

Appreciating networked learning: Value creation in practice

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Abstract

In recent years an extensive body of research has emerged that focuses on concepts describing how teacher learning can be embedded in daily practice. This includes professional development initiatives that promote the use of social networks to support teacher learning. These networks, also referred to as learning networks, offer opportunities for teachers to expand their knowledge potential in an informal setting. However, researchers and school management alike, find it hard to grasp the implicit learning outcomes created within these learning networks. It is therefore difficult to appreciate, assess and share the value that is created beyond the boundaries of the network itself. With our poster we will present a framework for assessing and promoting value creation in learning networks, which was developed by Wenger, Trayner & De Laat (2011). It departs from a perspective in which learning is seen as a process of value creation that is a result of participating in social networks. To appreciate the richness of the value created in learning networks, the framework proposes five different cycles in which value is created through networked learning activity: 'immediate value', 'potential value', 'applied value', 'realized value', and 'reframing value'. By telling value creation stories, the value that is created through each of these cycles can be articulated. Our research focuses on two possible applications of the value creation perspective. The first possible application is in educational practice, where we focus on three distinct uses: first, we aim to study how the framework facilitates the articulation of value creation, second, we aim to study its use for assessing and appreciating networked learning outcomes within organizations, and third, we aim to study the potential of the value creation cycles in guiding networked learning activities. The second possible application is to use the framework as a research instrument, in which we focus on exploring the extent to which the different value creation cycles occur in practice. The question central to our studies into this matter is whether the value creation cycles cover all value that is created within learning networks and by assessing the value that is actually created in learning networks.

Keywords

Networked learning, social learning, value creation, teacher professional development.

Context

Teachers' professional development initiatives are increasingly focusing on social networks to support teacher learning. These initiatives are catering to the notion that teacher learning is situated in a dynamic social context, which provides many opportunities for teachers to learn from each other (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). Networked learning takes place in all sorts of social relations, regardless of their configuration. Networked learning can be characterized as a form of informal learning situated in practice, where people rely strongly on their social contacts for assistance and development (Jones, Asensio, & Goodyear, 2000). A network in this sense can be regarded as a web of social relationships among teachers that reflects the flow of resources among them. Recent research has provided evidence linking networked learning to an array of positive outcomes, including teacher professional development, student performance and school improvement (Earl & Katz, 2007; McCormick et al., 2010; Moolenaar, Daly, & Slegers, 2010). Nevertheless, school management and researchers still find it hard to grasp the revenues that are generated through networked learning activity. Although certain outcomes are anticipated, a large part of the learning that takes place in learning networks remains implicit and is hard to share and appreciate beyond the network itself. Our research therefore focuses on the value that is created within the network and tries to articulate this value. For the purpose of our study, we use a framework that focuses on assessing and promoting value creation in communities of practice and networks (Wenger, Trayner, & De Laat, 2011). In the framework, learning is seen as a process of value creation that is a result of participating in social networks. We explore the possibilities of this framework for use in educational practice as well as its potential as a research instrument.

Theoretical framework

The framework propose five different cycles in which value is created (Wenger, Trayner & De Laat, 2011). 'Immediate value' considers networked learning activity as having value in itself. Connecting to others can simply be fun and the opportunity to ask someone else a question can also be pleasant in itself. 'Potential value' refers to the knowledge capital that the network produces. Knowledge capital has the potential to be used in practice and contribute to projected outcomes. Acquiring new contacts or getting a lesson plan from a colleague, are examples of potential value that can be created in learning networks. If the lesson plan is then modified to fit the needs of the own students and put into practice, 'applied value' is created. Grasping applied value, means identifying the ways practice has changed in the process of leveraging knowledge capital. Consequentially, value may be created in the form of performance improvement. If the application of knowledge capital is having an effect on the achievement of what matters to stakeholders, 'realized value' is created. Finally, 'reframing value' may be created when engaging in networked learning activity leads to a redefinition of success.

To draw a reliable picture of the way in which networks are creating value, it can be worthwhile to follow value creation across cycles. When looking at networked learning through these five cycles, a value creation story can be told (Wenger, Trayner and De Laat, 2011). Value creation stories are a special genre of stories that start with a network activity and how productive it was (c1). It highlights a resource (c2) and then explains how it was applied in the storyteller's practice and to what effect (c3). Consequently the effect can then be linked to an outcome (c4). Finally, a story might include a redefinition of success and new considerations to frame the expectations of value creation (c5). Participants in a learning network may however not be fully aware of the value they created nor of the steps they took creating it. Telling their value creation story can be a scaffold to articulate the value they created, allowing them to share and appreciate their learning outcomes beyond their networks.

Research questions

The value creation framework described above may be an answer to the call for ways to appreciate the implicit learning outcomes that are created through networked learning activity. However, we must be aware that the framework is merely a conceptual model that still needs empirical validation. Our research therefore focuses on the possibilities of this framework for use in educational practice as well as its potential as a research instrument. Concerning the application of the framework in the context of educational practice, three main questions must be answered: 1) To what extent can value creation be articulated by telling value creation stories? 2) In what way can value creation stories be used to assess and appreciate networked learning outcomes within the organizational context? 3) Can the perspective of value creation cycles be used as a means to guide networked learning activities?

Furthermore, the value creation framework may also provide interesting venues for research as it is a research instrument in itself. The main questions we focus on in our research, therefore are 1) To what extent are the different value creation cycles occurring in practice? 2) Do the value creation cycles cover all value that is created within learning networks? 3) What value is created in learning networks?

In the years to come, these questions will be researched in university-district collaboration projects. Thus far our efforts have concerned the formation of these collaboration projects around the theme of value creation.

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