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Understanding the process: Rich Pictures and the Spiral model

Prior to the Change academy conference, delegates were asked to begin preparations for creating a Rich Picture. The purpose of this was to explain to other delegates the project, the institution, and the people who will be implementing it and be affected by it. For our team, each member drew their own (extract from one example below) and these were then used to inform debate as we created a group poster.

The attempt to identify a relevant system that could be modelled led the team to conclude that a "journey" metaphor was more appropriate than a "soft system" metaphor, and the final picture reflected this. Significantly, at the conference, only one project team had created a Checkland-style Rich Picture so it is inferred that the difficulties were shared by other groups.

Communities, Culture & Complex Adaptive Systems

Community is a difficult and amorphous construct. Communities are both:

- formed from historical association with both place and people,
- and are the construction of an identity around agreed ritual, ceremony, structure and assumptions

Together these create the social heritage or culture of community. A university/college community is subdivided into many subcultures associated with subject specialities, service support, research and teaching, and leadership. Lecturers bring the rules and rituals of their specialities into their Faculties, and students are socialised into these Faculty and subject 'families' within the overall HEI community. This socialisation is strengthened through learning within practice settings of schools, NHS trusts, social care contexts and business.

Within a Complex Adaptive System, a collection of individual agents all act within their own rules and mental models, as services and Faculties do at HEIs. By using this micro-diversity creatively, change can be stimulated by bringing new insights and solutions to complex problems. However, a tolerance of tensions and paradoxes is required in order to make the resulting emergent change sustainable. The gateway process uses this micro-diversity for constructive conversations to bring 'newness' into the world and generate different coherent communities with novel shared meanings. This then allows different cultural perspectives and juxtapositions to match up natural attractors in order to co-create originality and new cultures.

Questions for discussion

- How viable is the idea of relating conversational analysis to a virtual environment? Have you any experience of undertaking this or are you aware of any published research relating to this?
- How might we address the analysis of the relationship between face-to-face conversations and virtual conversations?
- What experience do you have of using a VLE for a non-teaching activity? Please tell us how you used it, what worked and what did not.
- There is an assumption that students in rural communities will benefit significantly from FDL. Does anyone have specific HE experience or evidence in this area?
- Aspects of the Change Academy approach have much in common with Checkland's "Soft Systems" approach (SSM). Has anyone applied SSM as part of an FDL development process?
- In moving from a predominantly conventional teaching and learning environment to one which has FDL at its core, one would expect to have to actively engage with changing tutor's conceptions of teaching and learning. Is this so, or do most tutors adapt readily to new environments?

Analysing the conversations in context: using computer mediated communication to support the development of a cultural change project.

Key Ideas:

- The team wanted to better understand the ways in which the VLE had been used to facilitate a democratic process and cooperative working (McConnell 2000: 2) and support the processes defined by Seel (2005:113) as emergent inquiry characteristics
- We explore how these conversations impacted on the output we were charged with: specifically the delivery of a college wide strategy for implementing Flexible and Distributed Learning (FDL)
- The analytical approaches seem to fall into two discourses; quantitative analyses using a coded approach (Stribos 2006 and others) or more qualitative analysis (after Salmon 2004) typically applied within a pedagogical setting.
- We observe networks of conversations (Brown & Isaacs 2001) which demonstrate connectivity, diversity, a high rate of information flow, lack of inhibitors and a clearly defined shared intention (Seel, 2005).

A small multi-site Higher Education institution managing change in its e-learning culture

What we're doing

The project involves undertaking a series of research engagements with a multi-site higher education institution which is re-orientating its e-learning culture. The focus of the engagements is the change management process adopted for the re-orientation.

Challenges facing the e-learning project team

- Understanding the communities we serve
- Changing academic perceptions of e-learning
- Working together in a new way
- Understanding the overall change process

Spiral metaphor

The attraction of the spiral metaphor is that when travelling round the spiral, one revisits each point with the benefit of more experience each time. This is reminiscent of Boehm's Spiral Model of information systems development.

This cellular automaton, from Walker and Rucker's Cellular Automata Laboratory, shows spirals emerging at one point in the run. This model contributed to our understanding of the metaphor.

Research & Evaluation

Expertise

Conversation

Analysing the conversations in context: using computer mediated communication to support the development of a cultural change project.

Work in Progress:

- Incorporate an element of chronology.
- Consider the implications of discussing 'conversations' other than those which occurred on / through the VLE, in the wider context team work.
- Demonstrate the centrality of the VLE to the overall approach of the team; including the key use of the VLE in our project as a shared-access repository.
- Using the recollections and reflections of the team to explore and explain how situational / institutional contexts influenced our approach to, and use, of Blackboard specifically.
- Develop an approach to coding the reflections which is meaningful in the context and aids further evaluation of the effectiveness of the processes and the use of Blackboard as a tool to enhance team effectiveness, including how this was linked to the characteristics of a 'Hi-performing team' (Jackson 2005:59).

E-Learning, Perceptions of Teaching & Cultural Change

Key ideas:

- Tutors' perceptions of teaching are inextricably linked to their perceptions about the utilisation of FDL and e-learning.
- Tutors have their own theories and perceptions about teaching practice that are culturally derived and value laden
- Consideration of teaching perceptions has to be a key element within cultural change concerned with shifts in learning and teaching, especially where this change involves a move towards e-learning.
- The kinds of change needed to implement FDL on a wider scale cannot be imposed by structures and regulatory frameworks alone.
- Reforms to the academic infrastructure need to be considered as a part of a holistic process of emergent change, that supports staff as they reconsider their perceptions and values in relation to their teaching practice
- The Framework that we have developed seeks to provide the context within which this re-evaluation can occur alongside parallel institutional developments that (may) influence the adoption of FDL

Work in Progress: What is the research team doing now?

The Change Academy project finished when the project team presented their "Framework for Action" to Academic Board. In response, and FDL Steering Group was established and the development of a support infrastructure was agreed in principle.

The Change Academy team has continued to meet in order to drive forward the rollout of the "Framework for Action". Events and presentations have taken place, or are planned, at College, Faculty and School level.

The research team continues to engage with this process and is specifically involved in:

- Understanding and disseminating the change processes
- Evaluating the rollout of the Framework for Action

Thus the challenges presented in this poster form the core of the research project. However as the work progresses, the team is finding resonances with other established areas of research. These include:

- Technology Acceptance Model approaches, drawing on the links between the Computing and Psychology disciplines
- Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL), drawing on ideas developed in industry for CSCW (...Work)
- The extremely rich seam of research in the area of teacher's conceptions of learning.