

How Might Transformation Be Achieved?: Intrapreneurial Means to Achieve Networked Learning Ends

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Abstract

Networked Learning (NL) scholars aim to radically shift teaching and learning practices through digital innovation, in order to foster greater student empowerment, more holistic learning, and further connection between the university and society. However, implementing this vision is challenging due to the emergent and context-dependent nature of NL environments, as well as the inherent change resistance of postsecondary institutions. In response, NL scholars have advocated for adoption of approaches informed by design and speculative methods, while acknowledging further research is needed to put NL theories into practice.

This conceptual paper explores how the scholarship of intrapreneurship, entrepreneurship within an existing organization, could complement existing approaches to implementing NL initiatives. Intrapreneurship scholarship assumes that intrapreneurs will navigate resistance within complex organizational contexts so allocates attention to understanding forces of resistance and potential mitigation. Intrapreneurship theory differentiates between the logic of causation, which drives action that is goal-oriented and planned, and that of effectuation, which drives emergent and non-linear action, with effectuation being more effective in uncertain situations or for radical innovation. Five principles of effectuation are outlined: “bird in the hand” (start with what you have), affordable loss (risk only what you can lose at each stage), “lemonade” (leverage the unexpected), “crazy quilt” (let partners shape direction), and “pilot in the plane” (focus on controllable aspects).

Preliminary analysis suggests compatibility between effectuation theories of intrapreneurship and design-based and speculative methods, with all emphasizing exploratory, iterative action embedded in social and material contexts. Moreover, this paper finds that intrapreneurship theory has potential to contribute to advancement of NL initiatives through offering: (1) Insights into how change occurs within the entangled, social, political and material spaces of organizations; (2) Context-dependent knowledge on issues of relevance to those advancing NL initiatives, including research specifically focused on digital intrapreneurship and on intrapreneurship in public institutions; and (3) Affirmation of NL’s insights and approaches, since intrapreneurship scholarship arrive at similar conclusions from different empirical traditions. This is a preliminary, exploratory paper that concludes with potential directions for future research.

Keywords

Intrapreneurship; entrepreneurship; speculative methods; design methods; networked learning

Introduction

Networked learning (NL) scholars have long pointed to the ways in which digital innovation, and in particular the rise of the social web, holds the potential to radically shift teaching and learning practices in order to foster greater student empowerment, more holistic learning, and further connection between the university and society (Dron & Anderson, 2014; Lee & Bligh, 2023). One manifestation of this vision would be for the university to become a mode 3 or networked university, with porous boundaries enabling “a two-way, multidirectional and networked relationship between society and the university” (Matthews, 2023, p. 194). Such a university would “enter into dialogue and collaboration with the world through taking action in the form of thinking, doing and being beyond the course, study programme, or institution” (Nørgård & Hilli, 2022, p. 25).

Implementing a networked university vision is intrinsically challenging. NL environments are emergent, context-dependent, and constantly in flux, and their realisation therefore calls for swimming against the tide of a postsecondary climate “in which the value of evidence-based practice is enshrined in policy and in funding priorities, and where uncertainty and risk are often seen as unwelcome” (Ross, 2023, p. 49). Furthermore, postsecondary institutions are renowned for change resistance (Dron & Anderson, 2014). In response to these

challenges, NL scholars have advocated that those hoping to operationalize its more radical aspects adopt approaches informed by design-based and speculative methods (Goodyear et al., 2023; Ross, 2023).

This exploratory, conceptual paper investigates whether intrapreneurship scholarship, a field within the management literature that focuses on entrepreneurial behaviour within an existing organisation (Antoncic & Hisrich, 2003), might be a useful complement to the above-mentioned approaches. Like entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs are individuals who initiate divergent change and are active participants in its implementation (Pinchot, 1985). However, unlike entrepreneurs, intrapreneurs “face the unique challenge of having to justify divergence from taken-for-granted practices” (Battilana et al., 2009, p. 81), and intrapreneurial scholarship thus allocates attention to understanding forces of resistance and potential mitigation. Viewed through this lens, those advancing NL initiatives within their universities are intrapreneurs, who require expertise not only in designing innovative learning spaces but also in countering organizational forces that function to maintain the status quo.

This paper’s research emerges from the question, “What might be the contribution of intrapreneurship theories to the advancement of NL initiatives?” It responds to calls within the NL literature for further research into how to “put[ting] NL to work” (Lee & Bligh, 2023, p. 171) and to invite in new disciplinary perspectives (Goodyear, 2019). The paper begins by providing an overview of guiding intrapreneurship concepts, before discussing the ways in which they connect to approaches advanced by NL. It concludes by outlining three ways in which intrapreneurship scholarship could contribute to the NL project, as well as future research directions.

Intrapreneurship

The intrapreneurship literature distinguishes between the logic of causation, referring to the “traditional basis for making decisions, [which is] a goal-oriented approach that relies on analysis of the environment that creates reactive and planned behavior” (Brenk et al., 2019, p. 1103), and that of effectuation, referring to emergent and non-linear processes, in which the means at hand mould the opportunity (Brenk et al., 2019). While causal logic drives “first plan, then execute” strategies, effectual logic advises to “start with what you have, build as you go” (Sarasvathy, 2008). Causal and effectual strategies are always intermingled, but effectual strategies generally are more effective in situations of high uncertainty, substantial divergence from the status quo, or radical innovation (Brenk et al., 2019).

Theories of effectuation emerge from Sarasvathy’s (2001; 2008) seminal empirical scholarship on successful entrepreneurs and an extensive body of scholarship that has followed (Salajegheh et al., 2025). Theoretical findings have been made practical through distillation into five principles to guide action (Sarasvathy, 2008): (1) “Bird in the hand” (Start with what you have, including who you are, what you know, and who you know), (2) “Affordable loss” (Start small and build gradually, risking only what you can lose at each stage) (3) “Lemonade” (Turn unexpected events into opportunities) (4) “Crazy Quilt” (Negotiate with all willing to commit to help and allow each partner to shape direction) and (5) “Pilot in the plane” (Focus on what you can control, rather than trying to predict the future).

Intrapreneurship scholarship assumes the necessity of navigating resistance within an ever-shifting organizational context, so allocates attention to understanding organizational complexity (Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020). It eschews formulaic one-size-fits-all solutions but provides guidance in analysing one’s context and position and offers a varied menu of intrapreneurial strategies, for example, for recruiting and mobilizing allies, framing one’s message, connecting with external partners, mobilizing organizational resources, and using the organization’s political toolkit for implementation (Battilana, et al., 2009). It also offers guidance on key decisions, such as when to use causal vs. effectual logic and when and how to create a separate space, apart from status quo operations, for experimentation with new proposed directions (Brenk et al., 2019).

Intrapreneurship and Networked Learning

NL scholars tend to advocate for advancing initiatives via design-based and speculative methods, which suggest commitments to creative and exploratory *in situ* action, over a focus on analysis and prediction; to iterative learning through the creation of artefacts and prototypes with which others engage; and to embrasure of complexity and non-linearity (Goodyear, 2023; Matthews, 2023; Ross, 2023)

Even the above, very brief overview of design-based and speculative methods, points to compatibility with intrapreneurial theories of effectuation, which can be understood as an approach advocating for action in context and emphasizing “the emergence of novelty through continuous process of action taking by socialized actors (Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020, p. 2). Both design-based/speculative and effectual approaches commit to

exploratory iterative action, embedded in a social and material context. Both exist as counters to the prevailing logics in which they operate, with effectual intrapreneurs navigating institutions where the causal logic of prediction and planning tend to dominate, and faculty employing design-based and speculative methods responding to “linearity, fixity and the tendency of research to conceal the extent to which it is involved in creating the realities it uncovers” (Ross, 2023, p. 59). Effectual principles are evident in stories of NL initiatives. For example, in telling of the design of a NL module within a PhD program, Lee and Bligh (2023) demonstrate the “bird in the hand” principle when describing working within the constraints of “the design of the entire programme and the regulations of the university” (p. 184). Ross (2023) highlights the “lemonade” principle when discussing how, in advancing an NL initiative, glitches enabled “imaginative and speculative space” (p. 92) and in advising educational innovators “to be open to glitches: technical, human, temporal and otherwise. What one sets out to do is never the whole, or necessarily even the most interesting, story” (p. 92).

Given the foundational compatibility between NL and effectual intrapreneurship, in what ways might intrapreneurship contribute to the realisation of NL initiatives?

For one, intrapreneurship scholarship provides insights into how change occurs within the entangled, social, political and material spaces of organizations. Goodyear et al. (2023) advise educational innovators to avoid abstracted notions of “The University,” which allow sidestepping of complex questions of how innovation occurs when “real people” who do “real work” in “real workplaces” are called upon to change (p. 67). Relatedly, Ross (2023) has noted that “digital education research also needs ‘political teeth’” (p. 46). Intrapreneurship scholarship sharpens NL’s attention to politics by positioning power and institutional resistance at the centre of its analytical framework, offering a vast range of concrete tactics (Battilana et al., 2009; Brenk et al., 2019; Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020).

Two, intrapreneurship scholars have made generic process insights granular through researching how they manifest in different contexts. For example, a body of scholarship focused specifically on digital intrapreneurship yields insight into ways technologies take root and offers principles for digital prototype design (Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020). Intrapreneurship scholarship also points to the differences between organization types, noting, for example, that intrapreneurs in public institutions contend with “limited command over resources and the necessity to work within frameworks developed with the logic of systematic preplanning” (Vassilakopoulou & Grisot, 2020, p. 2).

Finally, where intrapreneurship and NL scholarship arrive at similar insights, the fact that these insights emerge from distinct empirical traditions strengthens substantiation. A significant strand of NL draws on design and speculative research, with a focus on testing and refining designed innovations from within a change agenda (Goodyear, 2019; Ross, 2023). Intrapreneurship scholarship draws on a complementary empirical tradition grounded in observing behaviour across many real-world ventures without a predetermined outcome shaping what was investigated (Sarasvathy, 2001).

Conclusion and Next Steps

Insights from intrapreneurship scholarship potentially can enhance the effectiveness of NL initiatives in higher education through offering guidance in navigating organizational complexity. This paper offers a brief overview and preliminary analysis of key concepts, for the purpose of assessing the fruitfulness of further exploration. Next steps would involve more detailed analysis of concepts from intrapreneurship and design-based and speculative methods, in order to further ascertain areas of compatibility—including in their epistemological and ontological foundations—and the precise contribution intrapreneurship theory might make to those advancing NL initiatives.

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