

# **Talking Heads – Its Progress – Transfer To Wales and Scotland and Relevance to The Republic of Ireland**

**Anthony Russell Ultralab - UK [anthony@ultralab.net](mailto:anthony@ultralab.net)**

**Kevin Thompson Ultralab UK [kevin@ultralab.net](mailto:kevin@ultralab.net)**

**and associates at Ultralab**

**Abstract:** Talking Heads is an on-line community for all the heads in England. Using Think.Com software its community based approach seeks to transform the continuing professional development of school leaders. It seeks to be a virtual space where the twenty four thousand heads in England are able to support, learn from each other and have the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with policy advisers and decision makers. This paper tells the story of Talking Heads, examines its impact so far and how it gave rise to similar, but different, communities in Scotland and Wales. It discusses how these experiences might be relevant to the Republic of Ireland.

## **Introduction**

**Talking Heads** is a fusion of technology and vision. The vision has been elegantly articulated by Dame Pat Collarbone.

*"Imagine a collection of individuals, working in close proximity, sharing a common purpose and passion - a desire to learn. Imagine this same collection of individuals, working closely together, sharing knowledge, aspiring to the same vision. Imagine that same collection of individuals, sharing each other's hopes and*

*fears, empathising emotionally, unleashing the power of their collective intelligences. This is a learning community.*" (Collarbone, 2000) Add to this a technology - Think.Com - that is capable of allowing heads in Stoke to support, and advise a head in the Isle of Dogs London who is experiencing a career threatening incident and you have the essence of Talking Heads. It seeks to be a virtual network of communities where the 24.000 heads in England will be able to support, learn from each other and have the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue with policy advisers and decision-makers. In terms of virtual communities Talking Heads is a major, innovative step forward. In terms of virtual communities for professionals, especially school leaders, it seeks to be a revolution.

In 1994, eight short years ago, Howard Rheingold was enjoying participating in virtual communities and pondering on the future of the WWW. He saw it as having the potential to, *"bring enormous leverage to ordinary citizens."* But he also feared for its future, *"The odds are that always good that big power and big money will find a way to control access to virtual communities"*. (Rheingold,1994) These were the "Wild West" days of the virtual world but Rheingold warned that they could rapidly come to an end.

*"The Net is out of control in fundamental ways but it may not stay that way for long."* (Rheingold, 1994) In those days virtual communities, like those early settlements on the American Prairies, were simple. They emerged from the virtual environment to meet the social needs and wants of the early on-line pioneers. *"Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."* (Rheingold, 1994)

Today the WWW still has democratic outposts but the control of access, by those with money and power, forecast by Rhiengold, is coming to pass and virtual communities are much more varied and complex. Gattiker records virtual community as a term, "that has been mentioned extensively in the business world and by marketing experts." (Gattiker, 2001) Today virtual communities do not always happen spontaneously (White 2001). Indeed there is a growing body of literature offering advice on how to set-up and sustain a successful on-line community for a variety of purposes. For example Kim (2000) identified nine design strategies and three basic principles that she considers common to building any successful on-line community. She suggested that the community builder design for growth and change, create and maintain feedback loops and empower your members over time. Talking Heads did not develop spontaneously and these basic principles are relevant to its the development.

At the same time communications software is developing rapidly. For example in March of this year the Project Harmony Domestic Violence On-line Conference brought together domestic violence professionals working in the countries of the old Soviet Union with experts in the USA. (<http://www.fullcirc.com/community/phdvconferencereportfull.htm> ) The conference was asynchronous and hosted on a web-based software platform called Webcrossing, which was designed in such a way as

to allow participants the opportunity to communicate ideas, hold discussions, exchange professional documents, meet one another and participate in a question and answer panel all in one on-line space. This project fits Gattiker's definition of a virtual community.

*"A virtual community is based on virtual reality, that is, it is usually an artificial social construct whereby people with similar interests (e.g. growing a rose garden) meet and exchange ideas, messages, and communicate (e.g., pictures, sound, video files)"* (Gattiker, 2001). Thus as we exploit the potential of the WWW, and new software makes more possible more easily, then imaginative, innovative people can create and use space on the Net to erase, " boundaries created by time and distance, and make it dramatically easier for people to maintain connections, deepen relationships and meet like minded souls ..." (Kim, 2000) Within Talking Heads these likeminded souls are school leaders.

Since the advent of the new digital technologies there have been no shortage of predictions as to how it they will change our lives. We can already see the effects of "dematerialisation" Mitchell (2000) where big physical things are replaced by miniaturised equivalents. For example the bank, with its labour and heating costs is being replaced by the bank machine. Mitchel (2000) refers to the "weightless economy." He further talks about "demobilisation" where we "wholly or partially substitute telecommunications for travel." He foresees digital communications. "remaking the traditional rhythms of daily life." If this is the case then not only should schools be equipping their pupils to live fulfilling lives in a transformed world they should also be embracing and adapting digital technology so that it becomes the means to that end and not a threat to be kept at arms length for as long as possible. Mitchel (2000) warns that, "Like their pipe-and-wire predecessors, however, digital telecommunications networks will not create entirely new urban patterns from the ground up; they will begin by morphing existing ones." Within schools computers are often seen as substitutes for or additions to traditional practice rather than something revolutionary. Stephen Heppell warned,

*"It is thus very tempting indeed to allow computers to become learning productivity tools: tools that test, that deliver content without eliciting contribution, that drill pupils up to speed, that allow four times the number of homework tasks to be completed and that cram yet more into both the school day and the children's heads, very much the teaching machine of Huxley's Brave New World - uniform, quantifiable, controlling and predictable "* (Heppell, 2000)

The vision of Talking Heads is therefore not about a bolt-on to the daily routine of a headteacher's practice. It seeks to remake the daily rhythms of professional life and to transform that practice. How far has it succeeded? As it transfers to Scotland and Wales how relevant might that experience be for the ROI? These are the questions this paper addresses.

## Background

Talking Heads began as pilot involving the 1200 English teachers who were appointed to their first headship from January 1999 to December 1999. They were each provided with a laptop as an incentive to participate. There was also a commitment from each head to log in three times a week for at least 20 minutes.

Ultralab with a history of researching and developing on-line community management projects received the contract to develop Talking Heads from the DfEE. Based at Anglia Poytechnic University, Ultralab had a good record developing on-line communities for professionals. For example the SMILE project, (<http://www.smile.anglia.ac.uk>) an Online Community for Engineers and the Online Learning Network (OLN) (<http://online.learning.net.uk/>) an Online Community for Learning Professionals.

In January 2000 a project manager and 12.5 facilitators were appointed for Talking Heads. These were from an established team of advisory teachers who had previously worked on the Tesco Schoolnet 2000 project that sought to give every child of school age in the UK the chance to create a webpage to mark the millennium. Ultralab were major partners in TSN. After the Talking Heads Pilot was deemed a 'success' the team was expanded to 22.5 and the pilot was absorbed into the development of the new National College of School Leadership.

The impetus for both Talking Heads and the National College of School Leadership came from a UK government publication, " National College for School Leadership - A Prospectus", (DfEE, 1999). Within this document, the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon Tony Blair, MP, stated that one of the fundamental reasons for establishing such an institution was to provide school leaders with "*the chance to share their experience of what works* "; and "*the opportunity to learn from the best in leadership*". The Prime Minister acknowledged the isolation of school heads, and the need therefore to build a national network of school leaders across the UK. The NCSL Prospectus gives clear recognition to the fact that the establishment of a physical college alone would not in itself be sufficient to meet this need. As well as a physical presence in Nottingham there would be a virtual college for the 24000 heads in England's schools:-

*"The major part of the college's operations must be available on-line as a virtual college..... It will establish new networks within the profession, including problem-solving groups of heads across the country, discussion groups on priority issues, on-line master classes, and access to the most up-to-date and research evidence. "* (DfEE, 1999)

In addition to the NCSL website ([www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)) Talking Heads was to help deliver these aims. Obviously if the virtual college was to be truly national then ease of access anywhere in the land was vital

and therefore Talking Heads uses on-line "thin client" Think.Com software. Access to Talking Heads is via a web-based URL, and is password protected, with full access being restricted to registered headteachers and facilitators. Ultralab led the design of Think.com in partnership with Oracle who programmed it, implemented it and sustain it but Oracle had intended the software for use by children (Gattiker, 2001) so SODIUM, a design team at Ultralab, adapted it's appearance for use with the adults in Talking Heads.

Think's asynchronous software provides a range of on-line tools that allow the heads and their guests to communicate in a variety of ways. For example guests or a head may sit in a hotseat, where they can engage in dialogue with heads. Guests have included educational thinkers, policy makers and even the Chief Inspector of schools. The asynchronous nature of the tools helps ensure reasoned thought and reflection. It means all can participate in their own time.

The debate and conversation tools allow thoughtful communication whilst the brainstorm tool enables anonymous contributions to be made. This tool is useful when dealing with contentious issues and is the only anonymous tool in the suite available.

There are also tools that allow audio, video and text files to be uploaded. Heads can share policies, jokes and even photographs of both personal and professional interest. These help build a feeling of community.

The system also offers web based email and "stickies". These are an electronic version of the post-it note we leave on each other's desks.

The pilot ended in September 2000 and by January 2001 the fledging National College of School Leadership was finding its feet. Also In January 2001 Ultralab, initially in partnership with DfES and then with the National College of School Leadership, built a unique on-line community for those aspiring school leaders to pass through the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). To meet the needs of professional study at this level Ultralab developed a system of online learning journals, professional debate forums and a Hotseat discussion strategy. Although separate Talking Heads and Virtual Heads share some communities.

At the time of writing there are 5970 members of the Community of Talking Heads and 6728 aspiring Virtual Heads. (These totals includes Ultralab facilitators and other members of the NCSL) One key feature of Talking Heads is the involvement of facilitators.

Schuman (2002) in an editorial for the International Association of Facilitators (IAF) describes group facilitation as "*a superlative task that must address the analytical, the cognitive and the interpersonal, political, emotional and spiritual demands of a situation.*"

White (2001) in suggesting that on-line communities need facilitation offers the following advice: "*The core of facilitation and hosting is to serve the community and assist it in reaching its goals or purpose ...*

*Facilitators and hosts encourage member interaction and participation. But their most important skill is as a genuine, authentic communicator."*

Rheingold (2002) also mentions the various hats a facilitator needs to wear. *"A host is also an exemplar. Good hosts model the behavior they want others to emulate: read carefully and post entertainingly, informatively, and economically, acknowledge other people by name, assume good will, assert trust until convinced otherwise, add knowledge, offer help, be slow to anger, apologize when wrong, politely ask for clarification, exercise patience when your temper flares."*

The Talking Heads facilitation team has to engage in all these roles, endeavouring to keep communities vibrant by informing Heads what is relevant, by starting new communities when required and by pruning out old items. Each head has a named facilitator to advise and support, especially in the initial stages of community membership. This initial period is important. Kim (2000) stated that. "The community builders I have worked with have often found it useful to refer to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs." ([www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html](http://www.ship.edu/~cgboeree/maslow.html)) This model in attempting to understand human motivation suggested five levels ranging from the physiological (basic physical needs) to self-actualisation (the ability to develop skills and fulfil one's potential). In an on-line environment Kim recognises the first level as the ability to access and participate in web community. Level Five she saw as the ability to take on a community role that develops skills and opens up new opportunities. In trying to motivate heads and develop community participation facilitators found that a major element of their work was within the first level. Because many heads had difficulty connecting to the web and using the software face to face training sessions have been organised across England, first on the initiative of the facilitators and then by the NCSL. Responsibility for Talking Heads passed from the DfES to the NCSL in August 2001.

Given the close relationship between student and tutor only two facilitators work with Virtual Heads.

Talking Heads and Virtual Heads were a step into the unknown. It was the original facilitation team of 12.5 that created the on-line environment that heads first entered in March 2000. The facilitation team had to be flexible and innovative. They were taking risks, "on the edge of chaos striking a balance between too little and too much structure." (Fullan, 1999)

They were aware that "an organisation's true nature is that of a community of humans" and that, "to regard a company as a living entity is a first step towards increasing its life expectancy." (De Gues, 1997). They were involved in research. They were aware that "You can't mandate what matters" and that, "change is a journey not a blueprint" (Fullan, M. 1993) Given that participation in Talking Heads is a voluntary activity, they have tried to remain open and flexible but change happened fast.

With the setting up of the NCSL, Talking Heads has spawned and become part of a wider network of communities. NCSL in Dialogue is a community facilitated by the National College with members Virtual Heads and other NCSL projects. Talking Heads also have membership of NCSL in Dialogue and here,

through the hotseat they have the opportunity to engage in dialogue with educational thinkers. DfES in Dialogue was also originally part of Talking Heads. It was set up as a separate community within which members of talking Heads could engage senior DfES civil servants, including the Inspectorate, in discussion. During the pilot phase, to ensure the heads confidentiality, DfES staff were denied access to all other communities. Within Talking Heads itself there are four different types of community.

**The Community of Talking Heads:** This has evolved into a navigation map giving access to all areas of Talking Heads but it also has a serving head hosting a hotseat on a topic or issue of their choice. For example, Creating a Positive School Image. All 5970 Talking Heads are members

**Cohort Communities:** To keep communications and dialogue manageable the population is divided into three cohorts. Cohort One has 3760 members. It consists of the 1200 pilot heads and those who followed but who weren't given a laptop. Cohort Two has 1935 members none of whom were given any incentive to join. Cohort Three is a new heads welcome community for heads who took up their first post within the last year. They have all been given a laptop, the offer of f2f training and a digital camera. It has 931 members,

**Special Interest Communities:** These are smaller communities and headteachers ask to join. For example Pupil Behaviour Management has 248 members and the Small Schools Community has 326 members.

**Local Working Groups:** These are set up in response to interest expressed by heads from particular geographical locations. They tend to have a small membership and to be an on-line extension of an existing cluster. In essence they are a place to set and comment on agendas, discuss local issues and socialise.

## **Research**

How far has Talking Head realised the vision? Of transforming the practice of headteachers? The evidence presented here was collected from:

Oracle's monthly participation figures.

An On-Line questionnaire

A f2f interview with a focus group

## An examination of selected communities

### Interviews with facilitators

A selection of Oracle's participation figures for talking Heads for April is used. The on-line questionnaire was posted in the Autumn of 2001 with the results providing information for other stakeholders like the NCSL. Given that it was on-line some bias in the data is acknowledged. Extracts from a focus group of regular users held at Ultralab on 26<sup>th</sup> Feb 2002 are also included. The extract from the communities were chosen as being typical of the comments made by heads. The interviews with the Scottish and Welsh facilitators were semi-structured and common to both.

### **Oracle's Monthly Figures for April**

Since the Spring of this year 2002 oracle have made available online information on hits and contributions for all the communities associated with Talking and Virtual Heads. They are detailed and many but the following selection gives a good quantitative idea of the amount of interest shown by heads.

<b>Community of Talking Heads April 2002</b>	
No. of hits on content	62,735
Total contributions	1744

Ratio: 36:1 [http://www.think.com/pls/d1/dir\\_report.display?p\\_id=34](http://www.think.com/pls/d1/dir_report.display?p_id=34)

**Table One**

As has been stated this community has evolved into a portal with one resident hotseat. Given a membership of around 6000, 62,735 hits for one month appears healthy, even allowing for the fact that the same people can visit and contribute over that time. The ratio of 36:1 suggests that some heads are

going in to read without contributing. However participation is a voluntary activity and whereas one member may contribute as much as he likes, "another may consume without contributing much if anything" (U.E.Gattiker, 2001) The point is that heads are debating and sharing professional experience and ideas. In the real world participants and audience at a play or debate all benefit from the experience.

Members of a focus group consisting of nine heads also shed some light on the ratio.

"Some people lurk because they enjoy lurking not because they cannot cope with the software"

"If you want to contribute you have to get in quick or someone makes the gist of your comment so there is no point in you going in and saying anything"

(Extracts from a Focus Group of regular users held at Ultralab on 26<sup>th</sup> Feb. 2002)

If we look at the figures for the DfES in Dialogue we find the following:

DfES in Dialogue April 2002	
No. of hits on content	13537
Total contributions	315

Ratio: 43:1 [http://www.think.com/pls/d1/dir\\_report.display?p\\_id=39](http://www.think.com/pls/d1/dir_report.display?p_id=39)

**Table Two**

This is a community of contact and dialogue between heads, aspiring heads and the decision makers. The figures show that in one month 315 contributions were recorded in dialogue. Given a total number of over 12000 heads and aspiring heads and over 13537 hits we can assume that a sizeable number of heads were engaged in conversation either as participants or as the audience. In real terms heads at the geographical and educational peripheries have had contact with the decision makers at the core.

An on-line questionnaire provides another view.

A detailed on-line questionnaire was administered in Autumn of 2001, Whilst valuable, it should be stated that the heads who responded were those who already were using the software. There were 163 responses and given the limitations of space in this paper the following data was selected..

How is Talking Heads increasing your effectiveness? Mentions	
"Puts things in perspective"/exposed me to other points of view	24
Provided "information"/"current issues"?"saves time"	21
"Clarification"/"learning "/"reflection"	17
Getting and giving "advice"/"help"/"help with change"	15
Share "ideas"/"views"/"solutions"	15
Share good /current practice/policies/schemes of work	15

**Table Three**

In response to the question "How is Talking Heads increasing your effectiveness?" 71 (44%) mentioned one or more of the following:

In response to the question is Talking Heads meeting your needs? Of the 156 who answered 54% said yes and 46% said no

In response to the question has participating in Talking Heads reduced your isolation? Of the 159 who answered 51% answered yes.

In response to the question whether Talking Heads helped them feel a sense of community of the 158 who answered 52% answered yes. ( Leonie Ramondt, 2001)

This quantitative data, perhaps weakened by the self selective nature of the sample, does not suggest that the hoped for revolution in the daily practice of English heads is upon us but the project is only just over one year old and it is encouraging that a significant percentages of those who responded find participation valuable in a number of ways.

However it is in qualitative data that we find the saplings of the hoped for revolution in heads' practice. These are a sample from the open ended sections of the questionnaire.

*"I am now an active advocate of computer use-in fact the change has been unbelievable to those who know me. Rather than avoiding computers if at all possible, I seek uses and particularly value the online support and advice of colleagues*

*"Communicating with others in dark moments."*

*"The knowledge that if you have a query or a problem, there are colleagues out there who have experience to share and who will offer advice - it feels less lonely." (anonymous Headteachers)*

Examples from the communities further make the point. Heads engaged in conversation and participated in a hotseat following the publication of the White paper, "Schools Achieving Success" which set out the Governments vision for the education service for the years ahead.

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/achievinguccess/> The following extracts form the preparatory asynchronous conversation reveal debate, firmly held opinions but also reflection.

*"They keep telling us they trust us...why does it not feel that way?"*

*A passionate debate! I tend to agree with ... that much in the white paper is to be praised. I also note the tone is much more upbeat and positive about our profession.*

*It is always the case that change is not welcome when one is busy and close to overload but when one reflects on this paper it is one of the better ones.*

*I too have concerns about faith, I have been a Buddhist for many years and I worry about closing down the options for pupils at an early age. " (OCT 2002 Conversation on the white paper)*

When writing a summary article in Talking Heads about his hotseat the civil servant who had occupied it reflected: *“There is no doubt that this and other means of direct, informal communication give those implementing policy the chance to be in closer touch day to day with a greater number of interested parties than was ever possible before. I look forward to further discussions in the future.”* (The White Paper Hotseat Talking Heads October 2001)

Exchanges and reflection of this quality indicate how democratising community exchanges can be. Obviously there was a strong element of trust between the parties. In the following example Kenny Frederick, a secondary head in the Isle of Dogs found herself in the middle of a major racial incident. It was reported in the 'Guardian'

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0.5500.597445.00.html>

Coincidentally Kenny was due to host a feature, "Fortnightly Matters" in the Community of Talking Heads at the time. She changed her topic to "Playground Incident-Racial Conflict" and began the item as follows:

*When the going gets tough - what do headteachers do? They ask other headteachers for advice!*

*A playground incident has blown up into a major racial incident and I am facing the repercussions.*

Kenny went on to explain her predicament to seek advice and place a great degree of trust in her fellow heads. She also referred to a piece she had read earlier in Talking Heads.

*Pat Collarbone talks in her article on Talking Heads (19th October) about the Headteacher as the Lead Learner. She says "Leaders expect themselves and others to be uncertain, enquiring, prepared for surprise and joyful of complexity and the unknown". Normally, I would agree with this - it's just today that I wish I was not uncertain!*

Replies came in quickly and a sample are included here.

*"I am the Head of a small school in Stoke and I identify wholeheartedly with the sentiments you express in your article. If only our job was simply about educating children! I have no words of wisdom, but so many of us share your despair, self doubts and hope that both ourselves and the situations surrounding us will get better. You seem to have tremendous resilience and I'm sure that will carry you through this as it has in the past .*

*I can empathise closely with the situation you describe and can only state that your approach is exactly right.*

*Kenny, Pleased you found time to write article - hope atmosphere in school improved. Share many of your concerns - in fact will reply at length with e-mail. Keep up the good work*

*I think that all you are doing is absolutely right, and agree that we must never doubt the value of continued efforts to counter racist attitudes within our schools. (anonymous Headteachers)*

*Things are changing in society slowly. Just look at what language was once acceptable on 1970's TV. Now it looks dated and offensive. We have to keep going. Change in society takes generations. Schools are a vital part of this. We can't change the world in 5 years!*

*(Fortnightly Matters, Talking Heads, November 2001)"*

At the end of "Fortnightly Matters" Kenny thanked her fellow heads for their support and provided a detailed update. In an email to her facilitator, months later, she wrote.

*I guess the value of the contributions and of the conversations is that it*

*tackles the issue of isolation - a problem shared is a problem halved! We*

*know there is no one answer to the problems we are experiencing. They are complex and are a result of a long history - we are trying to change a whole community in a short time.*

The above two examples have a national quality but Talking Heads is also of value to the head in dealing with the prosaic issues of professional life.

This example is from the Birmingham Catholic Primary Partnership, a local working group. The Birmingham LEA was offering schools the chance to manage their own catering. This would involve hiring a catering manager, sourcing the ingredients and presenting the meals. Kevin Macken was undecided but having been involved in the online debate within the community made this contribution.

"Thanks for that Paul. You've just convinced me to let the LEA get on with it!! Your salaries are just as poor as mine and they, the LEA, are welcome to the management fee for managing it. The quality of our food is already good..."

These three examples illustrate the potential of Talking Heads in transforming leadership in schools. Heads can feel both empowered and supported. Their experience and skills become a resource to be pooled and shared. Continuing professional development can mean much more than access to the latest theory, even if it is accessed online.

### **Scotland, Wales and the ROI**

Following the success of the English pilot of Talking Heads both SEED (Scottish Executive Education Dept) and the Welsh Assembly showed an interest. With the latter moving faster than the former. Neither are considering a national college. Given that Wales and Scotland have their own legislative assemblies and their own education systems negotiations between themselves Oracle and Ultralab were delicate. Reflecting the closer political ties between the two countries Wales now operates under the auspices of the NCSL but for SEED this was not an option as the unique identity of the Scottish Education System had to be preserved and so it was felt they had to administer their own project. (interview with senior Scottish official)

The Scottish "Heads Together" is in its infancy but it differs from the English model. There will be approximately 600 heads in the pilot, all nominated by their Authorities. The main thrust of this initiative is to help overcome isolation in the Highlands and Islands but as yet neither Shetland nor the Western Isles have responded to the invitation. Is this indicative of the very isolation Talking Heads seeks to diminish?

(Personal Communication, Kevin Thompson, Scottish facilitator)

Within Wales the Welsh Assembly first showed an interest in November 2000 and 15 months later , PEN-I-BEN (translated means "head to head") was officially launched at the new headteachers' conference in Llandudno, on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 2002. It has a clear purpose in supplementing the PHIB (Professional Headship Induction Programme). Within PHIB an experienced head mentors an inexperienced head but now with an on-line element. This has a more functional ring to it than that envisaged in the setting up of Talking Heads,

(Personal Communication, Geraint Lang, Welsh Facilitator)

Having looked at the experience of Talking Heads both the Welsh and the Scottish projects are keen on initial face to face training meetings.

Both the Welsh experience and the Scottish experience are relevant to the ROI since both involved negotiations with a different political entity, both have many isolated schools and both have language issues to resolve. Within Wales, although they have striven to make the communities bi-lingual the skins remain in English. One of the jobs of the facilitators is to translate the contributions in Welsh into English and vice versa. Although it is early days both the Scottish and Welsh models appear closer to "productivity" than "creativity". (Heppell, 2000)

Within the ROI there has been no formal training or CPD of heads. This is about to change. This July a four person team consisting of two principals and two deputies, who have been seconded for a year to consider the future direction of school leadership in the ROI will deliver a report to be considered by the Department of Education. In a country with an East West population imbalance, many isolated rural schools and two languages Mitchell's view that rural telecommunications will deliver increasingly sophisticated educational and other vital services making, ", the old distinctions between city and countryside, and between center and periphery ... fuzzier and fuzzier" (Mitchell, 2000) is relevant. Wales provides a model for incorporating two languages but the transformation that Talking Heads seeks in the CPD of school leaders, where the profession is the resource and experts are important but peripheral, could just be the start. Heppell foresees the new technologies, not only bringing hope to small rural schools but, *"It may just be that with the disadvantage of size solved by technology, the small rural school, heading for extinction a decade ago, now offers the blueprint of future learning organisations and institutions."* (Heppell, 1996)

In the future large schools and institutions may no longer own learning (Heppell,1996) and the economic core periphery model (Waugh, 1990) may no longer be relevant. In education in the ROI realising the vision of Talking Heads, by linking all schools and their leaders in a community that is independent of distance and time could be the first step in transforming not only school leadership but also the geography of rural Ireland.

## Conclusion

The evidence presented shows a healthy hit rate and hundreds of contributions in one month. It shows good quality engagement but as yet it is too early to say if the vision of a network of on-line communities linking all the heads in England will be realised. However heads are supporting heads and engaging in meaningful debate with the decision makers. Already Scotland and Wales have adapted their own versions and given the educational geography of the ROI it may benefit from examining what has already been achieved by its neighbours.

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