

## **KM4Dev, communities of practice, engagement to enlightenment? An interview with Lucie Lamoureux**

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This interview with Lucie Lamoureux is concerned with her 9 years' experience as lead facilitator of the Knowledge Management for Development (KM4Dev) community of practice. In the interview, she discusses her background in knowledge management for development (KM4D), the history of the community and how it is developing. Its membership has grown considerably to 1200 at the end of 2010.

Lucie Lamoureux has been the lead facilitator of the KM4Dev community of practice for the past 9 years. In this interview, she comes back to the community and the ebb and flow of her engagement with it and the contribution of communities of practice to the ever changing, ever challenging world of KM4D.

### **Lucie, who are you? How did you end up on the avenue of knowledge management for development?**

I have a Masters in Library and Information Sciences and started off working as a reference librarian in specialized Documentation Centres (in media and human rights). I started working on 'electronic communications' - as it was called at the time - back in 1991. This gradually led me to using the internet to better collaborate with others in my work, which naturally took me to Bellanet in 1998. At Bellanet, our mission actually was 'better collaboration in the development community, especially using the internet.'

At Bellanet, we started to look at knowledge management (KM) back in 1999. It just made sense given that we were exploring better ways to collaborate. I believe it was after a meeting with KM people at the World Bank that our Bellanet Executive Director suggested that we organise a KM workshop in Washington, USA, then another one in Brighton, UK. I was involved in co-organising both events. The KM4Dev community was born following the second event so I naturally became involved in the community too. Steve Song was the community's first lead facilitator, though.

### **What do you think about the name, KM4Dev?**

In hindsight, 'Knowledge sharing for development' would have of course been more representative. But everyone was talking about KM back in 2000 and now we've got a 'brand',

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for lack of a better word. By the time knowledge sharing became the more appropriate terminology, it was too late to change it.

### **What is KM4Dev for you and what is the history of the community?**

KM4Dev is many things to me but first and foremost, it is a big support group! It's the co-workers you don't actually have in the office next door. They happen to be halfway around the world but you can (metaphorically) knock on their door and ask for their advice and they will answer almost as quickly as if they were on your doorstep. That's a very special thing for people who feel isolated either by distance or the type of work they are doing in an organisation.

As for the history of KM4Dev, there are roughly three phases. During 2000–2003, KM4Dev was in a start-up phase, with a lot of effort going into active facilitation, trying to get people to discuss. In early 2000, there were about 65 members, mostly working for multilateral and bilateral organisations, there were no non-governmental organisations (NGO) involved. In the second phase (2003–2008), the community came into its own to function as a whole, with more diversifying participants, from NGOs, from the South, growing from 350 members in 2003 to 450 in 2006 and hitting over 550 members in 2007. This phase also signalled the end of the IDRC/Bellanet funding era. In its third phase (2008 onwards), the community has undergone rapid expansion and growing pains: The community itself nearly doubled from about 650 at the start of 2008, to over 1200 by the end of 2010. The last three years have brought many more people from developing countries and also a lot more University students. At the same time, we have actively had to look for funding, which has put a lot of pressure on the volunteer Core Group. We were lucky to have money from the Swiss Development Cooperation (SDC, 2008–2009) and the Interchurch Organisation for Development Cooperation (ICCO, 2009–2010).

### **What are the implications of this growth on patterns of participation on the discussion group with the type of people and institutions represented?**

Until the end of the second phase, I think the participation rule worked out, with 10% of either active or really active members. In comparison, in recent months, I would say that there were probably 50–60 (less than 5%) people that tend to send messages quite regularly, including 5–6 members that were very active.

Right now we have a mix of members from donors and United Nations (UN) agencies, NGOs, consultants, academics, some private sector and lots of students. The implication of having lots of students can be that the 'older' and more experienced members get annoyed by questions that might seem very basic, or by the ubiquitous student survey. But any heterogeneous community has issues relating to the mix of members and experiences. The flip side is that it often also makes for rich discussions that you wouldn't necessarily have with people who are just like yourself.

### **What are the most memorable conversation threads on the discussion list, in your opinion?**

There have probably been over 4000 or 5000 threads since 2000 so this isn't an easy question to answer. This is a really personal thing but I always enjoy threads relating to culture and knowledge sharing. I find behavioural change issues fascinating because they are so revealing about how organisations function (or not) and how we act and cope within them.

I really liked the March 2010 thread on ‘Brown bag lunches’ which turned into an excellent thread on language, jargon and culture. There was also a really nice discussion on ‘Is it possible to actually measure knowledge sharing?’ last August<sup>1</sup>. I also enjoy any threads that have posts by Tony Pryor! I’m a big fan of his always clear and insightful messages and have told him so numerous times.

### **Tell us more about the facilitation and ‘management’ of KM4Dev, what happens behind the scenes?**

In the beginning, there was a lot of active facilitation both online and offline. By the former, I mean starting discussion threads, sending resources to the list, etc. And by the latter, I would call up people and ask them to post something, if I knew they were doing something interesting. It was a lot of unseen ‘leg work’. Then, where the discussions took off on their own, it became more of a behind the scene role, helping people out with technical issues, lost passwords, removing them from the list, etc. While working at Bellanet, I put in as much time as I could into facilitating the community, given that I had other projects which had specific deliverables. Then, when SDC and ICCO provided funding, it was roughly 1.5 days per week. Currently, for a community the size of KM4Dev, this only amounts to general administration and coordination, not much else.

This is why volunteering is both incredibly necessary (for people to feel truly engaged) and very limiting (if there is no money whatsoever and you are only relying on volunteers). The biggest strength AND weakness of KM4Dev is that it is informal/organic. On the one hand, it gives a lot of flexibility to act and people can join without any institutional affiliation. On the other hand, decision-making can be difficult and slow, and finding funds for an informal community is tricky, at best. Over the years we have had to adjust to the growing pains of a rapidly expanding community and so in 2011, we are experimenting with rotating volunteer facilitation and administration.

### **What about facilitation style? What’s Lucie’s trademark?**

If I look at my personal facilitation style for KM4Dev, perhaps I’m more of a ‘hands-off’ facilitator? I’d rather not be too visible. Someone once told me they liked the fact that I kept a close eye on discussions and that they knew I was there and that, if anything went wrong, I’d step in. So maybe I’m more of a guardian than a facilitator, at least in this phase of KM4Dev.

### **Which are the biggest online blunders?**

The classic mistake is hitting the reply button and responding to the entire list. Most people who do it actually know about the list ‘reply to all’ setting but forget this while trying to go fast. This has led to some embarrassing situations for those involved, especially when they respond to job adverts, or intend a private – and often somewhat – critical comment to the message sender... While it *is* embarrassing, I tell people not to worry too much over it. The initial moment is painful but people forget really quickly.

### **Looking back, what would you say have been the highs and lows of KM4Dev?**

I can only talk for myself. Personally, I think the 2008 Almada workshop was the high point. Everything fell into place; we had a wonderful group of people from all over the

world, great Open Space-type of discussions, a stunning location and lots of fun. I wish I could say that my high point was online but face-to-face is always so much more intense and meaningful.

And so it goes with the low point: for me it was the 2009 Brussels event. I was one of the organisers so I can be tough on myself! It was a very challenging meeting content-wise, to start. We were trying to bring in KM/KS via different development themes or sector and it didn't work for everyone. There were lots of newcomers and we didn't do a great job of integrating them. And there were many problems with logistics, which exacerbated the rest.

### **Any other KM4Dev events stand out for you?**

The Ottawa 2003<sup>2</sup> workshop, because it was the first one where we used an Open Space-type of approach. My colleague Allison Hewlitt and I had just done our Open Space training and we were really nervous but it went quite well, I think. The 2006 event in Brighton<sup>3</sup> was great too. It was completely organised by Carl Jackson and his colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), and they did a fantastic job on both workshop content and process. It was also the first KM4Dev 'performance', a rousing rendition of 'It's Raining Men'<sup>4</sup> with umbrellas on the occasion of Bev Trayner's birthday. We've had more song and dance performances at workshops since then!

### **How does KM4Dev fare compared with other communities of practice? Is it the new enlightenment and the source of programmatic innovation as Sebastiao Ferreira's article claims?**

A lot of people tell me that KM4Dev is a great example of a working community of practice. I think it's because it's a purely bottom-up, organic community. People join, stay if they feel it's worth their while and go if it isn't. No one is obliged to be part of it.

As for being the new enlightenment... I liked Sebastiao Ferreira's article (2009) very much and the parallel he makes with the industrial enlightenment movement, where its members acted as a bridge or enabler between the existing knowledge and the needs of innovators. In some ways, I do think that this is the case with KM4Dev members. But I don't think that I am as optimistic as Sebastiao in terms of the overall impact of KM4Dev on development programmes. KM4Dev member experiences are of course influencing development work and stimulating more innovative behaviours but I think that this is still very limited in terms of scope. As much as I would like to think that we, as members of KM4Dev, are making a big difference in the field of international development, I am constantly reminded that while we may be necessary change agents or enablers, we still have an awful lot of 'bridging' work to do before entire organisations change their ways of working.

### **What do you think is the role of communities of practice in the field of 'knowledge management for development'?**

They are absolutely necessary. Development work involves a whole group of actors, from different sectors, organisations, professions, etc. Horizontal learning and capacity building brought through communities of practice should be such a huge part of development but there are enormous challenges to maintaining them both internally and externally. Management should see them as essential but, so many years on, there is a lot of reticence

to accept them as a way of working. Organisational politics are fierce in our field, sadly, and communities of practice seem to be seen as either as accessory at best or threatening at worst.

### **Do you have any tips and tricks for people wishing to work with communities of practice?**

If you want to start a community, put lots of effort into planning around its purpose, it must be very clear. You need to work hard in the early days to facilitate and get it off the ground, and give it time: two to three years can seem like a long time but it really isn't in community-of-practice years!

If you want to sustain communities over time, involve a core group of devoted members or champions and engage them in the work. Continue to give tender love and care and if possible, hold face-to-face events; they provide a lot of the 'glue' to the community.

### **What are your plans for now? Are you retiring from KM4Dev?**

I am taking a bit of a break right now but I'm still doing KM4Dev support work every week. I may not be very vocal but I'm still there! KM4Dev will always be what I do (meaning, in my actual consultancy work) and its members are my colleagues and friends. I'll always belong to this community. But I am also very happy to let other people take the lead. It's been almost 10 years!

*Happy anniversary Lucie and thank you for the lovely interview!*

### **Notes**

1. This thread has been summarized to form a 'Community Note' in this issue of the journal.
2. [http://www.km4dev.org/notes/Ottawa\\_2003](http://www.km4dev.org/notes/Ottawa_2003)
3. [http://wiki.km4dev.org/wiki/index.php/KM4Dev\\_Workshop\\_-\\_Brighton\\_July\\_2006](http://wiki.km4dev.org/wiki/index.php/KM4Dev_Workshop_-_Brighton_July_2006)
4. <http://www.km4dev.org/video/bevs-birthday-present>

### **Notes on contributors**

Lucie Lamoureux is a knowledge sharing trainer, facilitator and coach at KM4D Associates. Her main work revolves around supporting organisations in the use of knowledge sharing approaches, helping them share experiences using different techniques and tools, as well as methods that promote team learning. She has been involved in the KM4Dev community since its inception in 2000 and as facilitator since 2002.

Ewen Le Borgne is programme officer at the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre where he works on knowledge management, communication and monitoring & learning activities across various projects in Francophone West Africa and Ethiopia. Ewen is member of the IKM Emergent project working group 3 on Management of Knowledge and senior editor of the *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*.

### **Reference**

- Ferreira, S.M., 2009, The new enlightenment: a potential objective for the KM4Dev community. *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*, 5(2), 94–107