as seeking and sharing information and resources, creates an environment that enables argument to thrive.

Conclusion

The closure of the oz-Teachers email list after 20 years has instigated the reflection and analysis in this paper. While not unique, the oz-Teachers list is certainly unusual in its longevity and allows us an insight into how teachers learn and how they can do so through their own self-generative and self-sustained conversation. A simple listserv – an arguably old technology - provided the technological affordance of convenience and immediacy. The members of the list, over time, have brought and engendered its social and educational affordance through reciprocity and collective intelligence.

We contend that the findings of this paper show that communities are repositories of collective intelligence. In this, Gamma’s reference to both a *significant collection of wisdom* and *quite a few good arguments* (Gamma, October 13, 2014, 11.29am) should

be recalled. It is this sense of argument, described by Eta as a “continued dialogue” (Eta, October 14, 2014, 8.15pm), which is the outcome of building a community premised on collective intelligence. This notion is encapsulated by Zeta’s stated gratitude to the community to be able to “shar[e] both electrons and neurons with you all” (Zeta, October 13, 2014, 12.29pm).

But, above all, the main characteristic of the community can be seen to be reciprocity. This was shown through an analysis of three months selected from different years because of their differing patterns of participation. It was evident in two particular ways. First, the number of messages and of individual posters to the list did not affect the predominance of comment/discussion; and the giving/sharing of information and resources. Whether there were few or many participants, the outcome was the same. Second, there was a consistently disproportionate number of responses to requests: ranging from twice to twenty times in number. As reciprocity is held to be more about sharing than taking, so the disproportionate ration of response to request is a clear indication of this characteristic.

It would have been a simple task to document the archives as a simple history. We alternately believed that the oz-Teachers list is not just about what was, and that, rather, it has a story to tell about what can be. Its archives, in hindsight, allow us to see what online communities can provide irrespective of medium and, more importantly, how its members can support each other’s practice. What was a dynamic community in its two decades of operation has allowed us, through post hoc analysis, to understand more about how teachers can learn through the simple act of sustained and self-directed conversation.

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