Informal networked learning; a network in the wild

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Abstract

In shifting work predicated on talking to the very small screen of mobile phones, a space approximately 3cm by 3cm space, with a 160 characters imposed on each utterance, and where no-one gets seen or heard, a significant challenge is generated. This is the challenge faced by Youthline, New Zealand (NZ), a youth oriented telephone helpline. There is no evidence-base for such a practice; there never is for new practice. How then is new practice learned? One of the teaching and learning challenges that becomes apparent is that something cannot be taught until it is known, and in not knowing how the practice would develop there could be little preparation for those involved. They had to learn from each other. What evolves provides a unique opportunity for studying processes of informal networked learning, a network in the wild.

This paper draws on conceptual and analytical tools drawn from actor-network theory (ANT). In tracing the detailed activities of those involved it becomes possible to see that practice might have been, and still could be otherwise. The networked learning that occurs is a reflection of the interactions between those involved. In working the technology to suit human needs, it becomes apparent that the technology simultaneously shapes those involved. The technology in this network is demonstrably not a passive carrier of conversation, nor are the young people making use of the service passive recipients, the counsellors do not move in untroubled ways from one medium to another, and counselling does not remain the same. In observing practice development it becomes evident that things happen due to contingent relationships rather than individually held agency. Recognizing agency as distributed disrupts conceptions of who leads and who follows, of who teaches or learns, and who gets to define whom. An attribution error is made when agency is located individually; young people are cast as choosing text for pathological reasons that spans being developmentally challenged through to being a member of the thumb generation. Such errors that create barriers to empowerment are challenged by the new configurations that occur.

Studying networks in the wild brings to the fore concerns associated, obviously, with what is mainstream or not. What is seen as different, edgy, acceptable or unacceptable, desirable or abhorrent will of course depend on the vantage point one has. Looking at networks in the wild provides a further vantage point. There is potential that other educators might learn from network learning spaces where the borders on innovation and of literacy practices are less firm.

Keywords

Actor-network theory, networked learning, distributed agency, telephone helpline

Introduction

A central issue in *networked learning is* how we learn and where we learn. Networked learning is to be commended for bringing into focus the relationships involved in learning, however the very word network requires consideration for who, and what, is involved. There is risk if such relationships are narrowed down to only include those most obviously associated with computers and with the Internet. There is also risk in the theorizing of networked learning if the scope of networked activity is conceived too narrowly. In this paper I present a case-study of networked learning in the wild. The study involves a not-for-profit community helpline for young people: Youthline (NZ). Informed by actor-network theory (ANT) I explore how a socio-technical-political assemblage reconfigures practice. In uncovering the activities of those involved it becomes possible to see that practice might have been, and still could be otherwise. Accepting that myriad beings, human and otherwise, are involved and that these beings have influence, consideration is given to the concept of agency and how agency in a network is distributed. In drawing attention to distributed agency, freedoms and constraints associated with distribution can then be explored. This paper contributes to the theorizing of networked learning

by considering what it means to be distributed, and relations of power that are inherent.

This research has been undertaken with regard to the realities that might be produced as a result of the processes involved, and is particularly attentive to the potential for collateral damage and the potential for harm to this network. Two University ethics committees, Deakin University in Melbourne, and the Auckland University of Technology approved this research. Given the sensitivities involved in the research undertaken, all identifying information has been removed unless the participant has asked to be explicitly named. The data reported on here is part of a larger study on emergent technologies being used at Youthline (NZ) for counselling between November 2007 to August 2009. This involved participant observations in the phone rooms for four hours a week, participating in helpline training courses, and interviews of 24 people including Youthline staff, counselling volunteers, as well as young people who had made use of the text-counselling service. In this paper I trace and report on some of the connections that stabilized text-counselling practices in this organization and the learning that was involved. To demonstrate networked learning, the influence of actors both human and otherwise is described, this includes tracing the interactions of people as they negotiate the digital spaces of text messaging. Tracing these connections includes an analysis of 6400 text messages received by the organization during a six-month period in 2008. Further tracing of connections leads to archival evidence of policy, training manuals, through to contracts with both government and non-government organizations, and media reports where relevant. In tracing these networks the influence of mobile network operators (MNOs) as well as the technologies of computing and communication technologies (CCTs) is explored.

Networked learning in the wild

Fox (2002) identifies learning as something that happens naturally, incidentally, pervasively and situated within everyday life yet much of our theorizing of learning develops in institutionalized settings privileging knowledge as it occurs in the formal education sector over the informal. This results in privileging knowledge of networked learning that involves particular groups of people, and the ways such people relate. To use the eloquent words of Fenwick and Edwards (2010) and with acknowledgement to Pickering (1993) this concurrently risks effacing the fascinating mangling of context that generates particular practices that do not fit the picture of formal educational settings. Researching networks in the wild contributes in redressing this imbalance.

This study of networked learning in the wild is loosely associated with adult community education. I name this a loose association because funding of adult community education in NZ has recently been slashed. The learning requirement remains, it is the resourcing of this that is contested. The specific site of study is a not-for-profit organisation, Youthline (NZ). When this study begins the organization is providing telephone counselling predominantly through its crisis helpline. At the start of this study there is a constant buzz of phones ringing and of counselling conversations occurring, by the end of this study and even now, the phone rooms are almost silent. Youth still have problems, counsellors still counsel but the counselling conversations that occur, occur silently. This is the research story of how such work in moving from one medium to another, is learned.

This particular network involves approximately 40 paid staff, 700 volunteer counsellors and an indeterminate number of young people who engage with the service. This is of course not the full scope of those involved in the network, for there are further beings contributing to this network. There are those who contribute the angst experienced by young people that lead to their seeking counselling, there are the politicians that do or don't fund community education, there is an extensive communication and computer industry that makes the means of communicating in this network both more and less likely. Influences within a network cannot help but extend the more they are examined. The size and shape of the network is continually in a state of flux as these myriad beings engage. In 2005 when this study is first mooted, it is an investigation into the use of emergent technologies in a youth counselling centre, what evolves is a study of networked learning where the shape of things to come was never anticipated, and where the learning was not planned. No one had anticipated that counselling would shift from a service predicated in talking therapies and which occurred predominantly through the telephone helpline service to the silent and extremely tight space of the short message service (SMS) more commonly referred to as text messaging.

The conception and nurturing of a "hopeful monster"

This research follows the nebulous into the real. Investigating the relationships of the myriad entities involved, I trace practice as it is learned. This is not a simple undertaking. What is to evolve is not known in advance. This is research into how nascent practice grows, of things that may or may not survive, of things that may be hoped

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for or feared, and even where hopes and fears occur simultaneously. Law (1991) captures this fragility drawing on the writing of Nicolas Mosley:

> I said "I think they might also be called 'hopeful monsters'."
> She said "What are hopeful monsters?"
> I said "They are things born perhaps slightly before their time; when it's not known if the environment is quite ready for them."
> (Nicolas Mosley, Hopeful Monsters, p.71 cited in Law, 1991, p. 1)

For some what evolves may be monstrous or outlandish, for others acceptable if not desirable. Drawing attention to the learning that occurs may or may not be of benefit to the practices explored; the organisation; and to the actors, human or otherwise, that are involved. As a researcher practicing reflexively I find myself negotiating with you as reader to hold a space open to ways of working that might be different to your own; for holding a space where fledgling practice is described though this may, or may not be seen as relevant or useful to current or future realities you personally occupy.

That a range of voices has space in an ANT analysis allows movement away from mainstream, centred, or managerial interests. Although centrist dominated research has been a criticism levied at ANT (see for example, Star, 1991), this is not the only approach possible. A network does not have a top or bottom, and as demonstrated in the writings of both Verran and Mol, there is potential in an ANT informed analysis for increased awareness of a wider range of reals. This becomes a pivotal aspect of this research. Hearing voice from those oftentimes positioned at the margins and deemed "at risk" can become a central focus in an ANT informed analysis. The term at risk is used cautiously though. The connotation of vulnerability is suggestive of a deficit model whereas what I want to convey in this research, and is written into the vision of this organisation is a strength-based approach. Young people experience risk in not being heard, of not having services that meet their needs, of being further marginalized, and of being placed at further risk.

Youthline's stated intent is the provision of a service responsive, relevant and effective for young people, one that is strength-based and empowering. Such words though are not unproblematic, they are visionary words that are tested in the reals of day-to-day practice. A service presenting itself as youth-centred and responsive needs to listen, the construct of voice attests to the right to be heard and being represented. But as described by Thomson (2008) young people do not always speak when spoken to, or come forward when invited; they often speak without invitation, in the wrong place, at the wrong time and regardless of consequence. More is required than providing an invitation to be heard, a capacity to hear what is said, as and when it is said, and to treat the words and ideas expressed respectfully also needs nurturing. In looking at what reals are made more or less, my intent in this research is to support the voice of young people in shaping the service, while concurrently supporting the service with its espoused aims. Such intentions become challenged by contradictions and controversies. In the process of studying what at first glance might be seen as a fairly innocuous means of connecting, the core values of the organisation are challenged. With hindsight it is easy to say no wonder, for the study might have framed the question what is it we are doing and how best might we get there? However this was never voiced in the early stages of what was studied. The change in practice came quietly.

ANT research recognizes the researcher as not separate to what is studied. This is a critical actor-network sensibility, the researcher is not an unbiased recorder of processes, in framing the questions of study through to the reporting of findings, there is influence. As eloquently stated by Latour (2003) to explicate is to implicate, an account cannot help but be partial, and this account is no different.

In the middle of things

> It's not easy to see things in the middle, rather than looking down on them from above or up at them from below, or from left to right or right to left: try it, you'll see that everything changes.
> (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 25)

Being in the middle of things draws attention to the minutiae of detail of paths traversed. It is a difficult space to be in. A sense of distance is lost, a sense of overview collapses. While gazing at any one part of the network, further networks inside of networks evolve, and in attending to any one of these, others are cast seemingly into shadows, concurrently other parts of the network do not hold still. A kalaedoscopic lens on the learning processes evolves, and the telling of this research is partial in both meanings of the word. It cannot be otherwise.

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During the course of the study I am told that Youthline meets with young people in the spaces young people choose to be. I am also told the use of texting was only ever meant to be a portal or stepping stone, a link to other means for gaining assistance such as ringing the helpline or emailing or making an appointment for face to face counselling. Such contradictions and controversies feed my growing suspicion that reality is experienced in divergent ways. The stories I am told offer up contradictions, demonstrating situated knowledges. I use the term knowledges deliberately. The stories shared do not reflect only one way of knowing or an homogenised telling of the way things are. That I call them stories is not meant to suggest untruths, nor that they may be discounted as fictions, these accounts tell of realities experienced and acted upon.

The gift of text

A story of corporate social responsibility positions a gift made to Youthline as an act of charity at Christmas in 2004. Instead of giving Christmas cards, the costs involved are redeployed. Gift giving and receiving involves carefully choreographed movements. There is a hint of a question; a subtlety in suggesting mutual benefit. Who initiates the idea? Who selects the gift? These questions are gauche, they place gifting and generosity at risk. Nonetheless, a conversation ensues though the subtleties of the conversation are forgotten. I cannot trace who suggested the gift. I do not know. I ask, but my question is met with further questions: if this firm were to look at alternative ways of demonstrating generosity at Christmas, could Youthline work with this? And perhaps other business partners or competitors of this firm might join in. Might the act of gifting prompt others to contribute to a gift that keeps on giving? What type of gift could garner such interest? What results is a gift of a personal digital assistant (PDA) and following the lead of corporate social responsibility a major client of this firm adds to the gift by providing an 0274YOUTH number so that young people can text Youthline at no personal cost.

The hope was of providing further opportunities for connection with young people, as described in a joint press release between those gifting and Youthline (Youthline, 2005). The press release describes texting as attractive to young people because it is discrete and portable, and that the gift provides further avenues of support to young people. There was no reason not to move forward; there was no apparent harm being done. The financial costs could be met as start-up costs were, at least initially, small. As demand increased, the technology was adapted so that responses were through computers rather than the PDA, and then further changes so that texts were both received and responded to through computers. Demand outstripping tentative beginnings required further technological and financial investment. Concomitant with an increasing number of text messages was a need to reconfigure practice. Currently Youthline is receiving in excess of 20,000 text messages a month.

On becoming textually active

Mobile phone ownership for the demographic of young people that Youthline serves is very high.

Table 1: Individual ownership of mobile phone as a per centage
Note. Data based on New Zealand Census, Statistics New Zealand (2009).

Year	Age 15-19 years	Age 20-24 years
2006	86	92
2009	92	94

That young people have ownership over the means of connecting has a lead on effect in choices made for connecting. Unlike the communal ownership that is experienced with a home-based landline, or with computers shared with other family members, mobile phone use provides a greater level of privacy. It can also be clearly differentiated from other means of communicating such as through the Internet with discussion boards or with instant messaging, because it is by definition "mobile".

This is consistent with the findings of ethnographer Jan Chipchase, who found regardless of country, ethnicity or gender, when a mobile phone is owned, it is among the top three things people carry with them: keys, money, mobile phone (Palmer, 2008). Contributing to the mobile phone always being handy are seductive advertisements of being loved, wanted, needed, befriended. Such advertising helps position the mobile, and apparently your world in your pocket. Selling the dream of someone always amenable, always available, always on tap, suggests loneliness can be bypassed and that help is only an arms length away. Mobile phone use is therefore high, unexpected is that text messaging evolved as the preferred choice for communicating with others at a distance or that it evolved as the preferred choice for young people in NZ even when seeking counselling.

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The costs associated with making a call on a mobile phone in NZ are exceptionally high. In 2006, the cost regardless of the mobile network operator (MNO) used is 89 cents a minute and 20 cents for sending a text message. These costs are, and have been, consistently higher than almost all other OECD countries and contribute to the much higher use of prepay contracts, also known as pay as you go, than almost all other OECD countries (Commerce Commission, 2011). The high costs associated and that costs are incurred with each individual connection contribute significantly to the comparatively low use of mobile phones for making calls, and comparatively high rates of text messaging. As patterns of behaviour are laid down, grooves form,

> As the performance grooves or patterns are laid down and are repeated, they provide a kind of template or limit to what can come next. (Bigum & Rowan, 2004, p. 223)

Even when it is made possible to make calls to Youthline without incurring costs, still young people opt to text instead. Admittedly, for half of those attempting contact, because of their MNO, this involves a request to the community service line to be put through to Youthline. Acknowledging a need for counselling is difficult, having to acknowledge this with both the community service line people as well as with a Youthline counsellor imposes an extra barrier.

The literature of young people texting tends to position the preferred means of contact in terms of individual choice. This is an error, for choice exaggerates the agency of individuals and neglects the distributed agency of complex systems. An attribution error is then perpetuated with young people variously type-cast as suffering from a generational peculiarity variously named as generation thumb or generation text (see for example Thurlow, 2003) or worse with texting seen as evidence of a developmental delay and/ or the avoidance of intimacy (see for example Turkle, 2011). Both approaches frame a problem; they position texting as a deviation from some supposed norm. That young people might be listened to in the medium of their choosing is made harder and a counselling agency that has a stated intention to be there for young people in the places of their choosing, risks marginalization by association.

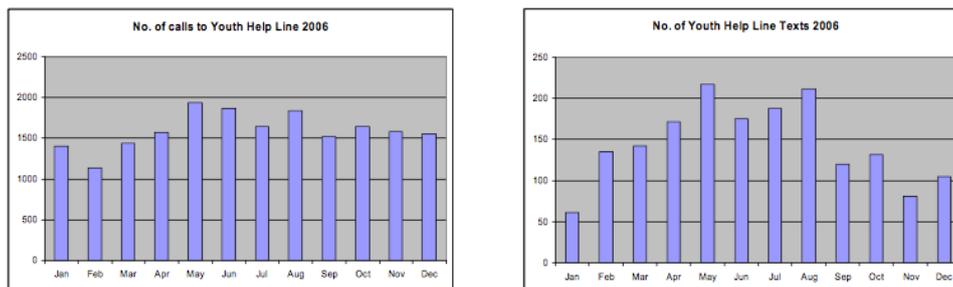*Positioning clients and counsellors*

For those who text, the 160 character limit of a text message necessitates brevity. As a consequence alterations also exist in the normal patter of counselling conversations. Most notable is the abrupt entry to a conversation between strangers, as shown in the following text message:

> Hae um I dnt reail
> knw wat to say but
> um i been realy
> depressed ☹ n cutn
> wrist n dnt knw wat to
> do. HELP!!!

The conversation of intimate angst, fears or hopes, is made possible with someone unknown and with whom there need be no ongoing relationship, The person initiating the conversation cannot see who they talk with, and perhaps more importantly, cannot be seen. They cannot hear their own voice, nor the voice of a counsellor. And in turn they are neither seen nor heard.

Developing trust and rapport would, at least on the surface, appear less important for those entering into this counselling relationship, and the reflective approach of non-directive counselling initially appears redundant. The medium chosen is not a passive conduit of the conversation but also shapes that conversation, and given that counselling identities of client and counsellor are made in conversation, the networked effect is that the form of these roles requires negotiating anew. It is not the intention in this paper to discuss the intricacies of how counselling is reconvened in the medium, but to note that what has been learned previously about counselling practice requires unlearning.

When the text service begins, it is positioned as "a new avenue of support" (Youthline, 2004). In June, 2005, texting Youthline is again described as an entrance point as a "portal, another doorway, to open…another way of entering a young person's world"(Youthline, 2005). As shown in figure 1. the phone counselling service is sustained with little alteration in the rate of calls being made, while simultaneously, and despite an absence of advertising the numbers of text messages received climbs steadily, but then drops.

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Figure 1. No. of Phone calls compared with no. of text messages being received by Youthline in 2006

The variation cannot be attributed to the effects of advertising, as beyond the initial launch with media releases, there is no advertising. I am told that it is the novelty wearing off. There is an expectation that the service will stabilize providing a steady but small stream of text messages secondary to the work of telephone counselling. However, with the digital traces moving onto a computerized software system in 2007, and alternative accounting becomes possible. Reviewing some 6000 messages across a six-month time frame demonstrates 20 per cent of text messages received expressed dissatisfaction with the service. Young people are wanting a service in the medium of their choice and are not shy about saying so, the following is a sample of statements being texted:

> I jst wanna txt coz I dnt wana b heard
> Can u plz jst txt me s0 I d0nt feel al0ne
> Il neva b abl 2 talk bwt it.S0ri 4 bthrn u
> Im sori I dnt thnk I cn cal.i jst feel 2 stupid
> Kn I js txt im a byt shy n da fne
> No I wana txt! Im crying u wont b able 2 understnd me
> If I effing wanted to call I effing would have!
> Icnt call im in the sck bay at skewl
> Im def n dum jus txt me PLZ

This paper does not debate the validity of texts from young people wanting to text rather than talk. Instead, what is pointed to is a disconnect between what those attempting to make use of the service are wanting and what is being provided. Such disconnect is disconcerting to counsellors also.

> I hate apologizing all the time. I do lots of apologizing. That gets me a lot. They get angry about the 6-text policy that is. (Ellie)

The policy was developed because of the belief that a counselling conversation in the space of 160 characters and working with very little information is risky:

> It's a little bit of a worry [text counselling] because if they are young you don't know, so you can be responding as if the person was well into their teens when they might be ten or eleven and might be sounding very natural and affirming of sexual activity assuming they're old enough to do that but colluding with activity that's not really appropriate for age. If they sounded young on the phones, we would have probably found a way of asking that. So what's texted back is more cautious because if you've got a ten year old saying my boyfriend wants to have sex with me that's very different to an eighteen year old. (Beth)

In my interviews with staff and counsellors asking about hopes or fears associated with use of newer technologies in counselling it seems that my prompting the question prompts further discussions outside of the research process. Daniel tells me of his preference in making use of a medium where he can compose what he would say, review it, send it, and not have to be instantly available on receiving a response. Texting affords him time for composure. Daniel is a staff member at Youthline. He states texting is his "first choice" in opening emotional conversations, with friends and particularly where intimacy is sought and there is risk of rejection. He struggles with the policy of six texts and that's all, describing this policy as not being his choice. When we discuss how "others" say it's not a medium for managing emotions, he smiles shyly and tells me how he has been managing his emotional life with the addition of texting for five years, all of his adult life. He feels more confident when he is not "present". It seems that in the conversation with me he has practiced or clarified what

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he is then prepared to talk of in other Youthline forums. At Youthline's National Conference a further story is told. This story is one I am then told of a further four times during my interviews of counsellors.

I am told of Jasmine a 12 year old who has left home at 1130 at night in a part of the country where there are no street lights, this is a rugged part of the country where telephone access is intermittent, and I am told that she felt worse for having texted Youthline. I trace the story through to her relative in Youthline who tells me of his distress that somehow she had gotten the message that it was wrong to text, and that she was in some way wrong for doing this. This is a worrisome story. The story unsettles understandings of what it is to be empowering, of working with strengths, of being client or youth-centred.

What is happening here is that a network that includes text capable mobile phones, MNOs, software that maintains a digital trace, as well as young people, counsellors and staff of the organization and myself, a researcher are interconnected in a networked learning experience. Influence is multidirectional, and shaping of of practice is continual. The organization revises the policy. New ways of relating by text are trialled. Counselling conversations by text ensue. The constraints of space are not as limiting as first assumed. When counsellors want to know more information, they ask. Ways of working develop where counselling scenarios are managed fully by text, such learning having been mutually constructed.

Implications of distributed agency; of constraints and possibilities

Conceptualising networked learning in this way requires reconfiguring understandings of who and what has agency. In this scenario agency is clearly distributed. In this assemblage of networked learning the conditions hospitable for this "hopeful monster" of fledgling practice have been considered. Seeing what came together to create this particular learning occurrence prompts further consideration for what might come next.

The numbers of text messages received by Youthline in 2011 is approximately 20,000 a month. The strategies for maintaining this volume of texted conversations continues as a process best described as muddling through. The way that texts are received and presented to counsellors makes it possible to sustain the thread of a conversation, but with increasing volumes this is increasingly difficult. With increasing sales of smart phones that are wifi capable, and increasingly free wifi zones, will young people continue to text or to switch to alternate media such as email or skype or instant messaging? Second guessing the future is difficult. What has been learned in this experience though is that young people are using text messaging not to be avoidant but to connect. The seemingly innocuous gift of a PDA had ramifications for learning and for the reconfiguration of practice that were never anticipated. Developing a teaching and learning package has become a priority for the organization. An interim workaround develops: those familiar with texting but not familiar with counselling are teaching texting skills to those familiar with counselling but less familiar with texting. Concurrently those familiar with counselling but not texting teach their counselling skills to those familiar with texting but not counselling. In a mutual learning space, text-based counselling is being developed, as these parties discuss how to meld the one with the other.

Conclusion

Studying networks in the wild provides insights for innovation that might be considered too edgy or too risky for mainstream education. In taking ANT sensibilities to networked learning, it became apparent that agency when construed as an individual act is not very helpful and may do damage. In addition, seeing agency as distributed also provides understanding of how reals for different participants in a network are created more and less. Further research of networks in the wild needs to occur; this sector provides insights for practice where the learning outcomes are not known in advance, but where what is learned of in connecting through alternate literacy practices, such as through SMS messaging can be considered. The significant learning for the organization has not been so much about how to do text counselling though this remains a concern, but how to reconnect with philosophical purpose; relating with trust, respect, and valuing in providing a service for young people and with young people.

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