

Researching dialogue and communities of enquiry in elearning in HE

ESRC/WUN series: second seminar

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(Attendance: 32+)

Melody Thompson

Elearning Research in the US: challenges and opportunities

The first theme that Melody addressed was institutional policy and management. The questions of finance and business plans, intra- as well as inter-University competition, faculty policies and support, and quality issues were all raised.

Second, changing staff roles. Traditional roles are changing, with new roles needed: design and development, administration; and new skills and tools are needed. Training needs to take place.

Third, the student experience: the meaning and measurement of student needs and satisfaction. The impact of community was noted. How do we foster retention? There are no new standards of retention, and yet this is a critical element in the success of the programme. There can also be tensions between staff and student expectations.

The question of blended learning as opposed to pure online learning. It is currently the orthodoxy that blended learning is the preferred model; but 'pure' online learning is a model that must not be sidelined or underestimated. Ethical issues were raised too, for researchers as well as staff/students.

In paradigm terms, the field in the US has moved from 'distance education' to 'online learning' and to elearning. In research terms, most papers are descriptions, or 'how to' papers, 'best practices' etc. So research is in a pre-paradigmatic stage. Three research communities were used as examples to show the types of eLearning research currently being conducted: the Annual Distance Teaching & Learning Conference (otherwise known as the 'Wisconsin Conference'); The Sloan-C Annual Summer Research Workshop, with a focus on 'what works' and evaluation; and *The American Journal of Distance Education*.

Methodologically, a study by Lee, Driscoll and Nelson (2004) sets out the methodological approaches used in elearning research. These are not much different from researching conventional learning.

In trends, faculty and student issues are most researched; seven of the 32 identified in a number of areas focussed on interaction, dialogue and community. Institutional and policy issues have received little attention. Challenges are: philosophical, epistemological (what counts as knowledge?) and methodological.

Interdisciplinarity is an important way forward; plus international collaboration.

Maarten de Laat

Teaching Online in Networked Learning Communities: a multi-method approach

MA in eLearning is fully online, asynchronous, hosted in WebCT. Maarten's study is focussed on teachers (a beginning and experienced teacher), following two groups over a ten-week workshop. The method involved a triangulation of findings: social network analysis (social structures and interactions); (coding) learning and teaching activities; (critical event recall) experiences and interpretations.

With regard to learning and teaching, Maarten used Veldhuis-Diermanse 2000 on social-cognitive theories of learning, including cognitive, metacognitive and affective activities. For teaching, Anderson et al 2001.

A research literature was defined, including work on pedagogical design, skills, the role of the teacher. Conclusions, weighing up the empirical evidence and literature, were that there was a balance between uncertainty and experience; group dynamics change over time; a changing teacher-student relationship; the offering of structure and guidelines is helpful – a kind of scaffolding of elearning.

[The research design also suggests, as did Melody's paper, a need for complex systems theory to take account of the experience of learning and elearning]

A key question that emerged at the end is, if learning is an effect of community, what is the nature of those communities?

Caroline Haythornthwaite

Social Network Methods and Measures for Examining Elearning

Learning is a social network relation. Social network basics are actors, relations, ties and networks. There is an emphasis on what people do together: who talks to whom about what? [Rhetorical theory]

Actors are nodes, and lines depict relations between them. Network structures, constraints and outcomes (think of a road or rail system). Ties are well-trodden relations. Relations have three aspects: content, direction and strength. How much, how often? Relations define ties...and there are weak ties and strong ties (the number of media increases with strong ties). One of the strengths of weak ties is access to new information, new resources; however, there is no obligation to share. The notion of 'latent ties' is important, eg as soon as a student registers on a programme, there are a number of latent ties available. You can have strong and weak ties in both conventional learning networks and in elearning networks. The aim of a learning community is to build weak ties into strong ones. Different projects make for different social and network structures.

Networks: networks show density, actor centrality, network centralization, cliques, network stars, network brokers, isolates, isolated cliques, structural holes, resource flow, social structures.

For further research:

In-class dynamics: what does it mean to have high density in a learning network

Discovering relations: what makes up a teacher-learning relationship?

How do you get elearning relationships up and running?

Building elearning communities: how best to do it?

[Cf rhetoric and framing theory in relation to both learning and elearning.]

Grainne Conole

Reflections on the day – what future for elearning research methodology?

Grainne posited a number of questions:

What are the key research methodological issues?

In what ways are these challenges different from other forms of educational research?

Is there evidence of new methodological innovations emerging?

How well do we understand elearning and its impact on student learning?

What if any theory underpins elearning?

This question in particular generated a good deal of discussion. A number of theories were put forward (social constructivist, critical theory, framing theory) with a pluralist viewpoint emerging. The point was made that there are various levels of theory. High theory was probably not of much use at this particular point in epistemological development. Rather, mezzo-theory and model-building might be more useful at the pre-paradigmatic stage.

What are the predominant philosophies, epistemologies and methodologies?

Which methods should be used for what purpose?