

Using the lens of liminality to understand important steps in creating conditions for networked learning in work-integrated learning

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Abstract

In this paper university teachers' and professionals' work in the BUFFL project, a networked work-integrated lifelong learning project with flexible online course modules. The project involved a meeting space between academia and industry bank organizations or insurance companies in Sweden. Previous research in the project reported that four important steps are important for a successful establishment of a networked community of practice and networked learning. In this paper, the concept of liminality, or a liminal space, is used to explore work-integrated learning. The short paper concludes that there is a balance to strike between the risks and possibilities of liminality in learning in practice. From the different perspectives of liminality, a balance is needed when academia and industry meet. While both academia and industry bring their formal spaces and structures, this meeting can be said to create a liminal space that provides a free and uncertain place of possibilities where learning and transformation take place.

Keywords

Communities of practice, liminality, liminal spaces, networked learning, work-place learning,

Introduction

Learning often takes place in informal and incidental places. However, learning in such places is not very well understood in existing research (Johan et al., 2019). The concept of liminality has been found useful to understand challenging situations in teaching and learning (see for example Jepson Wigg & Ehrlin, 2021). In many ways, an employee is as new to the teaching environment as for example a newly arrived student, even though they also differ in some respect. n employee is not only an individual who works, but also an individual who learns in the work place. In the workplace, professionals today meet continuous changes and digital embedded work conditions as well as the professional competence needed for handling complex business relations and tasks (Vithayaporn, 2021). Within the academic discussion concerning networked learning (NLEC, 2021), the concept is in this paper defined as the learning activities, which connect university teachers with a learning community (Goodyear et al., 2004) and the teachers who take part in this networked learning community (Ryberg & Sinclair, 2016). This paper reports university teachers' and professionals' work in bank organizations or insurance companies experiences in an online project called BUFFL. The project combines networked work-integrated learning and academic learning, in linking academia and industry in Sweden. The aim of BUFFL offer collaborative, flexible, lifelong learning activities to course participants continuous professional development at work.

In previous research in the BUFFL project four important steps were seen for creating beneficial conditions for networked learning in a project in organisations were reported (Håkansson Lindqvist, et al., 2020). Based on a combination of a literature review, and on authors' experiences of earlier networked professional learning initiatives four important steps were identified: creating a common virtual space, the handshake, the initial support and the mentorship. It is concluded that all the four described steps are important for a successful

establishment of a networked community of practice (Wenger, 1998). While these steps appear to provide beneficial conditions for networked learning, they can also be said to create new possibilities for learning when academia meet the industry.

Van Gennep (1960) has discussed liminality as a form of passage, in which persons can be transformed and pass through one stage to another more uncertain stage, becoming accepted into new communities. Thus, a liminal space can be regarded to be a source of possibilities and a space for new learning. If transformation does not happen, persons may often fail to learn and to change. In this regard, very rigid structures for learning can become a problem (Bamber et al., 2017). Liminality has also been discussed as a form of danger, in which those learning can be "cast adrift" from social convention and become stuck in doubt (Horvath & Szakolczai, 2018). Cousins (2006) introduces "the idea that learners enter into a liminal state in their attempts to grasp certain concepts in their subjects presents a powerful way of remembering that learning is both affective and cognitive and that it involves identity shifts which can entail troublesome, unsafe journeys" (s. 4-5). Overall the concept of liminality can be understood as supporting the importance of the combination of different skills, the non-linearity and uncertainty of learning, learning as ritual to be accepted into a new community and liminality as a form of danger. The aim of this short paper is to explore these four identified steps for supporting networked learning using the concept of liminality.

Aims and Objectives

The aim of this short paper is to highlight the four steps identified in the BUFFL project as important for a successful establishment a networked community of practice. The research question posed is: How can these steps be understood using the concept of liminality?

Liminality in four steps of importance for implementing work-integrated learning

Four important steps were identified: creating a common virtual space, the handshake, the initial support and the mentorship (Håkansson Lindqvist, et al., 2020). It is concluded that all the four described steps are important for a successful establishment of a networked community of practice and can all be seen as liminal spaces.

The first liminal space was to create a common workplace to support networked learning in a virtual space. The teachers in the project prepared for the upstart of their courses together with university teachers as mentors. The course modules were developed in the university's virtual learning environment (VLE) with university technical support. Challenges were seen in creating new course modules, registering participants who were not students and administrators who had a lack of understanding of the overall project design and the need for flexible routines for connecting teachers and participants to the VLE.

Entry into the second liminal space the initial handshake is important. Failure in this liminal space may result in low motivation and a high dropout rate among first time adult online learners, and is therefore an important issue for teachers. For networked learning to take place, the first contact with technology supported education and VLEs as well as accessing the learning content. The handshake can alleviate frustration in dealing with both pedagogical and technical aspects in order to support networked learning. In the BUFFL project, the importance of the initial handshake was established through early in-person or virtual joint sessions to establish contacts and collaboration. In this liminal space, teachers and students for joint support.

Many of the teachers in the teacher community were new to technology-supported activities. Entering this third liminal space, initial support was very important. In the BUFFL project technical training and support for the VLE was offered the video conferencing tool Zoom through realistic training sessions carried out as Zoom sessions. Furthermore, two members of the support group arranged a face-to-face workshop with hands-on activities at one of the other participant universities for project participants without earlier experience of tools for technology enhanced learning. Initial support in the BUFFL project beyond straightforward technical instructions also involved pedagogical support, technical instructions, study guides, and examples of online assessment. Although all teachers had previous pedagogical knowledge, teaching with the help of digital technologies requires a modified instructional design and knowledge in the construction of online assignments, which differ from online assignments.

The fourth liminal space regards mentorship. The work in creating beneficial conditions for networked learning within the project group was seen as a community of practice on three levels. On the first level, creating

conditions for networked learning among mentors is important to exchange, evaluate and develop the work in mentorship to support the teachers in the organizations. Secondly, how mentors through their mentorship support conditions for networked learning for teachers working on the courses as a community of practice was also vital. On the third level, creating conditions for networked learning is also created for both mentors and teachers to share and exchange experiences and development work in the intersection between mentorship and teaching.

Discussion

The aim of this short paper was to highlight the four steps identified in the BUFFL project as important for a successful establishment a networked community of practice. The research question posed was to explore how these steps could be understood using the concept of liminality.

In regard to the importance of the combination of different skills appears to be of importance for work-integrated learning in the BUFFL project. All four steps identified in the process note the combination of different skills to succeed in a new liminal space (Van Gennep, 1960). One particular challenge discussed in existing educational research is dealing with participants who have other social spaces apart from the learning setting where they also learn (Jepson Wigg & Ehrlin, 2021). In creating a common virtual space mentors and teachers come together to exchange and combine skills in order to co-create the VLE. The handshake combines the combination administrative, pedagogical and skills, which in turn creates the condition for the pedagogical and technical support provided in the initial support. Lastly, the networked learning in the community of practice seen in the combination of fills and knowledge in the mentorship between mentors, teachers and teachers and mentors creating a new space for exchanging experiences and learning.

The challenges seen in the four steps can also be seen as representation of the non-linearity and uncertainty of learning as a troublesome journey (Cousin, 2006), when university teachers meet teachers in workplace learning, uncertainties arise. Challenges seen in university routines and structures are not always easy to manage. In all of the steps, non-linearity exists between the steps as well as within steps. One such example was seen when university administrative staff were forced to meet course participants who are not regular students or where other technical structures were needed, as well as there being an imbalance between VLEs and other technical platforms. However, these spaces of non-linearity and uncertainty also provide possibilities for mentors and teachers to mirror their own administrative, technical and pedagogical processes and routines and to learn in this liminal space.

In regard to learning as ritual to be accepted into a new community, the identified steps were seen as important in creating a new community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Although all of the steps can be said to represent learning as a ritual in a new liminal space in which academia and industry are combined, this is perhaps seen most strongly in the fourth step of mentorship. Here a liminal space can be seen in the creation of a community of practice, which supports networked learning. Here, it is important to acknowledge the formal structures, which meet in a new liminal space (Bamber, et al., 2017).

Finally, liminality may be seen as involving a form of danger (Horvath & Szokolczai, 2018). Here, learners can be "cast adrift" from social conventions and become stuck in doubt or uncertain. This is a challenge, but also a possibility in all four of the identified steps. If teachers are not able to create a common virtual learning space, there is a strong risk that the learning space is not co-created and networked learning is not supported. In the handshake and initial support combine administrative, pedagogical and skills, which in turn creates the condition for the pedagogical and technical support provided in the initial support. If the support offered is not sufficient there is a danger that teachers lose motivation and participants do not take part in courses. Lastly, the networked learning in the community of practice seen in the combination of skills and knowledge in the mentorship between mentors, teachers and teachers and mentors. If this work is not supported the possibilities which the liminal space provides may not be achieved.

Conclusions and lessons learnt

Different perspectives of liminality appear to be fruitful in exploring and understanding the support needed to attain learning in a liminal space, when studying the four important steps for supporting networked learning in work-integrated learning in the BUFFL project. These liminal spaces provide opportunities when new skills and knowledge are combined and created. From the different perspectives of liminality, a lesson learnt is that a balance is needed when academia and industry meet. While both parts bring their formal spaces and structures,

this meeting can be said to create a liminal space that may provide a free and uncertain place of possibilities where learning and transformation take place.

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