

Networked Learning International Conference 2006: Subjectification and Surveillance within Distributed Work-based Learning

Lynn Clouder

Coventry University

d.l.clouder@coventry.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper will focus on the formative stages of the development of several communities of practice with what I thought was a common interest in work-based learning (WBL). Work based learning involves learning at higher education level derived from paid or unpaid work (Garnett, 1997). This definition not only gives some sense of the possible breadth of activities that WBL covers but also the diverse communities of practice that might be involved. Although initially confined within the institution the eventual aim is to extend the communities beyond institutional boundaries facilitated by computer mediated communication. Experiences of scoping WBL and exploring how it is conceptualised by colleagues from a variety of subject disciplines, through face-to-face and online interaction, has drawn attention to issues of identification and positionality. These issues are explored through a conceptual framework of subjectification and surveillance that paradoxically might be argued has generative potential for a community of practice.

KEYWORDS

Communities of practice, subjectification, surveillance, critical theory

INTRODUCTION

The development of a research culture around specific pedagogies lies at the heart of the current Inquiring Pedagogies (iPED) initiative at Coventry University. iPED is 'a move to create a vibrant environment of research excellence and scholarship which supports teaching and services to business and the community'. The notion of an iPED network or community is steeped in the discourse of collaboration and cooperation. Work-based learning (WBL) has been identified as an emergent pedagogy suitable for a research theme and attracting one of three half-time, 2 year research fellowships. The success of any resultant community led by the research fellows will be evaluated in terms of its rationale, that being to generate research capacity, research outputs and hard outcomes driven at least partially by the RAE 2008. However, sense of community, of joint enterprise, of mutual engagement, of relationships built on trust and shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998) inevitably impacts on achieving the hard outcomes.

WBL has some unique challenges in terms of building a community with shared interests. Conceptual ambiguity leads to a wide variety of practices falling under what is essentially an umbrella term. Gray (2001) suggest that WBL can involve learning 'for', 'at' or 'through' work. Learning 'for' work usually involves work placements on sandwich degree or professional programmes where students experience the realities of the work setting and develop 'fitness for practice' and 'fitness for purpose'. Learning 'at' work is characterised by staff training initiatives provided in-house which is rarely formally assessed or accredited. Learning 'through' work involves the negotiation of a programme of study tailored to meet the needs of the learner and their own work context. This definition helps us envisage how those involved with WBL within the University come from diverse fields and are more often than not unknown to one another because they are distributed. Add to these groups of people their contacts in professional practice, the public service sector and business and it is feasible to see potential for a dynamic online community built on sharing ideas and innovations and as a consequence developing interest in engaging in research and evaluation of practices to the benefit of all involved. This idyll is of course not easily achieved.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND CONTEXT

In a reflexive attempt at exploring how a networked community might develop while going through the experience of scoping WBL, finding key players and a rationale for bringing them together, I have resisted a techno-rational analysis of my progress and opted instead to adopt a critical inquiry approach. According to Brookfield (2005) thinking critically involves disengaging oneself from tacit assumptions of discursive practices and power relations, in other words, achieving a sense of distance, before oppositional reengagement with the

dominant culture. Not unlike the notion of 'bracketing' (Husserl, 1970) within the phenomenological tradition, disengagement allows the questioning of taken-for-granted realities. Discourses, evident in policy documents and conversations and ideas that have emerged in meeting with academic colleagues across the institution, have been interpreted through a political lens, making explicit power relations and the potential for monitoring and control. As colleagues have introduced me to other colleagues, allowing a mapping of WBL activity, so the 'net' has been widened. Email conversations predominantly form the basis of interpretations of my sense of factors impacting on the ways in which the community might develop.

My analysis must be set in the context of the dominant ideology - that is, the necessity for fundamental institutional change to survive and be competitive in the marketized, liberalized, more for less economies of higher education. The change (redundancy, re-grouping, re-housing, re-evaluation of jobs, curriculum review and a competitive bidding exercise for the establishment of several prestigious research centres) has been swingeing. Uncertainty, dissatisfaction and ennui persist. Academic tribalism is evident in the scramble for resources and recognition. The prize of research centre status has meant boundaries have been drawn, strategies invoked and conversations guarded in true competitive style as colleagues have retreated into their silos. Communities of practice around disciplinary research have become more plainly visible. However, just as new opportunities have emerged so others have withered and potentials for alternative communities faded.

Reflexivity and critical reflection around the formative stages of the development of a community of practice in WBL has resulted in the emergence of two major themes impacting on the community. The first involves how WBL is defined and by whom. The second is about WBL as a pedagogical approach becoming more visible and the expectations that this places on the individuals involved.

SUBJECTIFICATION AND WBL

The human actor is both a subject acting upon contextual conditions and is being determined by contextual conditions (Foucault, 1988). As we shape things so we are shaped. The diverse ways in which colleagues conceptualise, operationalize and engage with WBL practices means that they position themselves differently to one another and identify or make sense of their role and the ways in which they are seen by others in different ways (Woodward, 1997). For instance, colleagues involved in WBL on professional programmes, most of whom are qualified professionals in their field, see WBL from the perspective of one so positioned. They simultaneously constitute themselves and are constituted through professional discourse and to them their practice constitutes the dominant discourse.

Alternatively, colleagues involved in organising and facilitating postgraduate WBL with employees learning through engaging in fieldwork in the workplace see their conception of WBL as dominant not least because it occurs in the context of 'real work'. From their perspective 'learning for work' on placement is little more than 'work experience'. Attempting to define WBL is therefore both inclusive and exclusive and will provide a mechanism for positioning and making hierarchies (Staunæs, 2003). Knowledge generating disciplines or groups function as sources of authority who describe, interpret and explain, leading to domination and control. The conceptual ambiguity surrounding WBL and identification and positioning in terms of its various guises is clearly problematic for a potential community of practice. Failure to identify with the dominant view of WBL will result in colleagues choosing to exclude themselves because all other conceptualisations and attendant knowledge is dismissed. This is illustrated by a private email message received 5 minutes after the end of a face-to-face meeting with several WBL colleagues primarily concerned with employees seeking accreditation for work-based projects which stated, "Sorry I didn't contribute much in the meeting - I thought I was going mad. They weren't talking my language".

Clearly, this colleague felt exposed and vulnerable despite her successful and innovative approach to securing work-based placements for undergraduate students. Although online communication has been said to provide a means by which hierarchical power can be levelled out among individuals (Reynolds et al, 2004) this occurrence illustrates how hierarchy is communicated and perpetuated equally as well online as in a face to face sense and often without knowing or intention. However, withdrawal from the online community is much easier for those who feel excluded from the dominant discourse as they simply withdraw totally or communicate selectively with those with whom they continue to identify causing a schism in any sense of community.

Notwithstanding positive feedback from colleagues coming together from diverse backgrounds to share ideas and comment on written work, others are sceptical that a WBL community of practice has much to offer. Even if individuals identify broadly with the ideals, there remains potential for people to feel subsumed by the group when in their own groups they are all successfully pursuing their own interests and doing their own thing. For some, the idea of community, offering opportunity to relate to one another and pursue a common goal (Ng, 2001) is a motivational device (Reynolds et al, 2004). However, just as Reynolds et al (2004) identified that to students, collaboration was their tutors' agenda rather than their own so too I have recognised that collaboration

across the institution in the form of another community might be on my agenda but others will take some convincing as to its potential benefits. Certainly, one busy academic has questioned whether she has the time and space to be part of another community outside of her discipline and therefore whether being part of one community precludes being part of another which resonates with the notion of 'overlapping communities' (Lave & Wenger, 1991: 98). Clearly, people weigh the potential rewards and costs of joining a new network and for most people benefits need to be tangible.

SURVEILLANCE

Academics are increasingly encouraged to utilise surveillance techniques to monitor student participation with respect to e-learning activities (Chozos et al, 2002). However, they are possibly less aware of the mechanisms through which they themselves are monitored and the impact that monitoring has on motivation. Disciplinary power is constantly exercised by means of surveillance (Foucault, 1980: 104) or what has come to be known as 'the gaze'. The gaze signifies disciplinary power subject to which we discipline ourselves. Foucault suggests that surveillance is achieved through:

'a multitude of often minor processes, of different origin and scattered location, [which] overlap, repeat or imitate one another, support one another, distinguish themselves from one another according to their domain of application, converge and gradually produce the blueprint of a general method'

(Foucault, 1977: 138)

An institutional placement audit conducted in 2003 might be considered to be one such process. The exercise in mapping the use of WBL across the University to gain insight into the quality of provision resulted in several recommendations for processes to be adopted to achieve some degree of standardisation and quality monitoring. Two years later, the identification of WBL as a pedagogy worthy of research endows it with renewed importance in the eyes of the institution and therefore with suspicion by some academic colleagues. Penna and O'Brien (1998: 51) remind us that 'institutions operate according to logics that are often at excessive variance with the humanistic visions embedded in policy analysis'.

Research agendas now make more visible the practices of those colleagues involved in WBL and if they are not involved in research they are feeling an imperative to get involved. Relative anonymity is no longer tenable as showing that one is research active becomes increasingly vital, especially since it will be linked in the near future to job evaluation. Lack of time and space have been frequently cited as the prime reasons for not engaging in research although in principle (and possibly influenced by the 'gaze') colleagues are interested in researching and evaluating their practice to a greater extent than previously. For example, recognising the vast amount of data that he had collected and failed to do anything with, one colleague stated 'I just need help to get started'. Until recently, research has evidently been low on priority lists. However, self-surveillance, or what Brookfield (2005) terms the perfect mechanism of control, has been triggered. The potential to be observed by an unseen powerful gaze is inciting fear and a dynamic for involvement in a community that might help colleagues to learn what they often feel they should already know. 'Surveillance is permanent in its effects even if it is discontinuous in its action' (Foucault 1977: 201). 'The fact of constantly being seen, of being able always to be seen, maintains the disciplined individual in all his [sic] subjection' (p.187).

Becoming part of a community of practice, that involves researching and writing becomes an alternative means of surveillance increasing capacities of control. I am forced to confront the possibility that my post as research fellow is part of the surveillance plan, of making more transparent who is active in researching WBL and who is not and what is being achieved? The 'I' in 'inquiry' that implies focused investigation might be said to bring individuals into focus. Land (2004) suggests that online learning offers comparative freedom from the judgemental gaze of other students. However, I argue that online interaction brings individuals further into focus and into the wider gaze of academic colleagues. The extent of the distribution of participants is evident in group email lists and Web CT webs and who has not felt the pressure to make some meaningful and intellectual contribution to a discussion based on the potential recipients.

Groups are bounded, promoting perceptions of inclusion whilst creating barriers to new members. It is easy to exclude colleagues possibly due to their failure to attend an initial meeting or not join in with a discussion online. However, awareness of surveillance might well promote involvement online where ideas can be shared, although academics seem to be more cautious about translating talk into action. My developing theory in both the WBL community context and other groups with which I am involved is that it is feasible to 'play the game' in terms of maintaining visibility online and claiming involvement without having to make much effort at all or 'do' anything tangible other than throw in the occasional comment. Arguments concerned with lack of embodiment in cyberspace suggest it is feasible to 'hide in the network' (Baudrillard, quoted in Thibaut, 1996: 3) although this is attributed to being 'no longer in front of the mirror'. The notion of hiding is inadequate for

explaining occasional strategic presence although there is an element of 'lying low' that feels similar. However, it is my belief that the mirror remains; some colleagues are simply immune to its self-disciplining effect.

RE-ENGAGEMENT

Exploring the above concepts might seem a little negative yet critical thinking need not be negative; rather it can be generative if having distanced ourselves from the dominant ideology and gained some understanding of the tensions it creates for us as academics, we can then re-engage with it. Brookfield (2005) refers to work of the critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, who suggests that individual liberation can only occur when we remove ourselves temporarily from our peers. There are clearly tensions here between separation and collaboration particularly in the context of communities of practice although Marcuse acknowledges the importance of the collectivity. However, he argues that isolation, detachment and privacy are individual states that are potentially revolutionary. In attempting to identify mechanisms for separating learners from the mainstream, Brookfield (2005: 54) highlights the potential of online learning, self-paced learning and individualised programmes of study for the development of new sensibility or what Marcuse called 'rebellious subjectivity'. Within a community of practice context I question whether online communities possess greater potential for temporary separation from peers and subsequent rebellious subjectivity. Could it be that long gaps between e-mail replies or lack of participation in a discussion thread signify detachment and a space for developing new sensibilities having escaped 'the pressures that guide our thoughts and aesthetic responses into predetermined channels'? (Brookfield, 2005: 54-55).

COMMUNITY OR COMMUNITIES?

Subjectification is a very real issue for colleagues working with diverse conceptions of WBL and what has happened and is happening is that several communities are in the process of evolving where one larger community was envisaged. These communities are active both online and in a face-to-face sense and there are the beginnings of a sense of joint enterprise, relationship building and solidarity. Everyone has valuable knowledge and experience within their specific area much of which has not been shared outside of disciplinary silos. Strong beliefs about the value and benefits of WBL and creative solutions to the challenges it poses are being shared within the group and will hopefully be disseminated more widely as research and writing for publication becomes part of what people consider to be their normal work.

THE MORAL AND ETHICAL IMPERATIVE

Concerns about the sharing and ownership of ideas, has encouraged discussion around a moral and ethical framework for collaboration. If we are to avoid subjugation and enhance chances of fostering a community of practice we need an ethical framework for inquiry that draws people from a range of disciplines cutting across faculties and bringing in people operating at all levels. Building trust is key to the success of the evolving communities and emotional intelligence and sensitivity is currently evident in both online and face to face interaction. For instance, a colleague offers feedback on a draft paper and concludes by saying, "I hope you find these comments useful and not too picky. Basically, I was really impressed with the paper, and I know I will really have to lift my game before I expose my writing to scrutiny."

Building trust also involves paying attention to representation within the research process and particularly in writing up research. Rigour in terms of representation can be ensured through collaborative writing or conjoint representation, distributed representation using different voices in dialogical relationship and through use of empowerment research (Gergen & Gergen, 2000). My own role is to empower through offering my skills and resources to assist groups in developing projects of mutual interest.

WATCHING OUT FOR ONE ANOTHER

If we are aware of the gaze that brings each of us into clearer focus in terms of our research activity, outputs and our esteem factors (aka the discourse of the RAE) we can develop the new sensibility necessary for 'success' not least by collaboration (or might it be called collusion?). By ensuring inclusion of as wide a range of colleagues in what are becoming several WBL communities, a sense of active involvement has been created. Colleagues now aware of the interests of others within their group can communicate opportunities for involvement in projects, pass on useful papers and generally share knowledge across a much wider group than previously and clearly find this stimulating. It is also cost effective in terms of their time.

However, the level of additional networking required is more time consuming suggesting that there needs to be someone with a specific remit, such as myself, to act as a catalyst for bring people together both online and for face-to-face meetings. Where this is achieved I believe there is potential for a different type of 'emotional capital' (Cousin, 2003) recognised through collegial 'rebellious subjectivity'.

CONCLUSION

Research (and iPED) involvement is clearly a double edged sword. Despite potential gains for the individual, involvement generally generates increased amounts of work, which benefits the institution. This is, of course, the plan. We are trapped by our subjectification in terms of being 'good' academics and are under pressure to demonstrate our 'academicness'. It is my contention that our capacity to meet our targets depends on awareness of the dominant discourse and the ways in which it shapes what we are expected to do. Such discourse regulates interaction and impacts on our very identities. However, awareness can be used to strengthen collegiality across increasingly distributed networks that allow the 'distancing' we need from the taken-for-granted realities of the everyday.

REFERENCES

- Chozos, P., Lytras, M. & Pouloudi, N. (2002). Ethical Issues in E-Learning: Insights from the Application of Stakeholder Analysis in Three e-Learning Cases. http://www.dcs.gla.ac.uk/~nick/EL_%20paper.pdf [09/01/06]
- Cousin, G. (2003). Threshold Concepts, Troublesome Knowledge and Learning About Others. Paper presented at 10th Conference of the European Association for Research on Learning and Instruction (EARLI) (Padova, Italy, August 26-30).
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon, New York.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*. Pantheon Books, New York.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the Self in: *Technologies of the Self*, L. Martin, H. Gutman, and P Hutton (Eds) Amherst, MA, 16-49.
- Garnett, J. (1997). *Quality Assurance in Work-based Learning*. In: UACE Work-based Learning Conference.
- Gergen, M. M. & Gergen, K. J. (2000). Qualitative Inquiry: Tensions and Transformations. In, N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.) *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (2nd Ed.) Sage, London, 1025-1046.
- Gray, D (2001). *A Briefing on Work-based Learning*, York, Learning and Teaching Support Network (LTSN) Generic Centre.
- Husserl, E (1970). *Logical investigation*. Humanities Press, Atlantic Highlands, NJ,.
- Land, R. (2004). issues of embodiment and risk in online learning. In R. Atkinson, C. McBeath, D. Jonas-Dwyer & R. Phillips (Eds.), *Beyond the Comfort Zone: Proceedings of the 21st ASCILITE Conference*, (Perth, 5-8 December), 530-538.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge University, Cambridge.
- Ng, K. C. (2001). Using e-mail to foster collaboration in distance education, *Open Learning*, **31**(1), pp.191-200.
- Penna, S. & O'Brien, M. (1998). *Theorising Welfare Enlightenment and Modern Society*. Sage, London.
- Reynolds, M., Sclater, M. & Tickner, S. (2004). A Critique of Participative Discourses Adopted in Networked Learning *Proceedings of Networked Learning Conference 2004*, 251-257.
- Staunaes, D. (2003). Where have all the subjects gone? Bringing together the concepts of intersectionality and subjectification, *Nordic Journal of Women's Studies*, **11**(2), 101-110.
- Thibaut, C. (1996). Baudrillard on the new technologies: an Interview with Claude Thibaut, *Cybersphere 9: Philosophy*. <http://uta.edu/emglish/apt/collab/texts/newtech.html>
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning and Identity*. Cambridge University Press, New York.
- Woodward, K. (Ed.) (1997). *Identity and Difference*. Sage/Open University, London.