

NETWORKED IDENTITIES – UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT TYPES OF SOCIAL ORGANISATION AND MOVEMENTS BETWEEN STRONG AND WEAK TIES IN NETWORKED ENVIRONMENTS

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INTRODUCTION:

Within educational research there has been an increasing interests in the concept of Communities of Practice (Wenger 1998) both as an analytical tool and as a way to design learning environments (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Sorensen et al. 2004). Therefore, there has been a strong focus on understanding communities as a form of social organisation and how to implement the notions of communities of practice in pedagogical practices. At the same time other authors have emphasised the need to focus also on other types of social relations than communities, and understanding communities of practice as one out of many different types of social organisation. In (Jones and Esnault 2004) the authors stress the importance of weak links in networks and generally argue that networks are a good metaphor to understand organisations of social practices. Networks are viewed as constantly changing relations between nodes in the network, where nodes can be understood as both human actors and artefacts. From the metaphor of networks they question, whether tightly knitted and coherent communities with strong ties are the most dominant type of social organisation in comparison with more loosely defined networks with weak ties. These recent challenges to understandings of social organisation of different practices are very interesting and they certainly challenge analytical and organisational units of analysis such as ‘Communities of Practice’ (CoP’s). Actually, in recent developments of Wenger’s theory there has been a movement away from focusing exclusively on CoP’s towards focusing more on individuals’ movements through and across boundaries between different CoP’s – in some sense, as we shall argue, this resembles more a network perspective. However, the notions of networks certainly do not obliterate other co-existing organisations of practices, which are equally important to understand. Learning, engaging and acting in communities of practice (Wenger 1998) are, as we shall argue, fundamentally important principles of social organisation. However, our aim is not to argue which type of social organisation is most important or predominant, rather we set out to describe how people move through and navigate within these different types of social organisation and how they weave them into what we shall term ‘networked identities’.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

Methodologically we draw on an extensive virtual ethnographical investigation (Hine 2000) carried out by one the authors in relation to her master thesis (Larsen 2005). The virtual ethnography consisted of a seven-month participant observation at the most popular website in Denmark used by young people (www.arto.dk). The investigation focused on how young people develop friendships and identity on this particular website. In this article we re-visit the empirical material and focus on how the young people continuously construct their participation as an intersection between networked performances based on loose ties to engaging in closer connected networks or communities of practice, within the website as a whole. Fundamentally the website is based on a network metaphor where an individual can relate to others by adding them as friends on their ‘friend list’. In that way the website makes explicit networks build on different types of links to

others. In this article we shall highlight how people tweaked the available technological functions to form communities, which was not initially a social organisational form actually supported in the design of the website. However, as a response to these self-initiated ways of using the website an actual community support has later been implemented at the website. In this sense we analyse how people moved and continuously still move between different types of social organisation built on both weak and strong ties and how communities emerged within the networked environment. Further, we shall investigate how people use other actors as mediational means in constructing their networked identities and how creative use of technologies plays a crucial role in the process of constructing networked identities and communities of practice.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

Theoretically we will draw on different notions of networks, especially as presented by (Jones 2004; Jones and Esnault 2004), which we will discuss in relation to some of the recent work of Wenger (Wenger 2004). Further, we shall employ concepts from Nexus Analysis and Mediated Discourse Analysis developed by (Scollon and Scollon 2004) as their concept of Nexus of practice could serve as a bridging point between CoP's and general network theory. To illustrate a general movement within theories on learning and work, we shall also discuss some of the recent theoretical transitions within Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Engeström 2004) as this theoretical framework also seems to be on the move towards a more networked understanding of the unit of analysis. In that sense we shall argue that there is a general theoretical shift going on where the unit of analysis is less focused on networks with strong ties, such as activity systems and CoP's towards looking more at loosely connected practices and activities with weak interconnected ties. From this theoretical discussion and the analyses of the empirical findings we shall argue and unfold a concept of networked identities as an analytical concept to understand social organisation and learning.

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