Introducing Networked Learning with Human Resource Development Professionals Internationally

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Introduction

This paper offers an analytic and reflective discussion based on data from longitudinal action research in to the curriculum development of a postgraduate course for human resource development professionals. Earlier work discussed the introduction of email discussion into this distance learning programme to enhance dialogic learning (Edwards and Hammond, 1998). Course team discussion, staff development and further research with students arising from this study led to the design of a course intranet. The purpose of the intranet was to offer a forum for students world-wide to share information and perspectives related to their learning and their professional practice. The paper explores issues raised in the preparatory stages of this development, about the potential of networked learning, especially in relation to our aspirations to enhance collaboration between learners (McConnell, 1998). It discusses the value of discovering and acknowledging the different interpretations of learning networks and networked learning held by and shared amongst students from diverse cultures who were preparing to use this new technology for trans-cultural communication and learning.

Data was gathered through focus groups, recorded group work, questionnaires and some monitoring of email discussion usage and content. Students were based in UK, Ireland, and Singapore and included those working in Africa, Hong Kong, the Caribbean, and a number of European countries. At various stages the rationale for the research and curriculum developments was negotiated with participants and their co-operation solicited in identifying and responding to key questions and issues.

The paper begins with an overview of how developments unfolded over a three-year period. It required a considerable amount of time and tenacity to initiate and sustain technological innovation within an existing curriculum and mode of provision. Issues in the debate around collaborative versus individuated and competitive learning cultures are drawn out as the story of the case study unfolds. The paper suggests that new technologies can offer new opportunities for those aspiring to provide and model collaborative learning. But it also offers two particular notes of caution. The first is that the technology itself does not automatically engender collaboration, it 'merely' facilitates it, perhaps more quickly in some respects, where negotiated. And the second is that collaborative learning is itself a problematic and differentially understood and experienced concept which is worthy of deconstruction before being whole-heartedly and uncritically embraced. Issues around the preparation of international participants for trans-cultural communications and learning are also discussed.

Collaborative networked learning: aspirations and dilemmas

The concern to develop further collaborative networked learning opportunities for students on this programme came originally from students. They variously expressed interest in pursuing debates and intellectual argument further than seemed to be possible within the time constraints of the limited face to face learning phases of the course. Networked communication through, in the first instance, email discussion forums, appeared to offer a technology for this. But early attempts resulted in low levels of participation for a variety of reasons. These included issues of computer literacy, lack of easy access to email or a computer, and maybe above all, intellectual tentativeness and lack of general experience of

regular academic discourse. (Edwards and Hammond, 1998). Some students said they felt email discussion around serious academic themes would be easier for them than face to face debate because they could write at their own pace and would not be intimidated by more vocal class members. Others felt the opposite, that their partially developed ideas in text formed a permanent record of their intellectual insecurity and 'incompetence'. All agreed that the concept of collaboration was problematic both in its interpretation and in its implementation. And all expressed strong interest in networked learning becoming an integral part of course teaching and learning practice, despite problems experienced due to access and some scepticism regarding its putative learning potential.

In pursuit of a negotiated understanding of how we might use the technology to learn collaboratively, course tutors and students explored how we already used the terms network, networking, networked learning and learning networks. We asked each other to think about, draw, write about and then discuss how we 'saw' networks and how, if at all, we already used networks to help us to learn (as opposed to helping us to socialise or make useful professional and life contacts). We used Seed's (1990) framework of network features, network types and networked relationship qualities, drawn from social work, literature to refine and compare the emerging models. This exercise was conducted on three different occasions over two months in UK, Ireland and in Singapore. It enabled us to learn the similarities and differences in each others experiences, uses of language, models, to think more deeply about what contributed to our own learning and to hear and take account of a broadening perspective on the experiences of others. By also making transparent our views across the course team of twenty or so tutors we hoped to model an 'honest as possible' insight into the dilemmas and concerns that aspirations of collaborative learning entails. Above all we began to take much more detailed note of constraints and limitations in order to either overcome them or to accept that some limitations were inevitable and perhaps might even have some value. There was an argument, for instance, emerging about the role of competitive and individuated learning in all of this - that it inspired some kinds of useful learning in most of us some of the time and that this should not be hidden under some 'cosy' notion of collaboration as 'a good thing'.

In different ways participants talked about degrees of collaboration and non-collaboration in the public sector and business cultures they had to operate within in their professional lives. Their learning networks encompassed family, community, friendship groups, workplaces and the postgraduate course itself. A collaborative sense of community for some was significantly determined by the amount of time 'I have been in this place'. For others the sharing of professional or family identities was more significant. Yet others accepted the term community as belonging to more transitory and functional relationships even for brief moments in time.

In order to draw on our findings and make good use of them for the purposes of curriculum development we felt we had to come to terms with operant limitations arising out of the cultural habits, mores and shared meanings of the groups with whom we worked. These cultural habits and mores were deemed to have a deep influence on our interpretation of and engagement with any group learning processes designed to promote discourse and dialogue. Within the relatively short life-span of a student's engagement with a course, they may only partially adapt to co-operative modes of learning if their professional 'norms' are located in highly competitive business environments. They may also perceive our interpretation of collaboration as more aspirational than actual. Thus our 'systematically researched and documented' debate gave us 'data' from which we could then discuss the extent to which we wanted to and were able to develop our own course culture of negotiated collaboration whilst respectfully valuing the learning potential of apparently non-collaborative behaviours and approaches. If we had wanted to research even more deeply into informing cultural attributes another approach would have been to chart the influence of previous educational and

professional cultures which had contributed to each of our formation and self-concepts as learners.

Collaborating trans-culturally

Anecdotal experience by members of the course team, and in particular this author, of working with students from different national cultures on the same programme of study led to the desire to explore the extent to which students themselves felt national or regional cultural identity should also be taken into account in preparing for networked learning internationally. Each group was asked to note and then discuss whether they were aware that national/regional identity had any influence on their experiences and interpretations of networked learning and learning networks. We discussed both the dangers of internalised and externalised stereotyping and the dangers of being 'blind' to significant difference, if we were to attune our communications to and thus our learning from, one another. This was also done within a context in which theories of equal opportunities, anti-oppressive practice and trans-cultural communications already formed part of the existing curriculum.

The findings beg further development and further research beyond the scope of this paper or risk rather trivial interpretation. However, taken in the vein that the main purpose of the research questions was to raise awareness and stimulate debate, rather than to 'prove or disprove' anything about national or regional cultures I will tentatively share some of the ways in which insights were used to inform the next phase of developments.

Students in the UK and from the UK (notwithstanding some regional differences which I will not draw on here), talked about the limiting effects of a culture of individual self-reliance in pursuing more collaborative learning strategies. They talked about being overly formal, a need to overcome shyness, and 'be strong' drivers which made it difficult to ask for the help that collaboration implied. They wanted permission to share in such a way that they would not be deemed to be 'cheating', an issue which led us, for instance, to revisit definitions of plagiarism within this context. There was also a positive recognition that a culture of freedom of opinion lent itself well to engagement with critical academic debate.

Students in Ireland were aware that they were perceived as being a nation of social networkers and that this stereotype did have useful resonance in much of their experience. Phrases such as 'it's the only way you get anything done over here anyway, its what we do' were not contradicted within the group. But more subtle interpretations were also debated. One such was that 'we collaborate alright but only to a point, not so much as would give the person the advantage over you.' For those of us embedded in the culture of academia this did not seem such a foreign interpretation. We could identify fairly easily with this 'take' on collaboration.

Students in Singapore were from a variety of cultures and I share these results most tentatively of all as being Singaporean is a much more recent phenomenon than is the case with the other two 'national' groups. A quarter of the sample did not answer the question, the significance of which remains unexplained. Those who did talked about collaboration being very much a way of life in their communities and that they had difficulty in not collaborating over some aspect of academic life. Explored further this was held to mean that they did not feel comfortable challenging and arguing in public and thus felt disadvantaged in critical discourse. They needed explicit permission to challenge tutors in particular, and specific coaching in how to conduct a critical debate in public.

There were also people from all three groups who felt that cultural difference had very little bearing on how they used networks for learning. They felt either that their professional identities were already transnational and far more influential than their country of origin or

workplace. Or they claimed that their organisational culture was the predominant influence on collaborative learning behaviours and approaches.

The findings, being part of an action research process, were construed as contributions to our own learning and debate and are to be seen in that light, not as accurate or factual representations of people's perceptions, feelings or experiences. They gave us a means and an experience of sharing ideas and language which we could then build on in preparing students to take account of these many interpretations when they planned to use email discussion and the intranet in their future learning on the course. In particular, the work on cultural difference and stereotype was dealt with in the context of a critical debate about the nature and value of stereotypes and not left as a literal and unexplored areas of discourse. We then attempted to weave these many voices and ideas into how we developed and used all of our teaching and learning media, not just the electronic ones.

Conclusions

The research indicated to us that the three major national groups in the study shared very similar professional attributes at one level. But they also had some clear differences especially around their expressed interest in collaboration. These findings are discussed in relation to how they might influence the implementation and effectiveness of these and further networked learning developments.

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