

Negotiating Practice: An analysis of an institutional dialogue about networked learning

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Abstract

The following paper analyses data which has emerged from a strand of the TLTP3 Computer Based Collaborative Group Work (CBCGW) project focusing on the topic of 'institutional readiness for networked learning'. The purpose of the strand to date has been to survey and evaluate the readiness of a traditional, research-led university for implementing networked learning, specifically, networked collaborative learning. As such the survey has been concerned with a potential change process. One aspect of a potential change process is a concern with the meaning of such a process for the participants concerned (Fullan, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Drawing on the theoretical framework of communities-of-practice and on data from interviews with university staff the paper explores the economics of meaning at the University and the implications for the university's capacity to learn about networked learning.

Introduction

The CBCGW project (CBCGW, 1998-2000; Lally et al., 1999) is a Teaching and Learning Technology Programme Phase 3 project focused on the development, implementation and evaluation of computer based collaborative group work in higher education settings. These aims have led to the development of work along a number of distinct but interdependent strands. The institutional strand of the project has to date focused on the explication of issues associated with studying the readiness of an institution for implementing networked learning, mainly open & distance learning, specifically networked collaborative learning. From January-April 1999 the CBCGW Project conducted interviews with university staff at one traditional, research-led University (Foster et al., 1999). This paper re-visits this data analysing it within the theoretical framework of Communities-of-Practice (Wenger, 1998). The concept of a Community-of-Practice is introduced first along with the accompanying concept of economics-of-meaning. Two areas of an organization to which we can apply the framework are then addressed. These are: organizational design and learning architecture. The paper concludes with some comments about the capacity of the university we surveyed for learning about networked learning.

Community-of-Practice

The *locus classicus* for the theory of Communities-of-Practice is the work of Wenger (1998). Communities-of-Practice is a theoretical construct within the field of social learning, which seeks to

integrate the components necessary to characterize social participation as a process of learning and of knowing (Wenger, 1998: 4-5).

The concept of a Community-of-Practice can be illustrated by the following example:

Across a worldwide web of computers people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests (Wenger, 1998: 6-7).

The components, which contribute to the development of shared ways of pursuing common interests are: 'meaning', 'practice', 'community' and 'identity'. Such Communities-of-Practice are located everywhere in social life, at work, at home, as part of entertainment, in fact anywhere where we belong as members to a broader community of human beings engaged in a shared practice. Since Communities-of-Practice are pervasive in social life they also form part of organizational life. These communities may exist formally, recognised by the organization and hence institutionalised or they may exist informally outside of and even in spite of formal institutional identities. Wenger further illustrated the concept by identifying and researching a group of colleagues at a company called Alinsu who are involved in a Community-of-Practice organised around the enterprise of insurance claims processing:

With each other and against each other, with their employer and against their employer, they collectively orchestrate their working lives and their interpersonal relations in order to cope with their job. Colluding and colliding, conspiring and conforming, it is collectively that they make claims processing what it is in practice (Wenger, 1998: 45-46).

An important application of the theory is to define organizations as the interaction of

The 'designed organization' [...] and the 'practice' [...] which gives life to the organization and is often a response to the designed organization (Wenger, 1998: 241).

If our goal is to increase the potential within organizations for learning around a particular enterprise there are, according to Wenger, a number of different areas of an organization's work to which we need to turn our attention. These are: organizational design, learning architecture, and economies of meaning, which impinge on both organizational design and learning architecture. We turn first to the topic of economies of meaning.

Economies of Meaning

In the course of its life an organization will generate artefacts, which mobilise work and around which work is organised and coordinated. Organizational artefacts, which might be invoked in a discussion about networked learning at a university might include external government-related documents such as the Dearing Report and those generated by HEFCE along with internal documents such as a statement of a University's mission and university strategy documents. Reference to these artefacts justifies and legitimates work. Wenger describes however how the relationship of organizational actors to these artefacts is not a direct one but

defined in the context of a broader economy of meaning in which the value of the meanings they produce is determined [...] the notion of economy emphasizes: 1) a social system of relative values 2) the negotiated character of these relative values 3) the possibility of accumulating "ownership of meaning" 4) the constant possibility of such positions being contested 5) systems of legitimation that to some extent regulate processes of negotiation (Wenger, 1998: 199).

Closely allied to the notion of economies of meaning then are notions of: ownership of meaning — exactly whose meaning is privileged in the relative positions adopted with regard to a particular issue? And the notion of negotiating meaning — within a system of relative values how negotiable are the

positions of each actor? A focusing on such considerations has in itself a social value for in our attempts to innovate organizationally we recognise the inherently collaborative nature of the problem.

Organizational Design

Wenger proceeds to describe organizational design in terms of four dimensions: participation and reification: “trade-offs of institutionalization”; the designed and the emergent “two sources of structure in organizations”; the local and the global “combining local forms of knowledgeability”; and fields of identification and negotiability “institutional identities as key to organizational learning”. Since the fourth of these dimensions relates to the issue of design for organizational learning, it is on this area that our comments are concentrated.

Among its recommendations the Dearing Report mentions that the higher education sector should:

Take full advantage of the advances in communications and information technology, which will radically alter the shape and delivery of learning throughout the world (NCIHE, 1997: 10).

Nowadays educational organizations can find themselves positioned not only regionally but also globally. Indeed, the recent involvement of the University in a consortium of British and North American universities to further collaborative ventures is testament to the influence of global pressures. Other economies of meaning include external ‘regimes of accountability’ such as the Research Assessment Exercise and the Teaching Quality Assessment, which govern the performance of a university. The University we studied performs well in both areas but such performance can also be conceived as a potential constraint. With academic practice regulated by these external frameworks there is little time for attention to activities such as innovations in teaching & learning. There is as such little extrinsic motivation for academics within a research-led institution to get involved.

Economies of meaning also play their part internally within an organization. On the question of vision around developments in networked learning over the next five to ten years for example, the interplay of organizational identity and the potential for negotiability is clearly apparent. The University’s mission statement is as follows:

The mission of the University is to maintain the highest standards of excellence as a research-led institution, whose staff work at the frontiers of academic enquiry and educate students in a research environment¹.

Such a mission allows one manager to pronounce that, under current conditions,

It would be consistent with this university’s mission to say we are not actually interested in encouraging distance learning, we are not particularly interested in encouraging networked learning as part of our strategic mission but merely to support the activities we would otherwise engage in.

And, in a way, such a pronouncement to a large extent defines the parameters of and hence the ownership of the meaning of innovations in teaching and learning at the University. For linked to this mission are other regulatory frameworks such as incentivization in the form of finance or secondments that might exist to further developments in learning & teaching; incentives which would form part of an institutional design oriented not only towards the stimulation of research but also the stimulation of academic practice

¹ The University’s mission statement.

in networked teaching & learning. The mission of the University and its organizational identity clearly contribute to a situation in which research is privileged over teaching.

The above illustrates the various economies of meaning and differing legitimation frameworks, which impinge both internally and externally on the meaning of a change process in networked teaching & learning. Further evidence for the visibility of these economies can be obtained from an analysis of the responses to the questions posed to interviewees in our initial survey (Foster et al., 1999) in particular: 'What would it mean to say that the university is ready as an institution to support networked learning'? Here we detail some of the economies of meaning evident in the responses to these questions from the vantage point of the relative positions of managers, support staff, and academics.

Managers

The attention of managers is focused both internally and externally but again the relationship to such potential organizational artefacts as changes in an external funding regime more focused on regions is mediated by the University's organizational identity

At the moment this university is driven by research and that drive is basically money driven because if you do better research you get more money. If you do better teaching you don't get any more money.

This privileging of research is such that there is no perceived crisis in teaching and learning, a crisis which would naturally lead to managed changes in this area. According to one manager, reasons which are used to justify changes in other institutions e.g. (1) student shortage and the re-focusing of markets and (2) a top-down managerial structure as a mechanism to achieve the management of change are not levers which are applicable to the University at the current time.

Support Staff

It is to management that support staff largely look for ownership of the innovation process:

- there has to be a clear institutional vision that's owned by senior, very senior, people in the university...basic divisional drive has to come from the very senior line.

- much as I agree with things being done in a bottom up way there is a very big role for leadership from the top as well...both management but also the top academic level [...] without support from the top we are not going to go anywhere.

- it needs to be taken on board by the most senior management and then they need to strategically plan how they are going to use information technology most effectively.

For support staff then it is management in whom is invested the power and responsibility for an institutional design which leverages developments in networked learning. Shared involvement in the innovation process would then come at the implementation stage. Support staff also mentioned the importance of quality, particular the quality of learning & teaching materials; and such controls would be part of an external regulatory economy of meaning.

Academics

For academic practice there appear to be a number of issues, which are integral to its practice and which could be considered to be a focus on developments in interaction with institutional design by management and by academics. These issues relate to curriculum change:

the most important thing of all is quality control and that is not necessarily bureaucracy that's people... saying ... people aren't learning anything

before we get telematics we have to genuinely focus on how we are going to improve our teaching and learning

I can see some readiness in the structures that are there [...] but I still feel that it is a little bit devolved and the responsibility is with the departments and with course teams and I don't have the sense that there is a sort of institutional push to do things.

It has already been mentioned that Wenger defines organizations as the interaction of institutional design with Communities-of-Practice, with the former ideally in the service of the latter. Indeed, one of the main findings identified in our earlier research (Foster et al., 1999) was to recognise these dual aspects of a university's work. Wenger further suggests that if our practices are to be inventive then scope should exist for negotiating an organizational design:

The point of design for learning is to make organizations ready for the emergent by serving the inventiveness of practice and the potential for innovation inherent in its emergent structure. Institution and practice cannot merge because they are different entities. The relations between them is not one of congruence, but one of negotiated alignment. And the alignment is never secured; it must constantly be negotiated anew, because it is by being of different natures that they complement each other as sources of structure (Wenger, 1998: 262).

Having focused on organizational design and some of the accompanying economies of meaning at the University we now turn our attention to the topic of a learning architecture and its accompanying economies of meaning.

Learning Architecture

Wenger approaches an organization's learning architecture in terms of a three-way focus on 'engagement', 'imagination' and 'alignment'. In turning our attention to the economies of meaning which impinge on each of the three aspects of this learning architecture we need to ask questions such as how learning might more productively take place by negotiating the practice relating to a joint enterprise such as networked learning through engagement, imagination and alignment.

Negotiating through Engagement

The differing but relative positions adopted by managers, academics and support staff revealed by our interviews is evidence of one aspect of engagement in practice around networked learning: the negotiation of meaning. The existence of a Networked Learning Strategy group has also been one organizational focus for sustaining this negotiation of meaning.

The data also suggests that there exists much competence in the area of networked teaching and learning which is as yet untapped by the institution. We have described the current situation at the university with regard to the support of networked learning as being fragmented, that expertise exists informally, but that this has yet to be recognised formally in terms of an 'institutional home'. This will give rise to boundaries

between areas of local competence. However, boundaries can also be a source of learning and Wenger advocates the fostering of 'boundary encounters' for organizational learning. Some of the external constraints on learning have been identified above; internally, in terms of engagement, the following are also applicable:

the way the institution is structured it doesn't seem to me to show much learning itself in terms of implementing policy.

It can be argued that the inventive generation of new knowledge is stifled within the currently designed organizational context.

On an emergent level staff are developing competences which are not recognised within the current economies of meaning within the University. This leads to a conclusion that there is some degree of non-participation in the institutionalization of developments around information and communication technologies where staff have the competence but are not being given the experience and space with which and in which their competence can interact and develop:

it needs to be a proactive institution to learn for everyone in it, not just [...] mission statements, but ways of putting that into practice so that when somebody comes to work here they are going to contribute and take away from the university in terms of their own personal development

Here, the dual sources of structuring in terms of the designed institution in practice and emergent personal involvement in practice are highlighted.

Negotiating through Imagination

It would be unrealistic to suggest that all members of an organization have the opportunity to engage with and influence its institutional structures. Wenger suggests however that

Imagination plays an important part in transcending fragmentation, bringing the global into the local and making learning an important aspect of organizational life (Wenger, 1998: 257).

These are 'constellations' which lie beyond the immediate scope of Communities-of-Practice, but to which communities-of-practice need access

reflecting various connections to the organization and to the world (Wenger, 1998: 257).

Some of these constellations may for example be institutionalized and some may not. In a higher education setting such constellations may for example be: formally recognised organizational units whose institutionally accountable remit is broader than that of the Communities-of-Practice to which it plays host, inter-disciplinary research centres, academic subject disciplines, and regional encounters between universities. What is important about such constellations is that they are candidates for institutionalization. As such they become institutional sites for identification and negotiability:

Reifying constellations structures the fields of identification and negotiability because it provides new material to locate oneself and opens new issues to negotiation (Wenger, 1998: 259).

The management of networked learning and the management of the change process associated with the development of networked learning within an organizational context can be characterised as something akin to the coordination of multiple constellations:

