

Networked Learning: Theorising a 'Manager' Capability

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Abstract

Networked learning (NL) is concerned with how students learn using connections enabled by IT: connections with other learners, with teachers and with resources. In contrast to school or university education, there is no place in the current conceptual model of NL for an administration or management function. This may be demonstrated by looking at the proceedings of the Networked Learning Conference. The aim of this paper is to develop the conceptual model of NL by proposing a 'manager' capability. The method consists of critical discourse analysis of a sample of the Conference proceedings to gain a better understanding of the problem. This is followed by a pragmatic exercise in which suitable concepts from other relevant disciplines are identified, assessed and added to the NL conceptual model. The most likely explanation for the gap in the theory is the collective ontological stance of the NL research community.

Keywords

Networked learning, management, managerialism.

Introduction

The Networked Learning Conference is where members of the NL research community meet to share their latest ideas. 517 full individual papers have been presented at 10 conferences. Abstracts from these papers provide the empirical data for the present study.

The aim of the present paper is to argue that the scope of NL should be expanded to include management concepts. Critical discourse analysis (Harris, 1952; Fairclough, 1995) is applied to the abstracts. The findings include an enhanced conceptual model (Robinson et al., 2015) of NL.

The existence of a problem may be demonstrated by analogy with CoP (community of practice). CoP and NL have different origins, but the two bodies of theory are partly coterminous. Both disciplines are concerned with communities of learners and with learning connections: CoP emphasises communities, while NL puts more weight on connections. According to Cronin et al. (2016), CoP is 'rooted in social learning theory' and 'emphasises collaboration across strong ties', but a network 'tends to function around more flexible links between participants on a more ad hoc basis.'

Early writings on CoP imply community self-regulation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). But as the theory matured, a significant aspect of the discourse changed. Wenger's work became more performative (Wenger et al., 2002) (Cox, 2005). It is unclear why Wenger chose to move in this direction, but his position as the main architect of CoP means that the change in emphasis cannot be lightly dismissed. The problem, when viewed from a managerialist perspective, is that no analogous shift has occurred in NL.

Theoretical framework

Managerialism and the 'manager' capability

Managerialism may be defined as the set of values and principles consistent with the belief that professional management and management processes are important tools for furthering the aims of all types of social organisation (Diefenbach, 2009). The term is often used pejoratively in social sciences research e.g. Klikauer (2013), Grey (1996). Managerialism implies the involvement of a professional managing entity, or 'manager'. This 'manager' has a capability which may be modelled as a set of functions: e.g. control, accounting, resourcing. Quotation marks are placed around the word 'manager' to discourage invalid assumptions about the nature of this entity. The 'manager' entity might, for example, be a distributed software application or an ad-hoc virtual committee with fluid or even anonymous membership. A working definition of 'manager' is:

an entity with an operational, strategic or other non-pedagogical interest in a networked learning community.

Candidate disciplines which could supply new concepts

Network theories. Jones (2015) provides a grounding in social network analysis, actor-network theory and network concepts from science and mathematics.

Computer science. A body of theory addresses the management of computing devices. An influential paradigm is agent-manager (Mauro and Schmidt, 2005). The agent exchanges data with a managing system using rules called a protocol. For example, the managing system may ask the agent to send back information about what resources the object has consumed. This is illustrated in Figure 1 below:

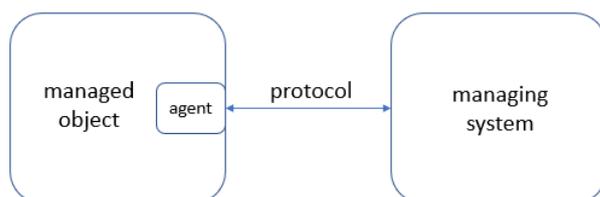


Figure 1: Agent-Manager Paradigm

Organisational behaviour and business studies. The proposed ‘manager’ capability resides within an organisational context. In his seminal work, first published in the 19th century, Henri Fayol identified six functions, or tasks, of a manager: forecasting, planning, organising, commanding, coordinating and controlling (Fayol and Gray, 1987). Since Fayol, the science of management has expanded to include leadership (Weathersby, 1999) and business strategy (Porter, 1979). Theories of leadership and management have applications in the administration of education (Campbell et al., 1987).

Learning analytics. Part of the ‘manager’ capability can be realised in non-human form as digital data processed by software technology implemented in a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) or Learning Management System (LMS) (Ferguson, 2012).

From these bodies of theory, a set of candidate functions has been derived: these are:

monitoring, reporting, control, accounting, direction, resourcing, design, support and security.

Analysis

Fairclough (1995) identifies three stages of critical discourse analysis (CDA): description, interpretation and explanation. A discourse is ‘text plus context’ (Bayley et al., 2013). This CDA exercise is about silence in the discourse: i.e. the apparent absence of a ‘manager’ capability from the discourse, where the analyst (the present author) has evidence to support an argument that this element should be present. Huckin (2002) provides a taxonomy of textual silences: speech-act; presuppositional; discreet; genre-based and manipulative.

The discourse is the published research from the NL Conference series; the sample is the abstracts of the 60 full papers from the 2016 Conference. It is assumed that the sample, when analysed, will provide a sufficiently trustworthy indication of what the NL research community was thinking about in the 2015-2016 period.

To reduce the sample to a practical size of 10 abstracts, the website www.random.org is asked to return ten random numbers in the range 1-60. The random numbers are: 09, 26, 23, 42, 56, 19, 37, 30, 45 and 11.

The empirical objective is to answer the following question for each abstract in the sample:

can the aim of the paper be amended to include elements of the ‘manager’ capability without compromising the paper’s research concept?

The results (condensed) are as follows.

- 09: Gross National Happiness in the Context of Networked Learning. YES: monitoring, direction.
- 26: MOOCs, openness and changing educator practices: an Activity Theory case study. YES: resourcing.
- 23: Designing for online homework guidance. YES: design.
- 42: Teaching Presence in MOOCs: Perspectives and Learning Design Strategies. YES: security.
- 56: Discursive psychology as a methodology to explore how multiculturalism affects use of learning technologies. NO.
- 19: Affording Opportunities to Learn in Homework Online. YES: support.
- 37: Effective team formation in networked learning settings. YES: control.
- 30: Trace ethnography: working with data from learning and assessment. YES: reporting, direction.
- 45: Academics' online connections: Characterising the structure of personal networks on academic social networking sites and Twitter. NO.
- 11: Online conversations around digital artefacts: the studio approach to learning in STEM subjects. YES: accounting, resourcing.

The answer is YES for eight of the ten abstracts in the sub-sample, or 80%. The goal of this critical interpretive analysis is not to undermine the research, but to demonstrate that with some simple, non-controversial adjustments, most of the papers can easily be re-framed to fit within the scope of a new conceptual model of networked learning that includes a 'manager' capability.

The next step is to propose an enhanced conceptual model of NL that includes the 'manager' capability:

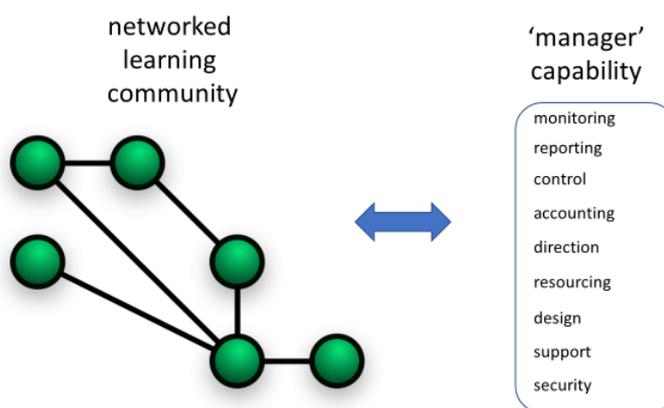


Figure 2: Enhanced Conceptual Model

For example, accounting is a function of the 'manager' capability. A role of the accounting function would be to track the cost of the resources consumed by a given NL community. From a managerialist perspective this is not a controversial objective.

Conclusion

How is NL theory shaped? What elements are emphasised and why? NL is not like the physical sciences or engineering, so there are no agreed international standards to reference. An easy answer is that NL theory is the collective intellectual product of the NL research community; it belongs to the community. A more nuanced, but probably more accurate, answer, is that NL theory is derived from an informal consensus among an inner core of experienced professional researchers. It is they who are responsible for the ontological framework, or scope, of networked learning theory.

Returning to Huckin (2002) and his taxonomy of textual silences, discreet silence has some relevance here. Management is linked to managerialism, and managerialism is linked to neoliberalism, a concept carrying strongly negative values within the European educational research sector. There is an argument that researchers may wish to avoid being associated with such a controversial topic. Presuppositional silence has greater relevance. There is an extension of this type of silence which Huckin (2002) does not describe. This is where

the discourse has evolved in such a way that topics and arguments from outside the discourse have no legitimate anchoring point, or no way of being connected to the extant models and theories within the discourse. This could be termed architectural silence. There is no gap in the theory because there is no place for a gap. The problem is therefore not the presence of a gap, but the absence of a place for a gap. Such shaping of the discourse is not evidence of manipulation. It is more likely that during the three decades of networked learning research, a common ontological framework has evolved organically and become an unquestioned assumption.

Part of the vision of NL is emancipation (Dirckinck-Holmfeld et al., 2011). It is difficult to see how NL can be designed for mass participation without the use of the 'manager' capability. The pedagogical theories at the core of NL cannot be insulated from the management theories which are required to realise the vision.

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