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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: qualitative analyses using a coded approach (Sheil 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).

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
- 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 specialties into their faculties, and students are socialised into these Faculty and subject families' within the overall HE 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 justifications to match up natural attractors in order to co-create originality and new cultures.

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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 uses of the VLE in our project as a shared-access repository.
- Using the recollections and reflections of the team to explore and explain how situations and institutional contexts influenced our approaches to, use of, Blackboard specifically.
- Develop an approach to coding the recollections 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).

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’ (SSM) 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, would you expect to have to actively engage with changing tutor’s conceptions of teaching and learning, or is this too, or do most tutors adapt readily to new environments?

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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 Checkland’s Spiral Model of Information systems development.

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

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 concerns 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.
- Reform to the academic infrastructure need to be considered as a part of a holistic process of emergent change, that supports staff and students as they are localised into and values 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 adaption 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 robust of the Framework for Action

Thus the challenges presented in this poster form the core of the research project. However as the work continues we are 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 (CSoL), drawing on ideas developed in industry for CSoL (...Work)
- The extremely rich seam of research in the area of teacher’s conceptions of learning.