Learning, Teaching and Assessment in Networked Learning.

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Abstract

The focus of our paper is on Theme 2 of the Networked Learning Manifesto which focused on Learning Teaching and Assessment and stated as follows:

Networked e-learning as envisaged in this manifesto requires models of learning that are based on participation and not ones that are based on transmission.

This requires as much emphasis on learning processes and learning to learn as on subject knowledge.

Educational values which contribute to quality in learning and teaching environments are those that seek to encourage dialogue, exchange of ideas, intrinsic approaches to study and engagement. It is this that we need to support through networked e-learning.

Networked e-learning provides the opportunity for developing innovative assessment practices in which teachers and learners collaborate in the assessment process.

Networked e-learning is not a depersonalising experience. The careful integration of course design and innovative assessment can create as intimate an educational experience as a face-to-face encounter.

In this paper we look at these statements in more detail in terms of what the ideas behind each of them were and the meaning and relevance of some of the key ideas to the current theory and practice of networked learning. Our approach is to review current thinking sufficiently to highlight issues which the manifesto raises and in addition, to examine these issues from the perspective of an empirical research study of networked learning practice. We have summarised key issues in the final section of the paper as questions which we hope might provide criteria for evaluating how the principles incorporated in the manifesto are reflected in current networked learning theory and in practice. The questions we suggest are:

- What values and beliefs underlie practice? Are claims to democratic pedagogy justified?
- What interpretations of 'community' are found in use? Do they take account of the social and political processes involved?
- As tutors, what ideas do we draw on to help make sense of these processes?
- Do Networked Learning practices support critical reflection and the co-construction of knowledge?
- Do assessment procedures reflect the same values as are embodied in other aspects of the pedagogy? If there are differences, are they at least acknowledged?
- Do our pedagogies support space and time for trust and confidence to develop?

Keywords

Networked Learning Manifesto, learning community, participation, assessment.

Section 1 – Participation, collaboration and assessment.

There is by now a long-standing if not universally accepted, tradition of participative pedagogies. Interpretations in practice of earlier positions developed by Dewey and Lindemann, more recently by Knowles in the field of Adult Education and supported by experiential approaches from Kolb have established participative approaches such as 'self-directed learning' and student-centred learning. Perhaps the most advanced form of participative practices seen in the 'learning community' which has been applied, critiqued and developed for at least 40 years. There have been applications of participative pedagogies in the different levels of education and in a range of academic disciplines. In reviewing ODL Teaching and Learning Models from 1971 - 2001, Rumble (2001) identified a progression of models related to the technology and media available moving through from transmission modes of teaching and learning to the more recent socio-cultural and 'metacognitive' models. These are:

> *The transmission model* of teaching and learning.
> *The constructivist model* – which assumes that learning is the active development of personal understanding, based on interpretation and selection.
> *The socio-cultural model* – which assumes that learning is social, interactive and co-constructive .
> *The metacognitive model* - which is reflective, helping learners to step back from their own learning and monitor it in order to improve their understanding.

Rumble's observation was that these changes have been accompanied by increased levels of interaction and participation. Certainly, and as we have argued elsewhere (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005) Networked Learning has been a lively arena for the development and application of participative methods for pedagogical and ideological reasons. Increasingly collaborative group work has become seen as a main pedagogical method for networked learning. According to McConnell (2005) the literature reflects a growing emphasis on community building and group work within networked learning environments. Jones and Steeples concur with this view and claim that the use of collaborative methods has been absorbed into the outlook of experienced practitioners of networked learning (Jones and Steeples 2002). With the advent of Web2, participation is becoming more directly fore-grounded in discussions of online learning. Greenhow et al (2009) in their review of Learning, Teaching, and Scholarship in a Digital Age: Web 2.0 and Classroom Research commented 'Two important themes, learner participation, and creativity and online identity formation, emerged from this analysis and support a new wave of research questions'.

Yet working with participative designs involves tutors and students in complex social dynamics which raises questions as to how these dynamics are worked with. The sections which follow address these issues, and are informed by critical perspectives in order to examine some of the potential issues associated with the increased interest in adopting or encouraging increased participation in networked learning.

Pedagogy or ideology: rationales for participative pedagogies.

As useful as frameworks like Rumble's are for helping to make sense of the evolution of participative pedagogies in open and distance education over the decades, it is still necessary to take account of the reasons why alternative approaches have been adopted. The reasons are often complex and sometimes confused. The belief that participation in the learning process is more meaningful to the learner is long-standing. More meaningful because the learner's involvement makes it more likely that their learning arises from and is relevant to their experience. Questions which have formed are in relation to that experience as are the skills and knowledge necessary to engage with it more effectively. The emphasis on experience has sometimes clouded the picture however when 'being involved' in experiential pedagogies has meant being kept 'busy' rather than taking part in a democratic sense. Recent developments in thinking of learning in terms of co-authorship, where knowledge is co-created amongst tutors and students, is a significant rationale for pedagogies which provide the structures and methodologies to support this, as is echoed in Rumble's last two categories.

Participative approaches have also been guided by more ideological principles as educators share in Dewey's axiom that education should represent preparation for citizenship of a democracy, reflected in work, education

Proceedings of the 7th International Conference on
Networked Learning 2010, Edited by:
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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

and society. The emphasis in the Learning Community on tutors and students sharing in the process through which decisions and choices are made reflects this purpose and the belief that power, structures and learning are inseparable. A distinctive feature of participative approaches therefore is that of sharing in control and in responsibility, a feature which is confirmed in the reflections of students taking part in a Learning Community in a series of studies of two different learning networks; a part-time postgraduate masters networked learning programme and a JISC mail list supported network of Further Education Principals. The studies took place during 2005 – 2006 and were initially conceived as virtual ethnographies that involved being 'in the field' in the classic sense of being co-present with participants and observing virtual interaction in online spaces. The studies additionally involved both face to face and online interviews and questioning and it is the latter data that this paper draws on. Further details of the studies are reported in Ferreday et al 2006a, Ferreday et al 2006b, Ferreday and Hodgson 2007 and Hodgson, 2008.

In both networks the expectation of shared responsibility was seen as positive and something that could be assumed. It was seen as an important dimension by some in terms of handling the difficult aspects of working at a distance from the others in the network and in terms of creating the best opportunities for learning. Both networks mentioned that being part of the network helps deal with certain aspects of loneliness associated with different professional contexts and situations. An agreement to be responsible for others was seen as important in this respect.

Two of the respondents involved in this research reflected on their experience of working in a Learning Community in this way:

> I've never felt as comfortable and confident doing academic assignments as I have on this workshop, on this course, because of the way it's structured through the network, it's not me on my own, it's the group helping me do it.

> I think its community and learning through dialogue with others is quite important to me in my own sort of learning space, in that by nature I think I prefer a social learning environment………

Similarly, an FE principal made this observation:
> I think that a good learning environment is one in which people are supporting one another and recognise that actually we don't need to be all in competition with one another, actually it can all bring more if we learn more from one another rather than being isolated

Making sense of the dynamics involved in participative pedagogies.

Working with participative approaches inevitably involves students and tutors in complex social and political dynamics which need to be understood and worked with. It sometimes seems that whether in the classroom or within a VLE there is ingenuity in design which is not matched by the level of ongoing analysis of the dynamics the design generates. Ideas used to make sense of these dynamics have either been absent or superficial with processes of power and difference reduced to psychologistic simplicities. With increasing national and ethnic diversity in Higher Education programmes, conventional or networked, this problem has become more acute. The idea of taking responsibility for the learning process has moved on since the early work of adult educators who placed great emphasis on self directed learning. Writers such as Ellsworth (1989), Brookfield (1994) and Gore (2001) have recognized the political and socio-cultural aspects associated with self directed learning and adopt a more critical perspective in drawing attention to the unequal distribution of power and control between learners and educators as a significant element in the learning process. Power, age, gender, identity, socio-cultural norms and language and discourse are all recognized as important dimensions and influences on the process and experience of taking and sharing in responsibility.

Language and discourse are seen to be the key medium through which relations of power and control are practiced (Fairclough, 2004). From this perspective, language is seen as the means by which learners construct reality, establish social relations, act in relation to each other and develop their professional identity. Implicit in this view is the idea that we are both shaped by such social and linguistic processes and can change them. The Learning Community is a case in point. The discourse of 'community' carries with it a number of attractive features, for example solidarity, a sense of belonging, shared responsibility and mutual support. These features

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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

are often present in people's experience of a learning community, as is illustrated by the extracts we included earlier in this section. Less likely to be featured by the advocates of community-based pedagogies are the darker sides, experienced by those holding minority interests (Reynolds, 2000). From this more critical perspective Giddens (1994) wrote:

> Those who think of 'community' only in a positive sense should remember the intrinsic limitations of such an order. Traditional communities can be, and normally have been, oppressive. Community in the form of mechanical solidarity crushes individual autonomy and exerts a compelling pressure towards conformism. (p. 126).

As implied by these observations, in a network based on participative, collaborative or other community-like values, there will always be the possibility of unequal power and control, and differences in how readily people feel able to take part, procedurally or conceptually. Furthermore, an examination of people's experience of community-based pedagogies reveals that that the differences which make a difference are not only structural (age, gender, class, ethnicity) but may be comprised of differences in approach to working in a participative environment (professional background or preferred ways of working for example). These differences can add to the richness of the collective educational experience, but can also become the basis for the formation of subgroups or of some becoming marginalised, as examples from a different study illustrate (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003):

> For the most part people seemed to bond with like-minded individuals. There wasn't much evidence of wanting to explore others' ideas and experience but of confirming ones own opinions.
> It seemed as if the only legitimate voices were those who argued for more structure. The rest were pushed to the margins and didn't have much influence from then on.

As Noddings (1996) observes:

> To varying degrees, members of a community voluntarily subjugate their individuality, and can find themselves subject to policing and control, or they become marginalized. At worst the choices seem to be between assimilation or expulsion, as in order to ensure the integrity of the community, 'normocentricity' is enforced and dissent is outlawed (p. 254).

Assessment practices in networked learning

Whether in Networked Learning or conventional practice, assessment is a crucial but often neglected element in a participative pedagogy. The assessment process, its procedures, responsibilities and criteria embody the power of the educational institution, granting or withholding grades and qualifications, opening or closing doors for students' aspirations. This being the case, the structure of assessment and its inherent opportunities for influence should reflect the other aspects of a participative pedagogy. How much influence do students have over the criteria used to judge the quality of their work? Is there an opportunity for them to be involved in the assessment of their own and other students' work?

The answers to these questions determine whether the pedagogy is participative in assessment as well as in the other elements of the approach, or whether it is limited to everything *but* assessment. The difficulty here for the academy is that traditionally the assessment process enshrines the authority of its members. Offering students a share in the processes of assessment may prove difficult to accept for some.

As with any aspect of a participative pedagogy there may be degrees of student involvement as the ideals of the tutors engage with the traditions of the institution. Students may support each other in reaching the focus of self-chosen assignments, they may have the opportunity to influence the interpretation of the received assessment criteria and ultimately, can take part in negotiating a mark or grade for their finished work with peers and tutors – as is the case in some 'collaborative' approaches.

These are difficult and complex procedures. The institutional power represented in the tutor group is invariably reinforced by exam boards and institutional procedures. This may influence the process of 'agreeing' a mark

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even if these pressures are unspoken. Research can uncover these tensions as experienced by students as Trehan's work has clearly illustrated (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003)

> Whilst it could be argued that [the tutors] only had as much power as we were willing to give them it didn't always feel like that, especially at marking time when their power …(real or imagined) was keenly felt.

Section 2 – Learning processes, learning approach and dialogue

In this section we will examine more closely the importance of emphasising the learning process in networked learning together with the nature of the educational approach that is advocated within the manifesto.

Learning processes that are based on relational dialogue and critical reflectivity

McConnell (2005) argues that collaboration can help to clarify ideas and concepts through discussion, develop critical thinking and provides opportunities for learners to share information and ideas. Alvai and Gallupe (2003) similarly claim to have found greater levels of critical thinking skills for online students involved in collaborative interaction and discussions. Cousins and Deepwell (2005), like other writers in the field, make a direct connection to the overlap between the collaborative pedagogic values of network learning and Wenger's theory of situated learning within communities of practice.

In many discussions of situated learning theory the emphasis is on the relationship between learning and activities or practice. Networked learning, however, has increasingly moved the emphasis more towards learning that emerges from relational dialogue with both online resources and significantly, with others in either learning networks or communities. It doing this it aligns itself to a social constructionist view of the world with its emphasis on language and the construction of meaning (Gergen, 1973). SLT theorists Cook and Brown's (1999) notions of 'productive inquiry' and the 'generative dance' that takes place in conversations and leads to or evokes new insights and new meanings is not dissimilar to the idea of learning through relational dialogue.

Ferreday et. al. (2006), however, go further than Cook and Brown and claim that through dialogue we construct meaning about who we are and what is acceptable knowledge within a given social and cultural context. In addition, they argue, hierarchies and inequalities are structured and re-structured through interaction/dialogue and social norms are reproduced. In the networked learning literature, they suggest, there has been a tendency to foreground communication at the expense of recognizing the continuing importance that social categories, such as nationality, race and gender have in dialogical exchanges, be it that of Self or of 'the Other'.

Online dialogue from this relational perspective is seen to provide learners with opportunities to articulate their social and cultural experiences and develop critical thinking through questioning and challenging existing work practices and organizational conditions, especially taken-for-granted assumptions embedded in both theory and professional practice (Reynolds and Vince, 2004). Dialogue also offers learners an opportunity to learn to listen to others' goals and interests. Social constructionists (Shotter, 1994; Gergen, 1999) stress the importance of understanding "different interests" without searching for the "most relevant" perspective. This constructionist tenet would seem to hold considerable value for learning in a world increasingly dominated by uncertainty and contradictions and the need to develop a sense of multiple perspectives to handle differences and tensions (Reynolds and Vince, 2004).

Hodgson (2008) refers to a discussion on participation in educational situations by Von Wright (2006) who explains that in a relational perspective teaching and learning should not be understood as establishing relations between (closed) individuals but rather as a communication between open selves. Von Wright draws specifically on the work of George Herbert Mead and John Dewey. The implication of such a perspective for teaching and learning is the requirement for space for participation, (Von Wright ibid). However, as Von Wright suggests the space for participation in many educational situations is often not only limited in scope but also frequently does not connect to the life and experience of students as suggested as necessary by both Mead and Dewey. She suggests that 'participation should be understood in terms of *involvement* in meaning making, knowledge construction and mutual will formation' (p166) and that 'Learning within this viewpoint assumes and requires learners' participation and involvement in the construction of subject knowledge itself' (Von Wright, ibid).

In this view, learning is an ongoing process that involves knowledge that matters to the learner. The focus is on how knowledge is applied to make sense of the world, including making sense their own position in it, of unclear situations, solving issues or problems and creating value. Learning from this perspective also includes the development of the capacity to *interact* with other relevant interlocutors and the generation of new ways of seeing things which leads to change.

In summary then we are suggesting that networked learning can be seen to be aspiring to provide a space and a place for dialogue and interaction that not only supports the co-construction of knowledge, identity and learning but also where this co-construction is exposed to critical analysis and reflection. Critically reflective dialogue was expected and encouraged in the Learning Community of the PT networked learning programme and as one participant commented it became part of the accepted process of working together;

> *So then the process of using questions to prompt thought is working really well, and it worked really well in the last set and the set before that. We are all sort of getting the hang of it, the different people in different groups and locations. Just well where does that come from and what are your thoughts on that and have you thought about this, have you thought about that. Ask questions rather than, well here's what I think, this is what you should be doing.*

Time has to be allowed to build relationships and trust

Johnson, S.D. et al. (2002) in their exploration of group processes of virtual learning teams concluded that more time should be allocated to establish relationships online. What is more the development of trust, together with social presence online, is increasingly identified as important (Swan 2002; Garrison, D.R. & Anderson, T. 2003). McConnell (2005) explains that without attention to developing trustful relationships which in turn support and foster collaborative work, members of the groups are less likely to feel engaged with each other or feel that they have been involved in a truly collaborative learning experience.

Learning and knowing that is seen as a social process based on dialogical interactions is associated with and depends on the relationships between learners and other social agents (peers, facilitators, experts, intermediaries, etc.). Building reciprocal and positive relationships requires time and patience. Relationship building is developmental and incremental and starts with establishing knowledge and understanding of each other's views and histories. Both the learners and other social agents involved in the learning experience need to get to know each other. In any learning relationship there is, however, always the danger of reciprocity of perspectives being privileged over different perspectives (Keddie, 1971). As Hodgson and Reynolds (2005) point out, consensus-bound discourses that frequently dominate participative practices in adult and higher education can discourage recognition of differences and different perspectives and the voice of the 'Other'.

Jones et al (2006) argue that trust is at the heart of networked relationships for learning. Garcia-Lorenzo (2006) however claims that, particularly in knowledge intensive networks, trust is becoming reconfigured and inscribed in informational social bonds that are based less in hierarchical relations and more in the complex, reciprocal intricacies of transverse networks of information exchange. Trust, she suggests, becomes based less on knowledge of someone's character and more on the knowledge of someone's resources and his or her position in the social field and a matter of 'mutual influence'.

The importance of Building relationships and trust in practice

As we observed is Section 1, it is very easy for people to be quite judgmental about difference and implicitly critical of people who contribute 'differently'. In large informal networks such as the principals' mail list this can be reflected in relatively trivial comments that, nonetheless, had an impact on how people felt about contributing themselves. As reflected in the following comment, people are aware that they are potentially exposing their own incompetence or lack of knowledge:

> *(t)here's a kind of view that there are some people who demonstrate their incompetence almost on the bulletin board. ... So there is an issue about writing on the bulletin board and making sure that it's coherent, it's grammatically correct because you're exposing yourself to all your peers,*

There is less likelihood that people will feel responsible for others in the network if they do not know them, are feeling exposed and, ultimately, perhaps do not trust them. Whether you can trust the other people in the

network has an impact on what people felt comfortable to post. In an informal network where you know some of the people but not the others and you don't know who is having access or how your responses might be used or 'leaked' then this will influence what you are prepared or willing to post. Indeed having a relationship with someone would often lead to private e-mail exchanges in response to something posted. The level of trust conferred on another Principal in the comment below did, as Garcia-Lorenzo suggests, seem to be influenced by a perception of the individual's resources and his position, in this case, in the social field of the FE sector

> *In a sense I wrote back to him particularly because I rate him, I think he is a good guy and I think he will actually put the point over well. And so I gave him some information because he said cut some problems that I've got and so I said this is the position here and we had a little bit of to-ing and fro-ing ...I found that quite an effective way of communicating.*

In both the principals' mail list and the PG programme the nature of the relationship established did appear to impact on both the responsibility they felt for each other and the kind of contributions they felt able to make. People were conscious that they and others were exposing themselves and their level or 'lack' of knowledge. This was reflected in comments like;

> '*So she lacked a lot of confidence in her knowledge of the field I guess, and that held her back from contributing. So I guess that might translate into contributing on the network possibly'*

How much knowledge people were perceived to have had an impact on how much power and/or confidence they were attributed with having or displaying within the network;

> *I find it difficult really, because I think we all come from very different backgrounds and perspectives and some people, who have a lot of that theoretical knowledge already, feel quite confident in posing questions. And then some of us, who it's all like, you know, constantly opening your eyes and getting into it, whether you actually feel less confident to put something down on paper, or put something down on the network, because I think there is quite a bit of a gap between some people who are already dealing all the time within the theory because of the nature of their job or they might be management or development consultants or whatever.*

The issues of confidence and vulnerability
As already explained where trust is not present or relationships not developed it can leave participants feeling exposed and lead to a lack of confidence in their contributions. As aptly explained in the following quote from a respondent, the effects of the experience of lack of confidence was influenced by how individuals related to and felt about the people they were working with. Where the relationship was felt to be a productive one, there was a greater willingness to both engage in the dialogue and to learn from challenges to one's own thinking.

> *And there is like defensiveness around those sort of challenges, there was a real warmth of understanding that people are doing that for your benefit, so you are writing something down and your learning has been more effective, it has been very good.*

It was not unusual however for respondents to make comments about a sense of vulnerability associated with the already mentioned feelings of exposure that resulted from writing down or committing ones thoughts or ideas to the written word for others to read.

> *For [me]my habitual, preferred delivery mode is verbal, I'm a bit wary of the written word and I feel that once I'd written something and set it I'd kind of committed myself you know, I'm much more vulnerable and transparent and open to criticism when things are written.*

Discussion and conclusions

In the Networked Learning manifesto it refers to networked learning not being depersonalising and further states that the careful integration of course design and innovative assessment can create as intimate an educational experience as a face-to-face encounter.

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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

Some authors have argued that relations and the trust required to overcome such feelings of exposure and vulnerability can not and will not happen in an online environment. Dreyfus (2002) for example claimed that essential dimensions of emotion, commitment and risk are not possible online. Blake (2002) in a response to Dreyfus' view commented that there is nothing intrinsic about Distance Education that precludes risk or commitment and that we take risks with a commitment to 'people' and not just to their bodies. Blake asks 'do not our beliefs about such risks relate to our knowledge of or assumptions about their imagined history?'

Blake's view concurs with a study by O'Regan (2003) who interviewed students who were studying online and found that emotions were critical to their described experiences of working online. She identified as significant: frustration, fear/anxiety, shame/embarrassment, enthusiasm/excitement and pride, all feelings that would suggest the working online is an emotional experience. O'Regan goes on to say that 'participants in the study reported particular contexts in which those emotions seemed to inhibit or enhance the teaching/learning processes'.

O'Regan's work reinforces both the importance of trust and the time to build relationships for trust to develop. In addition, it raises questions about whether or not working on line can be a depersonalising experience that can potentially inhibit the likelihood of relationships and trust ever forming. It is the starting assumption for many, though perhaps less so now but still present. In practice as the following quotes demonstrate that over time online networked learning spaces can become anything but depersonalising;

> *As confidence in how to use the system and that what I had to say was valid and understanding of what sort of feedback was expected grew, so too did the sense of community and responsibility. Having the online environment made me feel a real sense of belonging and that I wasn't in this alone.*

> *Through their postings people across my sets have made me laugh, cry, boosted my confidence, frustrated me, motivated me, been honest with me, comforted me and helped me enormously.*

To conclude we suggest some questions through which we might reflect on our understanding of current Networked Learning theory and practice of learning, teaching and assessment:

- What values and beliefs underlie practice? Are claims to democratic pedagogy justified?
- What interpretations of 'community' are found in use? Do they take account of the social and political processes involved?
- As tutors, what ideas do we draw on to help make sense of these processes?
- Do Networked Learning practices support critical reflection and the co-construction of knowledge?
- Do assessment procedures reflect the same values as are embodied in other aspects of the pedagogy? If there are differences, are they at least acknowledged?
- Do our pedagogies support space and time for trust and confidence to develop?

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ISBN 978-1-86220-225-2

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