A practical action perspective and understanding on becoming a networked learning educator

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Abstract

In the paper we examine one of the enduring issues in networked learning of the reticence of academics to work with and/or run networked learning courses mediated by technology. The paper is based on an analysis of the situated practice of members of an academic department and the work done in becoming a networked learning educator. It builds on the recent interest in practice based studies (PBS) that has led to an increase in looking at learning and knowing through the doing of practice. Following Schatzki, (2001) we see practice as an embodied and materially mediated activity around practical understanding. The research approach we have chosen to look at this is that associated with ethnomethodology; which has a long-standing interest in the understanding of practical action. In the paper we offer an account of the social fact of the competent university teacher as constructed in what Garfinkel (1967) refers to as 'common understanding' exhibited in the methods used and descriptions of practice-in-action of members of the department.

We go on to examine an account of designing an online module and the practice-in-action exhibited by Emma in becoming a networked learning educator. We conclude with the suggestion that the pattern and rhythm of said module could be used as a starting point for a pedagogical framework that can accommodate and/or exhibit the practical understanding of pedagogy for members of the department.

Keywords

Networked learning, practice based studies, ethnomethodology, online educator

Introduction

It has often been reported in the literature that HE teachers and academics are not always willing adaptors or users of learning technology and/or digitally mediated education. A reticence to work online and bias against online learning is periodically discussed. In the frequently cited Gilly Salmon (2005) paper she points out that academic staff are naturally reluctant to change their methods of teaching and learning. Similar points continue to be made in more recent work by for example Boon and Sinclair (2012) Gregory and Salmon (2013) and Redpath (2012).

In Salmon (2005) she comments that;

> Individuals and small groups, such as departments in universities, have their own desires, abilities, histories and preferred artefacts; in other words, they are closely situated (p.206).

There has however been little research that examines the closely situated practice of a group of academics and/or accounts of the work involved in practice in becoming online educators. The current study sets out to examine an account of the situated practice of a group and a single academic from the group becoming a networked learning educator.

There has in recent years been a growing interest in practice and more specifically in practice based studies (PBS) following the so called practice turn and interest in the notion of epistemic practice. Which as Perriton and Hodgson (2013) explain quoting Schatzki, (2001), 'although the language used to describe the elements may change according to the academic discipline an epistemic practice approach sees practice as an embodied and materially mediated activity around practical understanding' Corradi et al (2010) state PBS has led to an increased interest in looking at learning and knowing through the doing of practice. The emergence of practice

based thinking and research has equally been taken up within networked learning and has become under increasing scrutiny at recent networked learning conferences. The 2014 NLC based Springer book (Hodgson et al 2014) included several chapters that considered the question of practice from a number of different perspectives. The perspective we want to take in this paper is the one that assumes practice is a way of seeing, or practice as epistemology (Gherardi, 2009 and Corradi et al., 2010) As Schatzki, (2001) stated, we see practice as an embodied and materially mediated activity around practical understanding. Further the research approach we have chosen to look at this is that associated with ethnomethodology. As Fox (2006) explains ethnomethodology has a long-standing interest in practical action and he suggests the current interest in PBS has not paid sufficient attention to ethnomethodology's understanding of practical action.

Background to the study

The department where we work made a strategic decision in 2014/15 to move into online learning and offer its new Masters on the topic of Leadership Practice and Responsibility (referred to throughout the paper as the LPR MSc) as a part-time online degree. Most of the staff had no previous experience of running online degrees. Emma and Vivien were the exceptions to this. Vivien had many years' experience of running an online Masters programme informed by her interest and work on the theory and practice of networked learning. In the light of this experience Vivien had been invited by the HoD to work with them on this new venture. Emma on the other hand had been a student on an online MBA in L&S at another University and then deputy director for 2 years of the Institute where the same MBA was based, which had over 1500 students. That MBA was essentially a conventional though self-claimed student centred online MBA. It was delivered in partnership with a private educational college based in Europe. It was the European based college that provided most of the materials and teaching on the MBA and the UK University itself delivered one residential module (for which Emma was the staff lead) on campus and provided quality assurance for all the modules.

A pilot cohort of the new LPR MSc discussed in this paper started in October 2015, when the first module started with a 4 day residential workshop and then continued online. This was followed by a second module that also started with a residential workshop in November 2015. Subsequently the next four modules were offered as online only modules. Emma was director of the new programme, aided and abetted by Vivien. In the paper we seek to use an ethnomethodology informed action research approach to look at the work of becoming a networked learning educator on the MSc. The idea being to use the work done in developing and running the MSc as a vehicle for examining the embodied and developing practical understanding of members' pedagogical ideas and approach. That is we seek to use an ethnomethodology perspective to examine data we collected in our action research inquiry of developing and running the new MSc. What we set out to do, in line with an ethnomethodological approach, was to look at the way people make sense of their everyday world and their own practice in terms of the concrete practical activity involved in the work done and methods used in their practice-in-action – in this case the practice-in-action of university teachers who are being asked to become networked learning educators. As Fox, (2006) explains, drawing on Garfinkel's seminal work on Studies in Ethnomethodology;

> Ethnomethodological studies seek to recover and exhibit the details of the competent performance, - ------
>
> Its own inquiries are about other matters, namely an answer to the question 'what are the methods used by competent members to establish whatever they do?'

In the study we look at the work and methods used by competent university teachers to learn and seek to establish themselves as networked learning educators. We want to focus on the work done in the performance of becoming an accomplished networked learning educator. The main focus in the paper is on the work done and methods used by particularly Emma in becoming a networked learning educator. It will also touch however on the work done and methods used of other members of the department as part of the accounts offered of the social situation and the way their accounts as 'members' contribute to the sense they make of their practice and everyday world as university teachers.

'Common Understanding' of the Competent University Teacher

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Using a ethnomethodological perspective we first seek to give an account of the social fact of the competent university teacher as constructed in what Garfinkel (1967) refers to as 'common understanding' exhibited in the methods used and descriptions of practice-in-action of members of the department.

We start with an observation that Emma and Vivien both noted, as the emphasis on making use of panopto (a lecture capture and sharing software tool) by some members of the department. The use of panopto was described by one member in terms of 'low hanging fruit and quick gains'. It fitted with a prevailing narrative in the department that being a competent teacher is based on performance and expertise of the lecturer. As another member commented 'this is what our students expect and pay for'. And similarly in one of the MSc workshops sessions the practice-in-action of a colleague demonstrated methods in use that had him as the focal point, asking questions, scaffolding students, providing anecdotes etc.

This common understanding of the competent university teacher by members of the department as a skilled performer and expert did not however sit that easily with a greater adoption of technology based on the principles of a networked learning pedagogy. Members' accounts were more about quick gains that did not demand new thinking or change from them as teachers. The work done in their accounts was more about wanting technology to sustain their existing practice as competent teachers and not to change or disrupt what they already did well.

Over the summer, in a move to look closer at members' pedagogical beliefs through accounts of their teaching practice three staff workshops were organised. The first was used to explore the pedagogical values and beliefs held by members. This was done with the intention to use the outcome as a basis to identify shared pedagogy and practice that could perhaps then be developed into a shared online networked learning approach and narrative. In an exercise intended to elicit members pedagogical values and beliefs people were asked to identify both a good learning experience and a good teaching experience and then isolate the key success factors. Using these specific examples as a stimulus, colleagues were then asked 'What do you value about teaching or engagement with students in your current context that you would not want to lose?' The responses were captured on coloured sticky notes in categories as summarised in table 1 below:

Students	Knowledge	Ways Of Working	Organisational	Something Else
Dialogue Intellectual & emotional engagement Relationship Empathy Provoking the unexpected Rapport Experiential Responsibly and Agenda/ curriculum setting	Provocations Variety Vital Provoking the unexpected Dialogue Experiential Relevant/ applicable Critical enquiry	My engagement through variety Provoking unexpected Avoid repetition/ boredom Experiential Participation & collaboration Not mundane Sharing knowledge & experiences Informality Dialogue Practice Relational dialogue Constructing knowledge	Informality Flexible curriculum & flexible learning Clear boundaries Variety	Practice Meaningful output

Table 1

The work done and the account of competent pedagogical performance exhibited through this exercise are based on methods and a common understanding about the importance of student engagement through provoking and energising the students and self. As well as working in a variety of ways that are experiential and involves students and their own practice through processes of dialogue, critical enquiry and, as came out in discussion, encourage reflective thinking.

How members carry this account of competent performance forward into the online MSc was still a challenge. It was felt by members important to develop a more integrated approach to the overall design of the MSc and each of the different parts and modules on the programme. Up until now the module convenors designed and ran their modules in relative isolation. A more integrated framework would allow both staff and students taking different modules to easily understand as well as experience a shared and common framework whatever module they were taking. The framework would need to be clear and transparent as well as flexible enough to accommodate individual preferences to module design and activities etc.

We believe that two emergent understandings of NL pedagogy are exhibited in the work done in the above account. One is the need to have an integrated design framework to a NL programme that is clear to students but also to staff themselves. Two is any such framework needs to be able to accommodate differences in personal staff styles and ways of engaging with students. Another and third emergent understanding, as discussed more below, was that the framework should build on existing understandings, methods and work done by members on the development of pedagogical design and frameworks.

In regard to this third understanding an important artefact in the process was the discussion of the philosophy and principles used in the design and approach to an existing face-to-face MA that the department ran. These principles and philosophy it was felt could be a useful starting point for achieving a common framework for the LPR programme and modules – a diagram of the MA was shared post the meeting, see Fig 1;
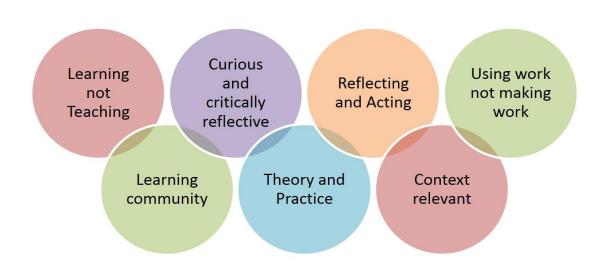
Fig1 Diagram of MA programme philosophy and learning principles

The philosophy and principles in Fig 1 were something the members had developed together and were seen as important signifiers of their pedagogical practice. They signified their common understanding of competent performance in programme and module design in ways that complimented their common understanding of a competent university teacher. These three emergent practical understandings of a NL pedagogy were subsequently taken forward and contributed to the work on the design of an upcoming module on the MSc which we will discuss in the next section.

Becoming a Networked Learning Educator

In this section we look at the practical understandings of networked learning pedagogy exhibited in the design process and subsequent running of LPR Module 5 – on Future Business Models (FBM). More specifically we will examine the practice-in-action exhibited by Emma in becoming a networked learning educator.

Shortly after the first of the 3 workshops Emma and her co-tutor (who we refer to as Rich) for Module 5 on FBM started working on their proposed design for the module which was due to run 10th Aug – 11th Sept 2015.

Emma and Vivien were both keen that the module should have a recognisable networked learning based pedagogy and believed the FBM module was an opportunity to offer an exemplar of what this might look like in practice for others to consider. In saying this we exhibited a view that others did not fully practically understand or recognise a networked learning based pedagogy.

For illustrative purposes we focus in this paper on the methods used and work done in Emma's practice-in-action in one (admittedly abridged) account entitled shifting responsibility to students.

Shifting responsibly to students

Initial ideas for the design of the FBM module were discussed by Emma and Rich; in the early iterations of the module design they and the students were both very 'busy'. In a note made on 30/6 Vivien commented;

> Emma and Rich want to use some real case studies of interesting alternative business models and invite the owners or senior management people to share something about their business and then have an interactive session with the students who will either read or watch a podcast of their description – they both have ideas of people to invite for this.

Emma had introduced into the design an activity described as; 'The class will meet virtually every week for one hour. Outside of class the participants are expected to prepare a 10 minute video presentation on a future business model, upload it to Moodle, and make comments/carry out discussion on the presentations of the others'.

Emma and Rich had lots of other interesting ideas that they wanted to include. In the first iterations of the module design they described their own roles as;

> Provide overall direction of the course ensuring that LO's met, that faculty understand and deliver, and that participants know what is expected of them and when. Lead on two of the four video –conf calls. Contribute to the on-line discussions

Over about a week or 10 days of interspersed discussion between Emma and Rich the focus was on what activities to include, who to invite as guest speakers and what weeks Rich and Emma should take the lead on etc. Vivien participated in the discussions and as illustrated in the excerpts from the conversations introduced some points about learner responsibility and critical inquiry in networked learning;

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1 VH 7/7– "a few further thoughts on this based on a more clear NL perspective where
2 the emphasis is on learner responsibility and critical inquiry ……. …………….
3 the issue for me is around who is establishing the criteria for examining future business
4 models – and for interrogating the guest speakers. Which I think including is great and
5 so was thinking about ways to get the most from their involvement
6 …………………………………….. the emphasis being towards a pattern of question-posing
7 and asking students to research for themselves…. "

Vivien continued saying - 7/7
8 "for me it would be good to be careful about the way we manage the idea of
9 responsibility in the pedagogy and design of the module and put onus for criteria
10 setting and researching future business models on the students – aided and abetted by
11 resources we provide, including the guest presenters.
12 And try to use this module perhaps as a working example of networked learning –
13 which it has a lot of potential to be for sure"

Vivien's comments were followed up with some from another colleague who Vivien had worked with on other Master programmes and with whom she had discussed the emergent FBM design with – called Jean for the purpose of the paper. Jean had made some challenging comments about the design as it was shaping up, for example;

14 Jean 8/7 "Do wonder how much the reading list is challenging people to think about

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15 the issues, criteria etc. rather than offering new 'how to' ideas? Is doing some of the
16 former, but could do more?"

Jean recommends some other texts one of which is later adopted by Emma and Rich as the pre-reading for the module being 'Towards Reporting on the Triple Bottom Line: Mirages, Methods and Myths' by Rob Gray and Markus Milne.

Emma responds a few hours after the comments from Jean (and Vivien) with the following;

17 Emma 8/7 "Rich and I have had a good discussion this morning about the module and
18 Rich will shortly circulate a revised outline with our latest thinking. We have added in
19 more student led activity to each week as well as some planned activity each week.
20 We are also re thinking the tools/theories away from the business model canvas
21 approach which we think is more strategy based to more of a 'what will the world look
22 like in 2025 and how will the current business models need to adapt' plus activity
23 around the significant global challenges we face which will encompass the
24 environmental challenge undoubtedly but also some of the other challenges."

The conversations around issues of responsibility, focus and criticality continued over the next week. Vivien commented for example 10/7 ;

25 "I think her (Jean) point about criticality is a key one and I had already thought
26 the final assignment could perhaps be reworded to both convey a less sense of
27 recommendations to reflections on the possible and more a sense of criticality?
28 ………………………………….. …………….. …… I also did wonder if some
29 workshop pre-reading and more shaping and thinking about the criteria for analysing
30 the case studies etc and the example organisations might be better to do in week
31 one"

Towards the end of July the design of the module had developed and shifted to the point on 28/7 Emma commented; – draft 7
32 "We are using the chapter you suggested as pre course reading – it is available as an
33 e-book in the library. We have also stripped down on a lot of the content – here is the
34 latest version of the outline."

Table 2

In the above excerpt we see the work done on practical understanding of learner responsibility and critical inquiry. In the early excerpts Vivien and Jean demonstrate their practical understanding of learner responsibility and critical inquiry in the work done, for example, in the comments discussed below. We indicate the 'work done' below for each of the comments selected from the excerpts in table 2 after each comment.

Through the work done in Vivien's and Jean's comments and methods used they exhibit a view or understanding that learner responsibility is important in a networked learning pedagogy and could be greater in the current design of the module.

Asking for example;
Line 3 - **'who is establishing the criteria'** – i.e. it is not the students?
Line 5 - **'thinking about ways to get the most from their involvement'** – as not sure getting most from the involvement of guest speakers is currently happening?
Line 7 - **'asking students research for themselves'** – would be asking them to take more responsibility - and so on as signified in their other comments they made in table 2 above.

As indicated by Vivien in Line 12 her practical understanding is the things mentioned would help to make the module a **'working example of networked learning'**

As the module design develops Emma's developing understanding of networked learning as exhibited through her practical understanding of learner responsibility and critical inquiry is demonstrated in the work done in the following excerpts;

Line 18/19 - **'added in more student led activity'** – students taking the lead equates with student taking more responsibility.
Line 23- **'activity around the significant global challenges we face'** – we agree with some of Jean's challenges about the importance of global and environmental challenges we face and want to bring this into the module activities.
Line 32 - **'We are using the chapter you suggested as pre course reading'** – that is we are going to now use a reading that challenging people to think more about the issues and criteria etc.
Line 33 - **'stripped down on a lot of the content'** – this should give the students more time/space for inquiry and for doing the student led activities.

To summarise, in the above analysis we have tried to offer an illustrative account of learning and knowing through the doing of practice. The work done through Emma's practice- in-action around shifting responsibility to the learner during the design process of the FBM module is, we suggest, part of a process of learning and becoming a (competent) networked learning educator.

It was clearly not the only work done or only learning to become a networked learning educator that occurred through the doing of practice. In deed another important area that we identified in the study was 'Designing the Learning Space'. We do not have space in this paper to discuss the account of practice-in-action of 'designing the learning space' It was however not only important but also an aspect of practice that troubles many academics in their own practice of becoming a networked learning educator.

In the final part of the paper we would like to return to the emerging practical understandings of networked learning pedagogy of members identified earlier in the paper

Exemplar of a networked learning pedagogy

It will be recalled that Vivien and Emma wanted the design of the FBM to act as an exemplar of a networked learning pedagogy to the rest of the members of the department. Who it was claimed in the section on 'common understanding of a competent university teacher' had exhibited three emerging practical understandings of a networked learning pedagogy;

1 Need to have an integrated design framework to a NL programme that is clear to students but also to staff
2 Any such framework needs to be able to accommodate differences in personal staff styles and ways of engaging with students.
3 The framework should build on existing understandings, methods and work done by members on the development of pedagogical design and frameworks

We would like to conclude with a brief description on the way we took the work done on the design of the FBM module to illustrate to other members of the department how it might be seen as an exemplar of networked learning pedagogy that fitted with their emerging practical understanding as just described.
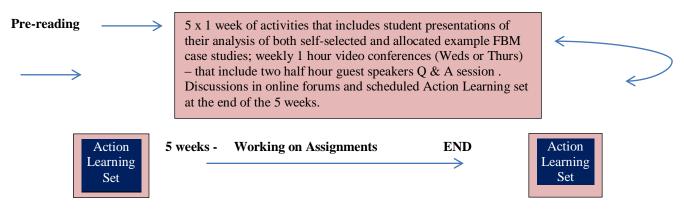
We thought a good starting point was to look at the recurring patterns and rhythms to the existing MSc LPR modules. There were varied patterns in the use of digital tools and student activities already regularly included in the different modules on the LPR MSc. However there was no recurring or shared rhythm to when or how different digital tools and student activities were used. We thought one way to progress and act on the above emerging practical understanding of NL pedagogy was to share the pattern and rhythm of the design of the FBM module. If other members of the department found this fitted and worked for them then this could be a step toward achieving a shared and integrated pedagogical framework for the LPR MSc.

As discussed in the previous section in designing the FBM model we had wanted in developing the module design to consider both the characteristics and principles of networked learning and, at the same time, take account of the practical understanding of pedagogy exhibited by members the department. We therefore now wanted to see if other module tutors felt that the resultant structure and format of the FBM module could offer a

natural and recurring rhythm for other LPR modules. And if the module pattern and rhythm was seen as having the potential to make it easier for both staff and students to navigate and use the online platform, Moodle, and at the same time could accommodate and/or exhibit the practical understanding of pedagogy of the members of the department. The current flow of the FBM as depicted in Fig 2 was shared and discussed with the members.

Fig 2 - The current flow of the FBM module

Pre-reading → 5 x 1 week of activities that includes student presentations of their analysis of both self-selected and allocated example FBM case studies; weekly 1 hour video conferences (Weds or Thurs) – that include two half hour guest speakers Q & A session . Discussions in online forums and scheduled Action Learning set at the end of the 5 weeks.

Action Learning Set   5 weeks -   Working on Assignments   END   Action Learning Set

Four members of the department already had an understanding of the FBM module as it was simultaneously developed, run and reviewed. Other members of the department have now also discussed and are adopting the same pattern and rhythm to the design of their own modules. The emergent framework will be further considered and developed as they work with it on their modules. What happens in each of the first 5 weeks can of course vary between modules depending on whether it fits in all instances and may well include, for example, panopto presentations.

This is the point that we have reached in this work; we plan to do more work as mentioned previously on designing the learning spaces. An area of work that may well connect with Goodyear (2005) work on patterns in learning design as well as some of Goodyear and colleagues more recent work on the architecture of productive learning. All of which might help in looking at the work done in becoming a networked learning educator.

Conclusions

The original aim to this work was to identify a shared pedagogical framework and approach for designing modules on the department's online programmes. The intention was to try to achieve this in a way that was flexible enough to accommodate difference while at the same time give enough consistency and sense of a recurring pattern that allowed academics and students alike to feel comfortable with their online experiences. Recognising that working online was neither natural nor common for members of the department we wanted to find ways to bring the department into the online space that felt comfortable and not alien. It was for this reason we wanted to look at the practical understanding members had of a competent HE teacher as well as present an account of practical action of becoming a networked learning educator. An ultimate aim would be that working online becomes as seamless as being in a classroom or other physical space and an embodied part of members' practical understanding of pedagogy.

Acknowledgments

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