Traversing Situations and Contexts in Networked Learning: The Role of Situated Readiness in Business Education

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Abstract
To meet the goals of business education and develop responsible business leaders, educators need to design networked learning environments that nurture and leverage connections. This includes connecting students to each other, their teachers, to industry and to the community. This paper aims to understand factors that support or inhibit students' participation in networked learning in a business education context. Productive participation in learning networks is essential if students are to connect meaningfully with people and resources in ways that support their learning and experience. As the physical and digital learning environments students engage in often include complex configurations of tools, tasks, and epistemic resources, they require the skills and dispositions to effectively transition between these environments. Using a situated readiness framework by Hachmann and Dohn (2018), this study presents an analysis of focus group data from business students in higher education to identify ways in which students' level of readiness impacts on their ability to participate effectively in learning networks. Students in the present study highlighted a range of challenges they faced when attempting to traverse between face-to-face and online learning environments. However, our study also revealed numerous other situations or contexts that business students needed to traverse as part of their networked learning experience. These were grouped into five overarching categories: domain; space and configuration; format, structure and resources; people or groups; and purpose and responsibility. Overlayed onto the situated readiness framework, these categories can be used by other researchers to gain a more nuanced understanding of how students navigate the complexities of networked learning environments. Future research conducted across a range of learning contexts would allow the categories to be refined and built upon. The study also identified skills and dispositions that contributed to students' level of readiness to navigate situations and contexts within networked learning environments, and some preliminary design considerations based on the findings. To support business students in higher education on their journey to becoming responsible business leaders, it is imperative that they are able to participate productively in complex networked learning environments. As educators, this requires us to understand their level of readiness to do so and equip them with the skills and dispositions they need to participate effectively.

Keywords
Situated readiness; Participation; Networked learning; Business education

Introduction

In *Reimagining Business Education* (Carlile et al., 2016), three actions are noted as requiring greater attention from business schools: (1) enhancing the value of business education, for example by measuring students' contribution to organisations and communities; (2) ensuring real world relevance that reflect experiences in a 21st century global economy; and (3) offering technology-driven innovations and new learning formats that meet the needs of industry. The Chartered Association of Business Schools (CBAS, 2019) also recommend that business schools identify partners in learning and teaching such as corporates, other faculties and international schools. Further, Business Schools need to find effective ways to develop students' understanding of responsible and sustainable business practices in the process of embedding the Principles for Responsible Management Education and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (PRME, 2015). To meet these goals for business education, educators need to design networked learning opportunities that nurture and leverage connections. This includes connecting students to each other, their teachers, to industry and to the community (Wilson et al., 2021). Hence, students' capacity to participate productively in these networked learning environments is paramount.

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Building on the foundations of a roundtable discussion held at the Networked Learning conference in 2020, The Networked Learning Editorial Collective (NLEC) (2021) explored and offered a redefinition of networked learning: "[n]etworked learning involves processes of collaborative, co-operative and collective inquiry, knowledge-creation and knowledgeable action, underpinned by trusting relationships, motivated by a sense of shared challenge and enabled by convivial technologies". Convivial tools are described as those conducive to "creative use by networks of people" (p. 319). The definition captures the complexities of the social-material-digital world that students inhabit, and this complexity is amplified by the diversity of learners in higher education. As suggested by Boys (2022), this entanglement of practices is "enacted, adapted and contested across spaces and technologies as these interact with diverse learners, teachers, curricular and contexts" (p.13). Boys' research investigates how diverse learners "make sense of, survive in, and learn through educational spaces, as the continuous negotiation of its everyday activities and settings". Further, she suggests that it is the "mundanity of such activity that allows it to go unnoticed and unremarked upon" (p.14). In the present study, focus group data is used to reveal and better understand the challenges of diverse learners and their capacity to participate in, and contribute to, networked learning. To support networked learning, educators need to understand the factors that enable and inhibit students' ability to participate effectively.

Questions about participation come to the fore when we consider that one way of understanding networked learning is that the network is one of situations or contexts in which the learner takes part (Hachmann & Dohn, 2018). Not surprisingly, students in the present study highlighted a range of challenges they faced when attempting to traverse between face-to-face and online learning environments (that is, moving between being co-located with other students in the classroom and studying online and vice versa). However, students also discussed numerous other situations or contexts they had to traverse. It became evident that when traversing different environments within a network, there were certain factors that either inhibited or supported students' capacity to do so fluently. These factors have important implications when it comes to students' ability to participate productively in learning networks.

Therefore, in this study we investigate the following research questions:

1. What kinds of situations or contexts do students need to traverse in networked learning, and what is their level of readiness to do so effectively?
2. What are the skills and dispositions that support them in this process?
3. Which aspects of design contribute to supporting students as they navigate between different situations or contexts in networked learning?

In this paper we begin with an explanation of situated readiness, followed by a description of our context and methodological approach used to collect and analyse data. Our results are then presented with a series of examples from the data grouped according to the types of situations and contexts involved in the network. To finish, we discuss how approaches to design can contribute to the development of students' situated readiness to help them effectively traverse different situations or contexts in networked learning.

Situated readiness

Our students had to negotiate a complex networked learning environment where they participated in live online sessions while living in physically distant locations. This experience of being 'together apart' (Dohn et al., 2021) involved complex configurations of tools and epistemic resources. According to Hachmann and Dohn (2018), effective participation in a networked learning environment requires students to have a set of socio-epistemic skills and dispositions they call *situated readiness*. This "enables the learner to utilise, resituate and transform knowledge and ways of participating from known social contexts to new ones" (Hachmann & Dohn, 2018, p.102).

In our study we utilised the framework of situated readiness to analyse instances when students commented on the difficulties or issues they faced when navigating and participating in the network. Situated readiness relies on a student's 'disposition', which is a combination of ways of acting in certain situations that a person develops over time and their openness or willingness to engage. According to Hachmann and Dohn (2018), skills and dispositions are not separate entities, which means that a student should be able to do something and be willing to do it. They are also not fixed and are often adapted in use to fit the demands of the new situation. To aid in the analysis of the situational demands put on a student when traversing from one situation to another, or what

Hachmann and Dohn (2018) call 'requirement characteristics', the authors propose a five-level analytical framework consisting of the domain-internal level, activity-internal level, activity-framing level, activity-enabling structural level, and cultural-practices level. The framework allows the analysis of context from content domain level to broad society level.

Situated readiness at the *domain-internal level* requires the student to know the content and have the skills to perform specific actions, such as doing calculations in maths. On the *activity-internal level*, situated readiness requires dispositions to recognise the affordances and constraints of the activity. This then enables the student to transform and resituate patterns of participation from previous activities they engaged with. Situated readiness on the *activity-framing level* requires the student to notice sameness and differences between different settings. This helps students to develop a conceptual understanding of the two settings (Hachmann & Dohn, 2018). The *activity-enabling structures level* is concerned with societal structures that make an activity possible and therefore requires an understanding of rules, demands and standards associated with an activity. The *cultural-practices level* is concerned with the "cultural tools and ways of behaving prevalent across specific practices" and requires being able to anticipate the use of such tools and particular behaviours (p.105). The framework is used in this study to analyse what skills are needed to attune to the requirement of different situations and what can go wrong when a student fails to attain them.

Methods

Connected Learning at Scale (CLaS) is a large strategic educational project at The University of Sydney Business School designed to transform the student learning experience. The aim is to better connect students with each other, teachers, industry, the discipline and broader community in very large courses. To achieve this, the project focuses on embedding three key principles: information engagement, connected participation and active learning, and authentic assessment and feedforward (Wilson et al., 2021; Bryant, 2022). Evaluation is an integral component of the project to assess the impact of course developments on the student experience. Data is collected, based on approaches approved by [name of University] ethics, through a combination of student surveys, student focus groups, focus groups with teachers, and course coordinator interviews.

The present study draws on the student focus group data collected as part of the CLaSau project. Each focus group was conducted via Zoom and ran for between 1-1.5 hours. Audio recordings were downloaded and transcribed by an external transcription service. In total, the study draws on 14 focus groups from undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) courses. The focus groups were held between Semester 1, 2020 and Semester 2, 2022, when students were largely engaging with their study remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Table 1 provides a summary of the focus groups analysed in the study.

Table 1: Focus groups from which data was drawn for this study

Course	Context	No. of focus groups	No. of students across groups
Quantitative Business Analysis	UG first-year core, Bachelor of Commerce	3	20
Accounting, Business and Society	UG first-year core, Bachelor of Commerce	2	18
Foundation in Finance	PG foundation course, Master of Commerce	3	12
Foundation in Marketing	PG foundation course, Master of Commerce	2	11
Leading and Influencing in Business	PG first-year core, Master of Commerce	2	17
Introduction to Data Science	PG first-year course, Master of Commerce	1	10
Marketing Capstone	PG first-year course, Master of Commerce	1	4
Total		**14**	**92**

Analytical approach

During the period of data collection, most students were participating in online lectures and online tutorials, however in the courses conducted most recently (the last two courses in Table 1) both online and face-to-face workshop options were available. Lectures were delivered either asynchronously as online modules via the Learning Management System (Canvas), or synchronously on Zoom, and the online tutorials were delivered

synchronously on Zoom. Online modules were designed to be self-paced and included various active and interactive activities with opportunities for students to check their understanding though built-in feedback.

As part of a broader study that examined the kinds of networks students engaged with and how they conceptualised connection with other students, we conducted a preliminary analysis of the focus group transcripts. For the present study, we more closely examined the *situations or contexts* in which learners participated, and using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012), these situations or contexts were grouped into five overarching categories.

Dohn et al. (2018) suggest that connections between different situations or contexts can be drawn spontaneously by learners themselves with or without utilising ICT. While networks can support learning if ways of acting in one situation can be drawn upon in another, they can also be prohibitive if students do not have the appropriate skills or dispositions to traverse different contexts effectively. Therefore, the focus group data was also examined to understand what skills and dispositions were demonstrated or would be required for students to effectively traverse between situations or contexts, and which of the five levels of situated readiness were being described in their responses.

Findings

Hachmann and Dohn (2018) acknowledge that in the current "age of digitisation" we often need to transition between online and physical environments when participating in formal and informal social networks (p.102). Traversing contexts such as work, school, leisure activities and online social groups require "a complex configuration of participation, tools and action, and... requires skills and dispositions in order to involve oneself meaningfully" (p.102).

Our analysis of data revealed numerous situations or contexts that business students needed to traverse as part of their learning experience. These situations or contexts were grouped into five overarching categories: domain; space and configuration; format, structure and resources; people or groups; and purpose and responsibility. Figure 1 shows the levels of situated readiness (Dohn et al., 2018) that were identified across the five categories of situations or contexts identified in our data.

Figure 1: Levels of situated readiness identified across the five categories of situations or contexts identified in this study.

Our motivation for overlaying the levels of situated readiness with the five categories is to provide a more nuanced version of the framework for practical application by other scholars to help them consider relationships between the levels of readiness and different types of situations or contexts, and the impact of these contexts on how we might approach design for learning to effectively support the student experience. Examples of each of these different types of situations and contexts identified are presented below.

Domain

Examples of a shift in domain for students included moving from one disciplinary context to another, from one course context to another, and one business context to another. Not surprisingly, findings in this category can be described as relating to the domain-internal level, however readiness at the activity-internal and activity-framing levels were also relevant (see Figure 1).

In a Data Science course drawing on three disciplinary perspectives, one student commented, “I feel a bit disconnected – I think weeks one to seven [are] quite good for me... but week 8, 9 and 10 I can’t follow the content because I don’t have any data science background” (FG14). The student was referring to the Business Analytics component of the course which relied heavily on students’ skills in statistical methods and coding. Within a single course, the student experienced difficulties traversing between the different disciplinary contexts. When students were asked how well they felt the three disciplinary components were integrated in the course, one student commented that they found the videos of one of the lecturers (in Marketing) very effective because “he actually talks about the Marketing aspect of data science which I guess relates quite a lot to what I do at work. It also makes the entire [course] map more realistic and more understandable. I do wish that a lot of the other videos would come to ‘how do you use this in real life’... but I really like that it comes from different aspects of data science” (FG14). Therefore, connecting content to real life scenarios may help students to deepen their knowledge of the disciplinary content, and as a result, traverse more easily between the different disciplinary domains.

Students identified a number of factors that helped them traverse different course contexts. As one student highlighted, "when we were looking at social media marketing strategies, I had done a previous unit, which was called Social Media Marketing... a lot of what I’d learnt last semester was so useful... I had a better understanding of it only because I had done the previous unit” (FG13). This highlights the importance of the broader program design to support students in building on their prior knowledge and synthesising their learning when presented with a major capstone project, as in this case. This example illustrates that students need to have the relevant domain knowledge (at the domain-internal level), and to recognise sameness and differences between different settings (at the activity-framing level). Another student highlighted how transferrable methodologies helped support the shift between different parts of the course content: “Although it is quite different from the social media campaign... I think the methodology is transferrable, because everything is about research and brainstorm[ing]… so it is [a] transferrable methodology” (FG13). The requirement for students is that they need to be able to recognise how the methodology in one course can be applied in a different situation and course. This relates to the activity-framing level, as it requires the student to notice sameness and differences between different settings and helps them develop a conceptual understanding of the two settings and analyse the skills needed to attune to the requirement of novel situations (Hachmann & Dohn, 2018).

A further example of traversing between different domains was highlighted by a student who commented on the shift between applying their learning of marketing strategy to two different business contexts, that is, for-profit and not-for-profit organisations. One student commented on the value of having the opportunity to explore and engage with a series of mini case studies on marketing strategies implemented by not-for-profit organisations: “Because we never think about marketing strategy from the perspective of the non-profit organisation. So yeah, [the] pre-work before the class gave some good opportunity” (FG13). Another student explained that being able to see other students' responses to the case studies once they had posted their own responses in an online module allowed them to “see where you’re going wrong and if [you] were on the right track” (FG13). This example highlights the importance of feedback in enabling students to transition more easily between one business context and another and should be factored in when designing approaches that supports students in developing situated readiness.

Space and configuration

Examples of shifts in space and configuration included moving from inside to outside the classroom, and from small group activity to whole group activity across different spaces (e.g. between online breakout groups and ‘main room’ discussions). Findings revealed that situations and contexts in this category were associated with two levels of readiness: activity-internal and activity-framing (see Figure 1).

An example from the data includes a student’s description of how access to appropriate resources can impact on students’ ability to successfully traverse learning contexts inside and outside the classroom: “In the classroom it’s really, really good with the shared document... but once we go outside the classroom, it’s limited, like just

Canvas discussions, and I don't feel like that's effective creating a community environment as, say, something like Ed [an online discussion platform] would... it just better facilitates that sort of two-way communication between peers and also the facilitators of the course" (FG5). This comment draws attention to the fact that different tools may be more or less 'convivial' in terms of supporting networks in different contexts (such as inside and outside of class). To successfully participate, students require an understanding of the affordances of different tools and their suitability for communication and collaboration in different contexts at the activity-internal level, and they need to recognise the similarities and differences between settings (activity-framing level).

Another student described challenges associated with shifting between online breakout rooms and main rooms: "Just before we'd come back from the breakout rooms, they'd say, 'Make sure you have one person prepared to present on behalf of your group.' But if no one had their cameras on, or their microphones on, there was no discussion about it, so if I was the only one writing the question, I was the only one who knew the content enough to present it" (FG4). When students don't have the attention of their peers, there is no discussion and thus only the student who attempts to respond to the question is able to contribute to the larger class and there is limited learning for those who do not contribute. The comment highlights the difficulties students experience trying to draw on a network of situations or contexts. To more successfully traverse breakout rooms and 'main' rooms online, students need to develop effective communication and collaboration skills in the online environment (and build their confidence in online communication). They also need to understand the importance of visibility (being able to be seen and heard) when learning online and the purpose of sharing ideas back to the main group to contribute to a community of learners.

Format, structure and resources

Examples of a shift in format, structure and resources in the data often related to shifts in online and face-to-face learning environments. These included shifts from: online classes to groupwork where students were physically co-located; online modules to individual assessment tasks; online modules to an (online or face-to-face) workshop environment; and online modules to exams. Further, students noted having to traverse formative and summative contexts (such as from informal quizzes to structured exams). More broadly, students described challenges associated with traversing structured and non-structured contexts, for example, from highly scaffolded tasks in an online module to highly self-directed projects involving research and inquiry. Findings revealed that situations and contexts in this category were associated with three levels of readiness: activity-internal, activity-framing and activity enabling (see Figure 1).

One student highlighted their concerns about moving from formative quizzes to summative exams due to a misalignment between the level of difficulty between them. This made it difficult for them to move into the exam environment: "I feel [the quizzes] are very helpful... however I've heard... about the final exam it's very different from the quizzes so I'm really concerned...I've heard the exam is very maths heavy, another level of difficulty" (FG13). While students noted that moving from one situation to the other was motivated by doing well in the summative exam, they highlighted the misalignment as causing considerable stress. From a design perspective, alignment is key to supporting students in traversing these different formats that have different impacts on student success. Students here recognised sameness and difference between the assessment contexts and were calling for a smoother transition between these contexts (an increase in sameness) to support their learning.

One student described the difficulties they faced in moving between highly structured learning activities in the online environment to very 'open' exploratory tasks. They noted, there was a "huge amount of data, also different categories... and different metrics, and I have to go through a lot of reading that's not provided to understand the context of the data... maybe about two days after then I really understand...but before that after reading the supplied material I had no idea" (FG14). While some students found this transition between different levels of structural support extremely challenging, others recognised the inherent uncertainty in the methods being learnt and the value of the self-directed learning involved in exploring and analysing data. They noted that the particular data analysis method under study required "an open mind..." (FG14). Similarly, another student commented that the assignment "depends on my own judgement... so I need to build the whole knowledge to find how to solve each of the questions and coding... for me [it was one of the] the eureka moments..." (FG14). These students recognised the value of exploratory and self-directed learning (and hence the affordances and constraints of the different activities at the activity-internal level), while other students felt they didn't have the

prior knowledge (in coding using Python) to feel comfortable with self-directed learning and found traversing between highly scaffolded and exploratory contexts very challenging.

People or groups

Examples of a shift in context involving different people or groups included moving between different workshops with different teachers in the same course and moving between different social and cultural groups. Findings revealed that situations and contexts in this category were associated with three levels of readiness: activity-internal, activity-framing and cultural-practices (see Figure 1).

One student commented: "At least for the past few weeks I've had the chance to do an online class [in addition to the student's weekly face to face class]... the tutor was a different person... surprisingly the tutor, though online, was able to make it a bit more interactive... as opposed to the face-to-face tutorial where I just couldn't get the same...[interaction with peers]" (FG14). The lack of consistency in approach between workshop contexts, particularly in relation to the differences in the tutors' focus on facilitating interaction, made it difficult for the student to shift back to the face-to-face tutorial and participate productively. The student emphasised the importance of the interactive opportunities with peers and suggested that reducing the content in workshops would allow more time for this interaction. To traverse successfully in this example, students need to be able to recognise the affordances and constraints of a particular learning environment and the way it is facilitated (activity-internal level) and recognise sameness or difference between contexts (activity-framing level). However, the success of them being able to participate in these different learning contexts relies on effective professional development for teachers as well as learning design to ensure consistency in peer learning opportunities.

Several students discussed participating in groups with both domestic and international students. For example, one student commented on the importance of being able to connect with and participate in groups with students from the same cultural background: "Now our Chinese students we would like to search for our colleagues on the same course... we can form a small group and talk to each other to share... findings and questions... not just the knowledge in the course but our daily life..." (FG14). Students need the skills to move between these social and study groups to assessment groups in the classroom that may be more diverse in terms of students' cultural backgrounds. Another student stated, "[in one of my courses] they ask if anyone want to form a study group on the app... they post their information in the app if anyone wants to join them..." (FG14). This highlights the importance of having access to tools that are suitable for connecting students in different ways and for different purposes.

Purpose and responsibility

Examples of a shift in context associated with different purpose and responsibilities include moving between environments where engagement is underpinned by a different set of objectives and motivations. Predominately this included shifts between university and workplace contexts. Findings revealed that situations and contexts in this category were associated with one level of readiness: activity-framing (see Figure 1).

As stated by one student, "For some of my group members they are working at the same time so maybe they're a bit too busy so they cannot just connect with us... on time I think... We can only have meetings through some apps like WeChat. And I feel like I'm studying just on my own" (FG7). The tension between work commitments of some students and engagement in group tasks at university was seen as inhibiting their participation in the learning network. The skills and dispositions required to accommodate group members with competing commitments include flexibility, adaptability, time management and the skills to engage effectively in asynchronous communication. Students had a conceptual understanding of the two different contexts (at the activity-framing level) and could traverse between them, but they recognised that their engagement in these, sometimes incongruent activities, impacted on the time they could devote to connecting with peers.

In conclusion: Skills and design considerations to support participation in learning networks

The study's findings revealed five categories or 'types' of situations or contexts that business students needed to traverse. These types were related to domain; space and configuration; format, structure and resources; people or groups; and purpose and responsibility. As shown in Figure 1, all of these types of contexts were found to be

connected to the activity framing level, which requires students to notice sameness and differences between different settings. This points to the importance of students being able to develop a conceptual understanding of the two settings they are moving between (Hachmann & Dohn, 2018). The activity-internal level was found across all but one type of context (purpose and responsibility). The data suggested that being able to recognise the affordances and constraints of an activity helped students to transform and resituate patterns of participation from previous activities they had engaged with.

The remaining levels were found in only one type of situation or context. Not surprisingly, a knowledge of the domain (the domain-level) enabled students to traverse more effectively between different contexts within the domain such as between courses or activities resulted to different business contexts. The activity-enabling level was found in situations related to format, structure and resources. This level is concerned with societal structures that make an activity possible and therefore requires an understanding of rules, demands and standards associated with an activity. The cultural-practices level, which is concerned with the cultural tools and ways of behaving common across specific practices was found in contexts related to people and groups.
The data revealed a range of skills and dispositions that are needed for students to attune to the requirements of different situations. These included: being able to recognise when a previously learnt methodology can be used in a new context; recognising the suitability of different tools for communication and collaboration in different contexts; effective communication and collaboration skills in the synchronous and asynchronous environment; the confidence to be visibly present in the online environment; the capacity to cope with uncertainty in more exploratory tasks; and skills for connecting with and participating in culturally diverse groups. Flexibility, time management and adaptability also surfaced as important skills to allow students to move more fluently between contexts.

The analysis of data using the situated readiness framework also helped to reveal some potential design principles to support students in navigating networked learning environments. These included: connecting content to real life scenarios; designing for alignment between the course and broader program (including providing opportunities for students to apply multiple contexts); providing students with access to the perspectives of their peers (as a form of feedback); ensuring students understand the purpose the tasks they are expected to engage in; strengthening alignment between what is taught and assessed; providing consistency in peer learning opportunities across learning contexts; and offering additional scaffolding where needed to help students traverse between highly structured tasks and more exploratory contexts.

As noted in the introduction to this paper, one way of understanding networked learning is to view the network as one of situations or contexts in which the learner takes part (Hachmann & Dohn, 2018). In this study, we used the situated readiness framework to examine factors that inhibited or supported students' capacity to move fluently between contexts. Our study extends the framework by identifying 'types' of situations or contexts that students may need to travers in networked learning environments. Future research is needed to build on and refine these types. The study also identified skills and dispositions that contributed to students' level of readiness to navigate situations and contexts within networked learning environments, and some preliminary design considerations based on our findings.

To support business students in higher education on their journey to becoming responsible business leaders, it is imperative that they are able to participate productively in complex networked learning environments. As educators, this requires us to understand their level of readiness to do so and equip them with the skills and dispositions they need to participate effectively.

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