

## On: Community Grids for Learning (CGfL)

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### What is a Community Grid for Learning?

A Community Grid for Learning (CGfL) is not easy to define. A simple definition could be that it is a Virtual

Learning Environment (VLE) with content appropriate to a community audience.

### What does this mean in practice?

A CGfL is a further, local development of the National Grid for Learning (NGfL) and there is a resource on the NGfL web site (<http://www.ngfl.gov.uk>) pointing to Community Grids. In fact, these were originally referred to as Community Grids for Information, developed as a part of the huge interest in web-based resources in the late 1990's. However, having initially been little more than

portals linking to any local web site, they have subsequently developed in two ways: firstly, as local authority web sites pointing to relevant local community sites, and secondly, as web sites providing local resources for information and learning. This Information Sheet focuses on the latter type.

### How do I go about developing a CGfL?

CGfLs are an emerging technology. In one sense, they are a refinement of the NGfL, part of the rollout of on-line learning resources at local level. However, whereas the NGfL is constrained by the National Curriculum, a CGfL will reflect the needs and interests of those involved in developing it. It has yet to be fully defined, but a number of distinctive characteristics can already be identified:

- directory of on-line learning resources
- discussion group
- moderator
- on-line learning support

The 'community' dimension can refer to a geographic community, a community of interest (for example, school soccer coaches), or an on-line community. Usually, the CGfL will be supporting elements of all three. This is best done by initially supporting a local geographic community, using this to build an on-line community and then extending it to support various communities of interest. The Yahoo service 'egroups' (<http://groups.yahoo.com/>) is very useful tool for the latter.

A successful CGfL is dependent on the active involvement of its local people in various activities. Firstly, they will be needed in order to build and support the client community of the CGfL, which is best achieved by mapping to an existing community such as school parents.

Secondly, they will be required for the web-based work of administration, maintenance, content creation, discussion group moderation and learner support.

CGfLs are not simply a set of technologies. However, there are some key factors which are useful in building a CGfL:

**On-line learning resources** – on-line learning resources could be in the form of a directory pointing to existing on-line resources that the administrator of the CGfL finds useful for the client community. The directory could be something simple in standard HTML, such as that of SITE in Southcote (<http://www.southcote.net/thesite.htm>), or as detailed as Sheffield College's Links pages (<http://www.sheffcol.ac.uk/links/>), which uses Gossamer Threads, a searchable software links tool which also provides additional interactivity.

**Virtual Learning Environment** - a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is an on-line resource which provides an environment in which 'learning' can take place. At its simplest, it is a set of resources that can be accessed with some learning activities attached. Ideally, it should provide access to on-line learning support through a discussion group, preferably with a moderator and an on-line tutor. CGfLs are VLEs with a particular community focus.

**Managed Learning Environments** - Managed Learning Environments (MLE) are software packages or systems that provide a structured environment for on-line course creation and delivery, and enable student tracking and on-line assessments. With the on-going development of on-line learning, the national Joint Information Systems Committee has set up an MLE team to co-ordinate MLE development and standards. Becta has produced an information sheet on *Managed Learning Environments (MLE) in Education* (<http://www.becta.org.uk/technology/infosheets/pdf/mle.pdf>).

**Intranets** - some schools, colleges and universities have Intranets. These are web pages that can only be accessed from within an institution, which can be VLEs or, more commonly in universities, MLEs. The most effective Intranets can be accessed from outside the institution as well, such as the Newark and Sherwood College Intranet (<http://www.newark.ac.uk/>). These could be used as 'dynamic' CGfLs as a part of community outreach. See the Campaign for Learning's Citizenship Schools ideas (<http://www.campaign-for-learning.org.uk/>).

**CGfL** - in the rollout of CGfLs from the Community Access

to Lifelong Learning (CALL) initiative, funded by the New Opportunities Fund, three types of CGfLs have been identified:

**Flat CGfL** – this is as described above, an on-line resource aimed at a particular client group.

**Dynamic CGfL** - this is the concept of a CGfL serving not only a particular client group, but also having specific links with actual Learning or Community centres (or schools), and having a number of specific people creating content for the CGfL based on centre activities. In Liverpool, these staff are called Community Outreach workers and in Cambridge they are Community editors. The key difference here is that the learner support is carried out in a physical location as well as on line.

**Communities of Interest or Practice** - on a national basis, different social groups with similar interests can organise on-line support through CGfLs. A Community of Interest would involve people with a common interest such as those concerned with environmental issues. A Community of Practice would involve people with a common professional interest, such as volunteers for charitable organisations, who might use CGfLs to provide support services across geographic boundaries.

## What are the advantages and disadvantages of CGfLs?

### CGfL compared to the NGfL

A CGfL as a VLE is an on-line resource developed by people who will be accessing the learning resources stored on the CGfL. The NGfL is designed to address the needs of the National Curriculum with resources that meet a national standard. Some advantages of CGfLs compared to the NGfL are:

- local focus
- local resources tailored to local needs
- local publishing (e.g. Bolton Woods pages at Shipley communities online - <http://www.libspace-go-legend.net/scoltest/boltonwoods.htm>)
- more responsive.

Disadvantages of CGfLs can include:-

- lack of agreed standards
- lack of national, professional support
- uneven coverage of topics
- not comprehensive in any given topic area.

### CGfL compared to MLEs

MLEs are a feature of on-line learning resources in further education. Higher Education institutions typically have an MLE to supplement existing provision. Some advantages of CGfLs as compared to MLEs are that they:

- reflect the personal interests of local content creators
- are a quick way of reflecting current interests in a community
- provide general resources of interest to a community (see the Teesside Communities On-line pages - <http://www.tvco.org.uk>).

Some disadvantages of CGfLs can be that they do not provide:

- structured courses
- student tracking
- integrated on-line assessment.

## How can CGfLs help in schools?

**Particular character of CGfLs as post NGfL implementation** - the relevance of CGfLs to the NGfL is that they are about local content creation. CGfLs are also a publishing medium, which encourages the idea of teachers creating their own on-line learning resources, just as they have always prepared classroom materials. However, on-line publishing raises the question of intellectual property and teachers need to ensure that they have the right to use the materials they post to the CGfL. Taking your own digital images is very useful. Using an image search engine often reveals copyrighted material but can be useful.

**Home-School Links** - most schools are using Home-Schools links in some way to address various issues to do with standards, achievement, homework, and literacy. Many have added a web page to support this approach. A CGfL could be part of this solution by providing on-line resources that could be accessed by pupils at home (<http://www.langstonejun.portsmouth.sch.uk/-resources/links/links-community.htm>).

**Rural Dimension** - rural communities have particular issues in terms of developing their communities and ensuring that places have both a sense of community and the resources to help them develop. Whereas in the inner cities there are many institutions capable of community outreach, in villages the school, often primary, is probably the only institution capable of addressing the broader social issues that bind a community together. From this perspective, a CGfL can be part of the process of bringing a community together, although a broader Community Grid for Information is probably needed in this situation.

**Community e-learning** - the ICT Learning Centres initiative was initially started to promote community access to ICT resources including Community e-learning. Community Grids for Learning were the government's chosen mechanism for achieving this and there has been a NOF-funded initiative to support this.

This initiative is funding community e-learning sites which will either be working with local centres or simply making on-line resources available. These resources are becoming available from January 2002, but will build on the model developed at Shipley on-line and Brixton on-line (see the link to Case Studies at the end of this sheet for further details).

**NOF ICT Literacy Training** - schools that need ICT Literacy training arrange for the CGfL to support this. This will enable schools to put the necessary resources on line and point teachers towards them. They can use simple tools like e-groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com/>) to support on-line discussions or purchase an MLE to support this activity. With this type of resource in place, teachers can learn to utilise resources and then build on them and share them, through forums such as the Teachers Resource Exchange (<http://contribute.ngfl.gov.uk/>). This was the approach of TaLENT in Lewisham, where teachers can receive their ICT Literacy through the local Professional Development Centre and then share their learning and expertise through the TaLENT CGfL, which is also available as a resource for local community groups (<http://www.talent.org.uk>).

**UK online centres** - as with Home-School Links and Community e-learning, UK online centres provide another reason why a school might wish to develop a CGfL. UK online centres offer community access to ICT resources. Those centres that have made the most of this opportunity, such as Shipley on-line, have usually made on-line resources available for users. SITE in Southcote, Reading have posted all their resources on line so that they can be accessed from home as well as in the centre.

## How can a CGfL be implemented?

CGfLs can be simple or complex. Anyone with an understanding of simple HTML can create the appropriate pages. However, for CGfLs to be effective, they need to be regularly updated and aligned with their client group needs. The key skills are human rather than technical. A CGfL needs an administrator with the basic skills to update a web site, staff who will update content, links with the client community which will keep the CGfL relevant and a publicly accountable steering group (for example, CITINET in Sheffield post their proceedings on their Community Grid <http://www.citinet.org.uk/>).

**Simple CGfL solution** - a flat CGfL is a series of simple HTML pages that contain relevant content. This can be:

- an explanation of the purposes of the specific CGfL
- steering or user group information

- directory of learning resources and how to use them
- events
- favourite links
- other local organisations
- discussion group and how to use it
- user information on how to use the CGfL
- netiquette for the group
- moderator policies (and contact details)
- information on how obtain an e-mail account to communicate with the CGfL.

This type of CGfL will use standard web tools and techniques to build a simple but effective low-cost solution. The Whole Earth electronic Link (WELL) started discussion groups and on-line communities, with good resources on how to do this (<http://www.well.com/-confteam/index.html>). *Filamentality* is similar in approach and provides on-line tools to build learning activities (<http://www.kn.pacbell.com/-wired/fil/intro.html>). Both resources have numerous links to existing resources that can be trialled and used. This is a low-tech approach to building a portal.

**Complex CGfL solution** - a more complex solution is to purchase appropriate software to support a VLE, such as

the First Class system used by TaLENT and RuralNET, or an MLE like Blackboard or WebCT.

TaLENT in Lewisham has a simple HTML front end which then points to a VLE which is used to support discussion and build on-line communities of practice. With Blackboard (<http://www.blackboard.com>) you can use their web site to build on-line courses. In Sheffield, both Sheffield College and Solis use the tool Gossamer Threads to build interactive links lists for their directory of on-line resources. You can just link to theirs or build your own. More complex solutions would use a content or document management system such as Articlebase or mkdoc, or VLE or MLE systems to manage resources.

## How much will it cost?

CGfLs can be built for nothing, except people's time, or can cost several thousand pounds for each aspect listed below:

**Web-hosting strategies** - the CGfL has to be sited somewhere. You can purchase your own server, purchase a web-hosting service, or use a sponsoring organisation such as a Local Authority to do it for you. If you already have a web site, you can add CGfL pages as part of your normal publishing policy. Becta has produced an information sheet on Web hosting

<http://www.becta.org.uk/technology/infosheets/html/webhosting.html>.

**Free Community pages** - a number of organisations offer free templates, such as This is the Black Country (<http://www.communigate.co.uk/bc/>) or can add your pages as part of a community pages policy, such as Brixton on-line (<http://www.brixton.co.uk/>). ISPs normally host pages at no extra cost. However, you need to check for the bandwidth of the servers and how reliable the service is.

**Tools and Resources** - like any other web project, there are free tools available on line to help you.

The NGfL Scotland Communities Channel has a set of resources on how to build a CGfL. Tech Soup in America (<http://www.techsoup.org>) is a technical site providing resources for developers of community pages.

**Training** - you need skills in web site design and web site maintenance. For people who want to 'teach' on line and provide learner support, the Lettol course is available. Volunteers need training but this is often done by mentoring. Find out from your local FE College if they offer any courses.

**People** - people are your prime resource for a CGfL and need recruiting, nurturing and developing. CGfLs often depend on key people and as they are often committed to the CGfL because of the values they represent, they should not be taken advantage of. Again volunteers may be key aspects of the CGfL.

**Maintenance** - maintenance is an on-going activity as a CGfL has to be constantly updated. An effective CGfL will also have a lot of content added which will require regular redesigns, which take time and money.

## What do I need to be ready for this technology?

CGfLs are more of a system of technologies, software learning resources and services. They can be quick and easy to set up but need people actively involved to make them work. The best way to view them is as an extension of an already existing web site, such as your

school, that is supporting community outreach through family learning, home-school links, the Parents information network, social inclusion policies, links to the WEA or Age Concern and UK on-line.

## How can CGfLs help the learner and teacher?

VLEs/MLEs are essential components of on-line learning. Moving towards a CGfL-based approach is to do with increasing the degree to which on-line learning is a component of education. In addition, a CGfL allows for a greater degree of content creation, or the re-purposing of existing content like webquests, by the teacher. For the learner, it means that the resource that is being accessed is not just a downloadable file.

A CGfL will have a far greater degree of interactivity and on-line support, which will be targeted at the user much more appropriately. Furthermore, it means that resources can be accessed anywhere, in an institution, with a group, on your own or with the support of an on-line community.

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## Other Sources of Information

### Becta publications

Becta Information Sheets

The following related Information Sheets are freely available on the Becta site at:

<http://www.becta.org.uk/technology/infosheets/full.html>

Broadband Information Sheet

Managed Learning Environments (MLEs) in education Information Sheet

Metadata in Education Information Sheet

Telecommunications – a glossary Information Sheet

Web hosting Information Sheet

Becta Expert Technology seminar on Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) -

<http://www.becta.org.uk/technology/techseminars/011101/index.html>

Becta Resource Page -

<http://www.becta.org.uk/lifelonglearning/call/cgfl.html>

Becta Home-School Links -

<http://www.becta.org.uk/teaching/homeschoollinks/10areas.html>

### Useful links and resources

The NGfL Scotland Communities Channel resource for Building Community Grids for Learning

<http://www.ngflscotland.gov.uk/communities/gettcon/grid/>

Links to UK Community Grids for Learning

<http://www.ngfl.gov.uk/comgrids/>

Teachers Net

[http://www.dfes.gov.uk/teachers/community\\_grids\\_for\\_learning](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/teachers/community_grids_for_learning)

Community Grids

Brockley, South East London - <http://www.brockley.com/>

Cape Cod, USA - <http://www.CapeCod.Com/>

### Developing Community

Partnerships online - [www.partnerships.org.uk](http://www.partnerships.org.uk)

The Association for Community Networking -

[www.afcn.org](http://www.afcn.org)

### About.com etc -

<http://www.fullcirc.com/commresources.htm>

### Local CGfLs

Birmingham Grid for Learning -

<http://www.bgfl.org/mybgfl/>

Bolton Woods, Yorkshire - <http://www.bwoodshistory.go-legend.net/>

Brixton - <http://www.brixton.co.uk/>

Cambridge - <http://edweb.camcnty.gov.uk/camgrid/>

Ealing - <http://www.ealing-lea.gov.uk/>

North of England -

<http://www.northerngrid.org/home.htm>

Shipley - [http://www.libspace.go-](http://www.libspace.go-legend.net/scoltest/index.htm)

[legend.net/scoltest/index.htm](http://www.libspace.go-legend.net/scoltest/index.htm)

Staffordshire Learning Net - <http://www.sln.org.uk/>

Teeside - <http://www.tvco.org.uk/>

### MLE's

JISC MLE Briefings and reports -

<http://www.jisc.ac.uk/mle/refs/infopack.html>

## Other Sources of Information continued

### On-line articles

WEA Article - <http://www.nw.wea.org.uk/comgrid.htm>  
TAG Article -  
<http://www.tagteacher.net/jackenny/jack5.htm>

### Suppliers

Blackboard - <http://www.blackboard.com/>  
First Class - <http://www.softarc.com/>  
Gossamer Threads - <http://www.gossamer-threads.com/>  
mkdoc - <http://mkdoc.com/>  
WebCT - <http://www.webct.com/>

### Case studies

CGfL Case Studies -  
<http://www.communityprogrammes.org.uk/cgfl/>  
Includes a review of Community Grids, CGfL as an Information Ecology and Brixton on-line as a CGfL.

This sheet can be accessed in full text on the Internet in a choice of formats:

standard HTML: <http://www.becta.org.uk/technology/infosheets/html/cgfl.html>

PDF: <http://www.becta.org.uk/technology/infosheets/pdf/cgfl.pdf>

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British Educational Communications and Technology Agency (Becta)  
Milburn Hill Road, Science Park, Coventry CV4 7JJ  
Tel: 024 7641 6994 Fax: 024 7641 1418  
Information Sheet E-mail: [infosheet@becta.org.uk](mailto:infosheet@becta.org.uk)  
E-mail: [Becta@becta.org.uk](mailto:Becta@becta.org.uk)  
URL: <http://www.becta.org.uk/>