Using learning networks to drive module improvements in the Open University - a personal and professional journey

IET · The Open University

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PhD Final Year

Q1: Who am I?

I'm a final year PhD mature student in the Institute of Educational Technology at the OU. This means doing a PhD in later life!! I started out as an OU student in 2009 when I completed a Postgraduate Certificate in Education from Johannesburg, South Africa, where I was living with my family at the time. This is my personal 'clipboard' of some essential aspects in the journey. Like so many research students, my research passion is bound up with who I am.

Q2: What's a learning network?

It's a way of using collaborative learning technology to connect together different types of practitioners across organisations, to problem solve or make improvements. Many challenges, especially in distributed organisations, span across organisational boundaries and can be complex and tricky to solve. A learning network in this research is a way of integrating together viewpoints from various people who may be geographically separated but have a key part to play, and then taking action and evaluating the result together.

Q3: Why might using learning networks for collaborative problem solving be important in the future?

If you ever attended previous OU poster competitions, you may remember seeing this sandcastle on a beach before!! It's a symbol of the unfolding spiral of collaborative discussion, which integrates the viewpoints from many different practitioners or role players. Examples of different groups of role players in the OU are: students, module teams, tutors, staff tutors who look after a group of tutors, learning designers, student registration and support staff, and the Library. Fragmented or geographically separated practitioners mean it's a challenge for everyone's voice to be heard, and to play their part in problem solving and improvement. It's a bit like building separate sandcastles.

Image: Getty Images/iStockphoto

Image: needpix.com

Poster competition 2018.

Q4: What methodology am I using?

It's a very unusual and rewarding combination for a PhD. Sometimes rather scary. Firstly - it's 'insider action research', which is being used to involve people's voices in an active, collaborative and equitable manner, and to seek practical improvement or *impact,* as an intrinsic part of the research. Insider action research is one way to develop new organisational *capabilities* and encourage learning about complex issues (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014).

Secondly - it's underpinned by something called Grounded Theory Method, or GTM for short. I'm using GTM because current theories in use do not sufficiently explain the process or *mechanism* by which this type of technology-enabled problem solving or improvement could happen. As part of this research I've compared and contrasted the current theories, and am now using GTM to explore a new one. The combination of action research and GTM helps in the search for *actionable knowledge* – that which is usable and understandable by practitioners whilst also being theoretically robust for scholars and academics.

## Q5: What are the practical improvement results so far?

In Phase 1, the approach was trialled in 3 OU modules. One Year 2 STEM module was particularly successful. The project has now been able to effectively support the collaborative and equitable identification of challenging issues, and to integrate views on these issues from tutors, the module team and students. A 'signposting' intervention has been designed by a tutor to assist students who are feeling under time pressure. It's been implemented and evaluated positively by students as being helpful. The combined feedback from tutors and students has provided a key part of the evidence for future module interventions, in a management review of the module half way through its life (a Mid Life Review).

Q6: What are the theory results so far?

The unfolding process been analysed using GTM *iterative conceptualisation* (Urquhart, 2013). This consists of allocating concepts or *codes t*o data, then grouping the codes into *categories* and figuring out how the categories are related together. The result forms the fundamental building blocks of a new theory, and helps to identify components of a successful learning network. It allows the concepts in the emerging theory to be abstracted in a rigorous way, so that it could be transferred to other Higher Education and wider contexts.

Q7: Where and when will I go next?

In the current lockdown situation, that's a million dollar question. I have published a work-in-progress paper last year (see References), and am aiming to publish more. We need to evaluate to assess whether or how far this approach can be extended with in the OU. I'm due to submit my thesis by end of 2020, and would love to take my research further. It may be even more applicable as we emerge into a 'new normal' across the globe.
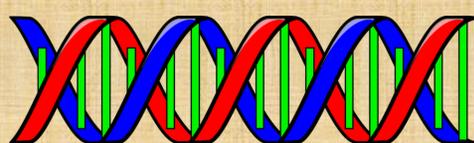
A DNA double helix is a good analogy for an unfolding process of collaborative problem solving intertwined with a learning technology infrastructure – my findings are built around this idea.

References

Boyd, L. (2019) Using Technology-Enabled Learning Networks to Drive Module Improvements in the UK Open University. *Journal of Interactive Media in Education*, 2019(1), p.16. DOI: http://doi.org/10.5334/jime.529

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