Building capacity through networking: Lurkers, Seekers, Leaders

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Abstract

Networks are an ally for higher educators: providing them an avenue to connect beyond the boundaries of space, time, and institutional hierarchy, to build professional capacity. This paper reports on an ethics approved mixed methods study on the value of networking to develop capacity for teaching with technologies. Data were collected via the means of anonymous online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. There were 218 valid questionnaire responses and 31 interviews with participants from 23 countries worldwide. The value creation framework by Wenger, Trayner and deLaat (2011) was the main reference concept for data collection, analysis and reporting. The findings show that higher educators create value in networks to build capacity to teach with technologies by taking the role of Lurker, Seeker or Leader.

Keywords

Capacity building, informal learning, higher education, professional development, online teaching

Introduction

Networks are an ally for higher educators: providing them an avenue to connect beyond the boundaries of space, time, and institutional hierarchy, to develop professionally (Littlejohn et al., 2019). Recently, using the hashtag pivotonline, educators from across the globe were able solve technical problems, gain knowledge, skills, and more importantly, build the camaraderie to adapt and take risks to teach with technologies. Such capacity building potential of networks has been researched from multiple perspectives (de Laat & Dohn, 2019) prior to the proliferation of #pivotonline in 2020.

This paper reports on an ethics approved mixed methods study which began with the premise that there is value in networking to develop capacity for teaching with technologies. What type of connections educators formed, how and why, were essential components of data collected via the means of anonymous online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. There were 218 valid questionnaire responses and 31 interviews with participants from 23 countries across the globe.

The value creation framework (Wenger et al., 2011) was the main reference concept for data collection, analysis and reporting. According to Wenger et al. (2011, p. 18-21), value is created in networks in cycles. Immediate value is what people experience through activities and interactions in the network. Potential value is knowledge capital that people accumulate in the network – including personal/collective assets, relationships, resources and a transformed ability to learn. Applied, realised and reframed values are concerned with how networked experiences influence people's practice to redefine success from the stakeholder perspective. For this study, an adaptation of Cycle 2 of the Wenger et al. (2011) framework – concerned with knowledge capital – was used to determine individual capacity development.

To build capacity via value creation in networks, educators can **actively** build a relationship with connections for on-going interaction, exchange, and long-term value or just **passively** access and benefit from the collective wisdom of the network. In networking literature, the active and passive roles are described as 'poster' and 'lurker' respectively (Zhu & Dawson, 2023). The networking experiences shared by participants in this study were more complex than could be described simply using the dichotomy of 'poster' and 'lurker. Instead, their roles could be grouped into three main archetypes – Lurker, Seeker, Leader, with aspects of poster behaviour(s) manifest in Seeker and Leader roles.

The archetypes

Lurkers are passive agents who "much rather be behind the scenes" (Interview #1). These educators are still in the process of developing the confidence to fully and actively engage in a network. As such, they are mostly drawn to external connections and online networks where "there's no judgment" (Interview #30) but

opportunity to remain passive or in the background of the interactions happening within the network. As observers, Lurkers do not always make connections directly with others, but they get to know the good practice of experts in the field via resources such as newsletters and emailing lists. Lurkers begin their networking journey with the agenda of observation rather than action. In some cases, they wait to "get to a certain stage in [their] career" before being "confident enough to build a network" (Interview #19). However, over time, Lurkers can gain enough confidence, and with the right motivation, become active participants in networks. They can benefit from more structured and supported networks e.g., a community of practice that is aligned with the values of the institution and offers more of a scaffolded experience. For them, the right **context** to obtain value from connections or networks is paramount.

Seekers are active agents who are sure of what they want from any network while also being aware of its limitations. They prefer "conversations with people who have a foot in the door of expertise in technology" but recognise that even then they might "get a very limited slice of their time, and it would not … have any meaningful impact" on their own ability to teach with technologies. They "need to then go away and do a lot of work" (Interview #31). Seekers actively seek solutions to their problems, look for new ideas and critical engagement with like-minded people. They reach for connections far and wide, without getting bogged down in the workings of (institutional) hierarchy. For the Seeker, networks are "relational, so when you're affiliated with somebody and you develop a relationship with them, you're more inclined to trust their expertise" (Interview #31). Seekers are self-directed and practice-driven, with an agenda to "have the conversation, go away and do" (Interview #28). Seekers seldom have a sole focus on the immediate value, but rather on long-term "personal development" (Interview #26). Having the space and time to connect, means Seekers can "play the role of a critic in a network … give people feedback but also ask critical questions" (Interview #27). The Seeker role primes an educator to become a Leader in their network, be it formal or just to learn, do or share one thing. Seekers can benefit from professional affiliations where they can connect with reputable and credible experts in their field. For them, the **opportunity** to connect and create short or long-term value is paramount.

Leaders are change agents who are focused on applied, long-term value from networks. The degree to which they realise the value created in networks to effect change, depends on the context within which they work. Change in institutions most certainly hinges on the enablers and constraints within. Leaders' formal role in their institution, which is often connected to the stage at which they are in their career, strongly impacts whether they are driven by service and/or ambition. The Leader role in a network, however, does not depend on factors like the formal role or years of experience. Networks can, and do, provide an avenue for educators to hone their leadership skills and capabilities. Collegial connections in a network counter the very "individualised nature of work, both in the disciplinary sense and in the classroom practice sense" (Interview #15). For service-oriented Leaders, reciprocal connections are key. They engage more with people in close proximity, so their contribution is time efficient and effective. A Leader in service, a mentor, can be a critical influence in the success of others because "people aren't willing to try new things if they are on their own" (Interview #16). Leaders can have personal ambition and by virtue of it, an interest in building a reputation. Be it for service, ambition or a combination of both, Leaders recognise that "reputation is really important … to disseminate knowledge" (Interview #12). Leaders just "get on and do stuff" for which they are "very privileged to be recognised for" (Interview #14). So, **incentives** to create value for self or for others is paramount for a Leader.

Discussion

None of these archetypes were typical of educators at a certain stage in their career as shown in the visualisation (Fig 1). In fact, educators who had a long history of teaching and researching in higher education (maximum of 42 years among interviewees) could still prefer to engage passively in networks while newcomers could take full advantage of the liberal nature of networks and begin to build a rapport with local and international colleagues to then influence or lead change. Personal growth and reputation were likely to result from such experiences, albeit dependent on the intention and the confidence of the networker. What was noticeable though, was the predominance of the Seeker and Leader roles among experienced educators. This could also likely be linked to their developing confidence in network participation because short-term value creation was the precursor to any long-term value creation, hence aligning well with the transition from being passive, to active, to change agents.
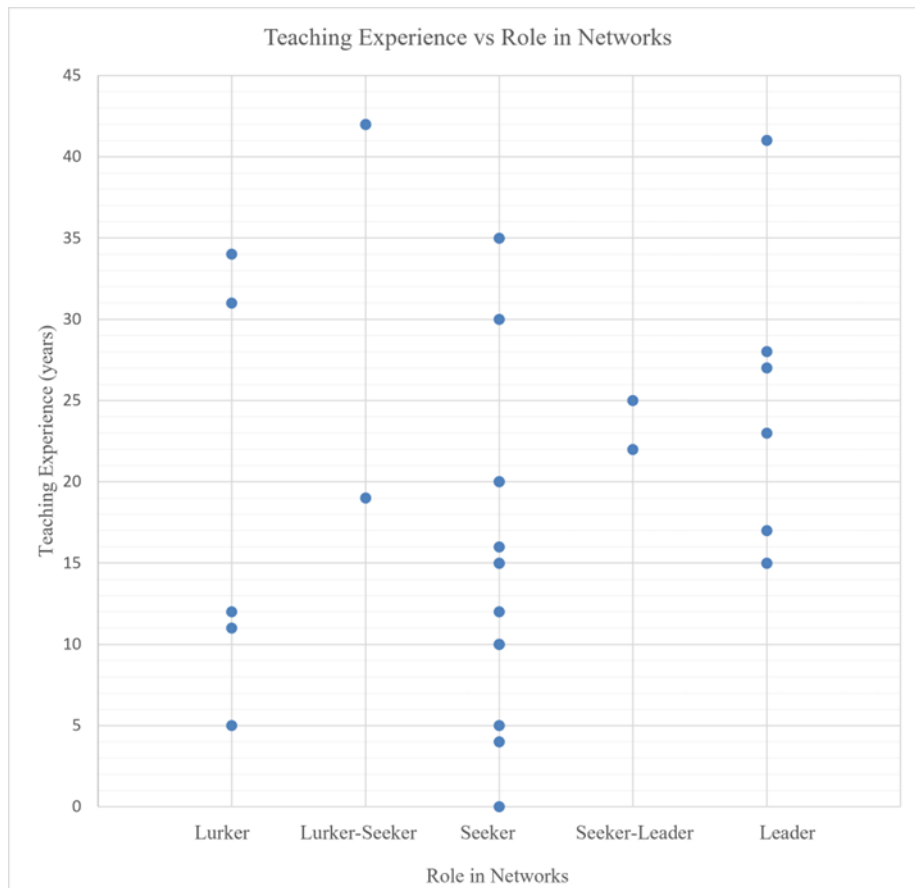
Figure 1: Teaching experience and role in networks

The Lurker, Seeker, Leader archetypes are unique but not mutually exclusive. Within the context of this study, the three archetypes offer an insight into value creation in networks for building capacity to teach with technologies. However, the Lurker, Seeker, Leader archetypes can also be used to describe experiences in networks of other persuasions, because it is "largely through their personal networks that people participate in broader social networks" (Wenger et al., 2011, p.16) so the individual perspective is important in formulating the collective or social networking narrative. The individual's intention, action and experience in a network is crucial to understanding value creation in networks at large.

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