Globally Distributed Funds of Living Knowledge

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Our living knowledge, skills, and abilities are in the process of being recognized as the primary source of all other wealth. What then will our new communication tools be used for? The most socially useful goal will no doubt be to supply ourselves with the instruments for sharing our mental abilities in the construction of collective intellect or imagination (Lévy, 1997, p.9).

Few would disagree with Levy’s (1997) utopian vision of a new age in which technologies allow people around the world to share their collective intellect and imagination for the greater good of humanity. But how is this vision playing out in practice? Nardi (2002) has argued that ‘the most fundamental unit of analysis for computer-supported cooperative work is not at the group level for many tasks and settings, but at the individual level as personal social networks come to be more and more important (Nardi, 2002). Building upon this insight, this talk explores how university students are using social media in everyday life to cultivate and nurture what pace Moll et al (1992) I call globally distributed funds of living knowledge (Francis, 2007, 2010). In turn, I show how resourceful students are now mobilizing the distributed expertise of remote learning companions to address very specific learning needs if and when required. The data suggests that social software tools like Facebook, Twitter, Linked In, and Academia.edu can indeed, function akin to a virtually ‘household’ (Moll et al, 2002) and afford students powerful tools for nurturing relationships. In turn, I demonstrate how these personal networks can rapidly evolve into a globally distributed fund of living knowledge that transcend institutional boundaries, support lifelong learning and facilitate access to the professions. Nevertheless, this talk also draws attention to: a) the significance of physical co-presence; b) the importance of prior nurturing work; c) the challenge of knowing how to know who might be able to assist with a specific problem and: d) the ethics of reciprocation associated with this emergent form of social media literacy. Time permitting, I will demonstrate how this social media literacy might be fostered in developmental workshops designed to help students reflect on their own social networking practices.

Key words: Globally Distributed Funds of Living Knowledge; Social Media; Social Media Literacy; Nurturing Practices, Distributed Expertise; Knowing how to know how; Relational Agency;
Key References


Quotations

Paradoxically, we find that the most fundamental unit of analysis for computer-supported cooperative work is not at the group level for many tasks and settings, but at the individual level as personal social networks come to be more and more important. Collectively subjects are increasingly put together through the assemblage of people found through personal networks rather than being constituted as teams created through organizational planning and structuring. Teams are still important but they are not the centrepiece of labour management they once were, nor are they the chief resource for individual workers.

However, much of the existing research within the field of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) suggests that many learners are not so quick to engage, share knowledge and learn collaboratively with others through new media. Crook and Light (2002, p.171) note that electronic seminar spaces, set up by university computer services to support taught courses remained unused by over 90% of course tutors. Of the remaining 10% that were used, the online discussion was dominated by a small number of individuals. Muukkonen et al. (2005, p. 535) highlight the ‘interrelated difficulties’ that arise when tutors attempt to integrate online discussion forums into structured courses. Recurrent themes in existing research include: problems with intensity of participation, shortness of discourse threads and lack of reciprocity. Kreijins, Kischner, and Jochens (2003) stress that many tutors erroneously take it for granted that participants will socially interact simply because it is possible. Moreover, their review of the CSCL literature stresses that a sole focus on cognitive processes in instructional activities neglects the social, cultural and economic circumstances that impact on students’ participation. Indeed, when one shifts the focus of attention away from ‘online discussion forums’ and ‘electronic seminar spaces’ established by tutors to support course-related study, one starts to recognise the relative insignificance of these virtual arenas compared to a myriad of less easily defined and under-researched informal arenas of learning activity.

Moll et al. (1992; 1997) use the term ‘funds of living knowledge’ to suggest how an extended family operates as a living system of shared knowledge and expertise. The research team conducted a cognitive anthropology of learning in and out of schools in Mexican working class communities in Tuscon, Arizona. Their research suggests how the exchange of knowledge, skills and labour essential for a family’s functioning and collective well being are interconnected through the ‘household’.

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1 In addition Crook and Light (2002) discuss: a) the breakdown in the turn taking protocols associated with face-to-face group discussion; b) the very measured style of participation attributed to a visible log created that left every contribution open to public display; and c) the ‘abrasive, irrelevance, and irreverence’ that welled up the when no moderator was present.
Indeed, the ‘household’ mediates the formation of a ‘living system of knowledge’ (Moll et al., 1997, p.140). Each family studied had developed strategies and arrangements that facilitated the exchange of ‘funds of knowledge’. Interestingly, the comparison with classrooms, in which access to living ‘funds of knowledge’ is relatively restricted, reveals that ‘the social environment does not take a neutral view towards the acquisition of knowledge and skill, but is instead highly interested, and often directive, controlling or even denying access to information’ (p.260).