Networked Learning: Classroom Experiences at AUT

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Abstract

This short paper describes a proposed case study which aims at exploring to what extent Networked Learning enhances classroom experiences at the authors' institution and how the authors' institution could adopt networked learning in producing Great Graduates, the authors' institution mission. The case study is significant with the re-definition of Networked Learning within an institutional context. The study employs an interpretivist research approach (Erickson, 1998) with a combination of direct observation and interview-like methods to understand the experiences of students and teaching academics in on-campus Networked Learning situations among all 15 study options at the authors' institution. Participants will include volunteered students and academics from various disciplines. The literature review indicates that the adoption of Networked Learning in classroom boosts students' self-efficacy for social networking and professional development, enhances student-centred experiences with a community focus (e.g., social presence) and provides opportunities for students to further develop their critical thinking. The changing landscape of higher education, especially in this post global pandemic era, warrants the development of a case study approach within a particular context in order to further investigate the adoption of Networked Learning in enhancing teaching and learning processes. The findings will gain insights into achieving the strategic goal of student-directed learning at the authors' institution and could be applicable to higher education in general in order to improve teaching and learning experiences further. In short, it is an iterative process of developing one's own Networked Learning application through the affordance of the Networked Learning principles and the practical accomplishment of teaching and learning practices at the course as well as the programme level. Limitations and possible future study are being identified from this proposal.

Keywords

Case Study, Higher Education, Networked Learning, Student Experiences, Teaching and Learning

Context

The notion of Networked Learning in education has existed for years and the word 'Networked' denotes the idea of 'digitally mediated'. However, Networked Learning moves beyond false dichotomies, which describe digital and physical spaces as somehow 'opposite'. There is certainly a large overlap in having both spaces intertwined into the notion of teaching and learning but Networked Learning allows more 'complexity' when it is being adopted in the process of teaching and learning. The classroom experiences that adopt Networked Learning are not a single theoretical unity nor a particular pedagogical standpoint (Lee, 2018). In fact, Networked Learning in this context is an open and diverse conceptual idea that is highly critical, where "learning should be designed in such a way as to increase learner agency, drawing on and nurturing learners' motivation to learn" (Blaschke, Bozkurt & Cormier, 2021). In other words, Networked Learning is student focused and student driven.

Rationale

The changing landscape of higher education warrants further justification how we could utilise the underpinning values of Networked Learning in a globalised teaching and learning environment for much richer and varied participation where both teachers and students' experiences could be enhanced. Therefore, the authors' institution defines Networked Learning as "a view of learning that relies upon actants' engagement in valued activities that are situated and contextualised, in a learning environment that cultivates connections between the actants. The actants operate as a learning community in which individual actants are connected to one another and to the resources of the community and where critical reflexivity is practiced by the community. Networked Learning is thus designed and facilitated to support collaborative reciprocal co-construction of meaning, identity and other products which represent 'learning'" (Networked Learning Editorial Collective (NLEC), 2021). With such comprehensive institutional definition, it is beneficial to propose a case study to examine how Networked Learning could be taken on board in the actual classroom experiences within a specific context. The aims of the study are to investigate:

1. To what extent networked learning enhances classroom experiences at the authors' institution?
2. How could the authors' institution adopt networked learning in producing Great Graduates, the authors' institution mission?

Research Design: A Case Study Approach

The proposed study explores the use of Networked Learning in teaching and learning processes in different disciplines (15 study options at the authors' institution). The study employs an interpretivist research approach (Erickson, 1998) with a combination of direct observation and interview-like methods to understand the experiences of students and teaching academics in on-campus networked learning situations. Participants will include volunteered students and academics from various disciplines who respond to the invitation. Data will be collected through

a)   Classroom Observation.

The focus of the data is to discover the adoption of Networked Learning in the teaching and learning process, especially if it aligns with the proposed Networked Learning principles in the authors' institution. Through observing the participants in the classes, the study captures how the academics incorporate Networked Learning in their teaching and to what extent the practice has an impact on student learning (e.g., student engagement).

b)   Follow-up interview/discussion.

During this interview/discussion, the participants will be invited to talk about their classroom experiences. Each academic will be asked to explain the notion of Networked Learning in their classroom, and how Networked Learning has been included in the teaching and learning process. Simultaneously, students will discuss their classroom experiences and to what extent the teaching practice has an impact on their learning.

All interview/discussions are audio recorded and transcriptions of the recordings are returned to the participants for checking. In line with the broad interpretive approach that frames and governs this investigation, the data will be analysed shortly after they are gathered. Analysis of the data contributes to the development of ideas about the perceptions held by the participants, and these are refined progressively across the instances that authors meet with participants. The identified perceptions are thus checked and rechecked and refined against observation data set as it is collected. This iterative and inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) involves thematic analysis (Silverman, 2001) and the capture of major and common ideas (Mayring, 2000) expressed by participants about how Networked Learning is adopted in the teaching and learning process. This approach helps to operationalise a process of co-construction between the researchers and the participants. Through checking and rechecking, refining and confirming, the authors are able to articulate their understanding of the perceptions held by the participants that match the participants' expressed perceptions.

The outcomes of the analysis process are a series of assertions about the ways Networked Learning is perceived and understood in the teaching and learning process in order to answer the above mentioned research questions.

Discussion

Based on three main themes which have emerged in the recent literature, as mentioned this case study approach is proposed to unpack the adoption of Networked Learning in a specific institutional context in order to answer the above-mentioned research questions.

Firstly, research shows that the adoption of Networked Learning in classroom boosts students' self-efficacy for social networking and professional development (e.g., Anders, 2018). For example, one of the studies argues that Networked Learning "that integrates a professional context into the learning experience" could "promote self-efficacy and skill to learn" (Ashar, Kamdi & Kurniawan, 2021, p. 202). Therefore, a context specific study is needed to examine the applications of Networked Learning that integrate professional contexts (i.e. relevant industrial and/or social domains) into teaching and learning. This is particularly useful when 'Work and Social Connection' is one of the key components in the teaching and learning framework at the authors' institution.

Secondly, research reveals that Networked Learning use in classroom enhances student-centred experiences with a community focus (e.g., social presence). Networked Learning in this form takes advantages of the flexibility of space, especially amid the current global pandemic, in order to establish a borderless community exposure. For instance, "it turned out that everybody involved, teachers, [students] and citizens, began to collaborate through network mediated by online app, tools and services and adapt to the circumstances according to their actual knowledge and to develop new knowledge in collaboration" (Gislev, Thestrup and Elving, 2020, p. 275). The community focus is particularly significant at the authors' institution when the Learning and Teaching Roadmap to 2025 emphasises student experiences to be shaped through a deep connection to work, communities and iwi (tribes). Therefore, further research within a specific context is necessary to investigate how Networked Learning could also make use of the flexibility of time and space for community enforcement due to the 24/7 connectedness, via all the institutionally provided digital platforms, in order to enrich student learning experiences.

Lastly, research unveils the fact that Networked Learning provides opportunities for students to further develop their critical thinking, which is an important 21st century competency. A recent study shows that critical thinking within Networked Learning is embedded "through dialogue with fellow learners to consider other perspectives and negotiate and critique ideas and arguments" (Koh, Jonathan & Tan, 2019, p. 287). Therefore, this proposed research within an institutional context is crucial to explore the recommended practices for teachers to turn this critical gaze onto Networked Learning acquisition in a classrooms setting. This is particularly important when the authors' institution aspires to produce Great Graduates with an emphasis on being able to Care, Question and Act. With that, critical lens is necessitated for the ability to Question.

Implications/Significance

Apart from answering the two research questions, this proposed case study aims to generate insights into the application of the eight networked learning principles as part of an institutional approach for implementing Networked Learning at the course as well as at the programme level, as presented in Paper-1. Further, the case study will determine the extent of Networked Learning adoption in achieving the strategic goal of student-directed learning at the authors' institution, as highlighted in the study in Paper-2. Aligning with the essence of Paper-3, this project is essential in enabling the authors, who work in the central teaching and learning unit, to support the institution in enhancing teaching and learning experiences constantly.

In Summary

Across and behind the different themes identified as recurrent, contemporary or emerging within the field of Networked Learning, the authors also see new ways of understanding the field itself emerging (Dohn, Sime, Cranmer, Ryberg & de Laat, 2018). Hence, it gives reasons for optimism regarding the development of a case study approach within a particular context in order to further investigate Networked Learning for teaching and learning process. However, the authors are aware of the limitations of the suggested case study. Although the literature review has elicited many advantages of Networked Learning adoption in teaching and learning process, it has not explored related features such as various factors that could be involved in potentially leading to the failures of Networked Learning application in the classroom setting. This provides a foundation for the possible future study depending on the findings emerged from this proposed case study.

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