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Authentic learning in crime prevention practice

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Abstract

Authentic learning activities closely approximate the interrelationships, differing perspectives in, as well as complexity and competing outcomes of, everyday life. In the online environment, collaborative studies can constitute authentic learning by offering opportunities for the personal construction of knowledge through dialogue and reflection. This paper outlines aspects of learning demonstrated by five crime prevention practitioners, mostly police, who undertook the online supported postgraduate subject 'Partnerships in Crime Prevention'. Students were required to identify problems in their communities, and to work 'in partnership' with fellow students and the lecturer as they moved through an action research process in seeing how these problems might be addressed. Online communication was designed on face-to-face group process principles. Despite its small scale and methodological limitations, this study indicates that, through attention to group processes, an authentic learning environment (learner-centred, active and discursive) can build productive relationships amongst professionals engaging in further education in an online environment.

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Authentic learning in crime prevention practice

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Abstract: Authentic learning activities closely approximate the interrelationships, differing perspectives in, as well as complexity and competing outcomes of, everyday life. In the online environment, collaborative studies can constitute authentic learning by offering opportunities for the personal construction of knowledge through dialogue and reflection. This paper outlines aspects of learning demonstrated by five crime prevention practitioners, mostly police, who undertook the online supported postgraduate subject 'Partnerships in Crime Prevention'. Students were required to identify problems in their communities, and to work 'in partnership' with fellow students and the lecturer as they moved through an action research process in seeing how these problems might be addressed. Online communication was designed on face-to-face group process principles. Despite its small scale and methodological limitations, this study indicates that, through attention to group processes, an authentic learning environment (learner-centred, active and discursive) can build productive relationships amongst professionals engaging in further education in an online environment.

Keywords: authentic learning, professional education, online

Introduction

Authentic learning activities closely approximate the interrelationships, differing perspectives in, as well as complexity and competing outcomes of, everyday life. In the online environment, collaborative studies can constitute authentic learning by offering opportunities for the personal construction of knowledge through dialogue and reflection (Agostinho, Lefoe and Heberg, 1997; Valdez *et al.*, 2004). This paper outlines aspects of learning demonstrated by five crime prevention practitioners, mostly police, who undertook the online supported postgraduate subject 'Partnerships in Crime Prevention', whose collaborative work online was intimately connected to their working lives. The subject has the aims of developing practitioners' capacities to participate as equals in partnerships, and of developing their ability to use community based action research processes (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001; Dick, 1999, 2005; Reason, n.d.). To foster the achievement of these aims, students are required to identify problems in their communities, and to work 'in partnership' with fellow students and the lecturer as they move through Dick's (2005) action research process in seeing how these problems might be addressed.

Previous subjects using online communication to support crime prevention studies had shown that students engaged with subject content and the required activities, but not with each other. This should not have been surprising, given that technology, in and of itself, does not directly change teaching or learning, rather, the critical element is how technology is incorporated into instruction (Grégoire, Bracewell and Laferrière, 1996). Herrington, Oliver and Reeves (2003) point to the need to humanise the online experience in order to engage students, and Dick's Action Research and Evaluation On Line (AREOL) process gives considerable weight to relationship building with stakeholders, so these were similar concerns to be addressed in subject design. This was achieved through developing online interaction around group process principles (Forsyth, 1983).

This research aimed to establish whether attention to group processes in online communication could provide authentic challenges. The partnership was initially an artifice, but, like other simulations (Herrington, Oliver and Reeves, 2003), came to have a life of its own. The interactive and reflective exploration of ill-defined problems, in the context of crime prevention practice, demonstrated that students, against a background of what they already knew, encountered authentic challenges, in ways that allowed for self-assessment and self-correction (Wiggins, 1998).

Context of the study

Partnerships have an increasing profile in crime prevention, as governments struggle with how best to respond to multi-faceted social problems using existing, and fragmented, services, and communities struggle to have their voices heard (Shaftoe, 2004). Partnerships are, perhaps, a misnomer, in that few 'partnerships' at the local level are formal entities, rather, they are loosely connected groups of stakeholders who come together to deal with a specific problem. This subject was designed to allow students to practice *being* in this type of partnership, to enhance the relevance of what and how they learned. With my initial assumption being that ontology precedes epistemology (Packer and Goicoechea, 2000), my approach was based on Burkitt's ecological perspective on identity (Burkitt 1991, 1998), where *being* encompasses the possibilities for action afforded by the things, people and processes in people's environments. I could not confine myself to seeing the students' work environments as somehow hermetically sealed from the late modern context (Giddens, 1991), particularly when the inherent requirements of the subject involved students looking beyond what was available in their own organizations. I needed the subject to encompass the building of relationships, from scratch, across what previously may have been intractable divides.

Contact with communities, by police, is generally characterised by the lecture/guest-speaker model, where compliant groups listen to an expert and have the opportunity to ask questions, but community based partnerships depend on an egalitarian approach, supportive relationships, negotiating difference and information exchange. Attention paid to group processes by crime prevention officers should allow *all* stakeholders, however diverse, to define the problem to be researched, plan the research, review the findings and plan an intervention to address the problem, evaluate its success and subsequent cycles, as necessary (Dick, 1999, 2005).

To replicate these demands in the online environment, the learning process was characterised as that of a typical workshop, involving forming, storming, norming and performing (Forsyth, 1983). Weekly entries, for example, began with anonymous personal accounts of interests, expectations and fears. Study materials included work on group processes. I, as lecturer, was both facilitator and participant. As participant, I was as involved as the students in monitoring the interactions, adjusting to and calibrating different perceptions, and negotiating outcomes; as facilitator, the issue was to allow 'space' for student leadership and collaboration, peer learning and feedback.

Methodology

Five of the six students who undertook this subject consented to have their work used for research purposes, and their online work and final reflective essay resulted in 202 printed pages. As a participant observer, my approach to examining their contributions was qualitative (Cresswell, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Given the unsuitability of highly

formalised approaches in this type of narrative research (Manning and Cullum-Swan, 1998), I drew upon standard iterative reading and note taking processes, sorting the students' responses into relevant categories once I was familiar with it (Plummer, 1983: 99; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

In terms of the trustworthiness of my interpretations, although students may gloss their perceptions in assignments (Boud, 1999; Madge, 1978) (as might lecturers in providing constructive feedback), the focus on the exploratory use of certain techniques and on calibrating relationships online meant that the students and I were making ongoing inferences from, and subtly checking our perceptions of, what was written as we communicated (Goffman, 1972, 1976; Halliday and Hassan, 1998). For example, students' pleasure when their own and each other's projects unexpectedly obtained community support needed little analysis, but the extent to which all students had observed what some had subtly commented upon was unclear, and required close examination. Students' final reflections on their learning, which included self- and peer-assessment, were conceptualised as triangulating data provided during the session. These reflections provided rich, convergent accounts that were closer to students' lived experience of the 'partnership' than would have been obtained, for example, from a Likert scale. Nonetheless, the small numbers of students, and the use of just one form of analysis, are limitations in this study.

Learning in the partnership

In this subject, students' postings gradually built the online partnerships, using the week's study materials, and also included reflections on their real-world practice in using suggested participative techniques. Assessment comprised these weekly postings and a final reflective essay considering the extent to which the student had achieved the subject's objectives, and assessing their own and others' contributions in the online partnerships. Online work encompassed crime prevention, action research, and group process principles, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Design features – JST481 Partnerships in Policing

Week	Subject-Specific Studies	AREOL process
1	Building trust and rapport online	Entry and contracting
2	Critically assessing partnership trends; identifying possible projects	
3	Boundary work (Wenger 1998)	
4	Goals and objectives; contracting	
5	Stakeholders; brokering	Stakeholders and participation
6	Recognising perspectives; fostering participation; group process	Achieving participation
7	Project management	Achieving rigour
8	Assessing validity/reliability; contextual research	Collecting and analysing data
9	Finding out what people think (1)	Evaluation as action research
10	Finding out what people think (2)	
11	Finding out what people think (3)	
12, 13,	Resources; applying for funding	
14	Evaluating crime prevention initiatives	
	Reflection	Soft systems methodology

The five students in the subject included four police from three States, all men (one working in a developing country), and one woman (a local government community safety officer). Students, besides interacting with each other online, collected statistical data, conducted network and stakeholder analyses, interviews, and practiced using specific participative data

collection techniques including focus groups, Delphi and Convergent Interviewing. The problems the students selected were clustered into two projects, and they formed two ‘steering committees’, whilst simultaneously pursuing their own local work. There were unanticipated real-world outcomes, although one project struggled along (students shared an interest in robbery, but gaming venues, which they selected as the focus, were only of relevance to one and the stakeholders were major corporations, not local individuals). The ‘steering committee’ that focused on youth congregating around a park at night mobilised stakeholders in a country town to develop a youth drop-in centre. Other outcomes included intra-organisational education in preventing crime in parks, and a side issue, international funding for improved road safety in a developing county.

Practicing the action research approach had unexpectedly resulted in changed communities, but did the learning processes contribute to this? Extracts from students’ online work illustrate the ways in which the following features of authentic learning were evident: discursive relationships; learner-centredness; knowledge construction in context; exploration; feedback; and mastery. Pseudonyms are used for three of the five students (‘Paul’, ‘Sam’ and ‘Tony’), the other two having given permission for their names to be used.

Discursive relationships

The forum was designed to allow for the building of relationships between students. The ‘icebreaker’ was an anonymous response to opening the mail package, with ‘no right answers, the idea is to create a space for you in which you can talk comfortably about your goals and expectations, and I can respond about whether or not I think I, or this subject, can meet them, and how’ (Layton, 2004, p.11). This was to address the *experience* of being a participant, and to situate students in the unfamiliar context as people sharing similar anxieties and concerns. Their responses included the worry that ‘I might be biting off more than I can chew’ (Ken), ‘oh my god – what a lot of reading! [...] the weekly activities will force me to keep up to date’ (Marissa); ‘only one assignment [...] means a lot of work somewhere else’ (Tony).

Students were also asked to mention their intended contributions, as an informal contracting exercise. All mentioned sharing ideas, experiences and perspectives that they hoped would be helpful. Paul, who was returning to study after a twelve-year gap, commented that,

I don’t see the students in this subject as competitors. The Forum structure leads me to believe we are supposed to use the forum as a learning tool, in much the same way as group discussion in the classroom, where we share our opinions and experiences relating to our studies. I see the forum as a partnership building exercise in itself, where the students can work together to develop understanding of the subject material.

In week 4, the students were still considering how best to go about their partnership, and negotiating roles. Marissa’s lengthy entry, reproduced here only in part, exemplifies the extent to which students felt free to discuss ideas and challenge assumptions:

Sam recommends that a police officer be the leader, and there are some good reasons for this. My bias, however would lean the other way and I would suggest that a stakeholder with good project management and coordination skills be chosen. My additional suggestion would be that, if possible, this person not be either a police officer or a youth worker. My experience shows that the ideologies (and often the core business of their job) of these people are often in direct conflict and it can be difficult to be both coordinate diverse opinions and present your own opinion without actual or perceived bias. (Marissa, week 4)

Learner-centredness

Students were asked to describe their expectations in their first forum entry, and they wanted 'the ability to be able to communicate with others from varying work locations and backgrounds and discuss issues and problems' (Ken); to 'learn the pro's and cons of various types of partnerships as I am so used to the traditional government bureaucratic committee structure' and to help 'with some particular projects I am currently working on' (Marissa); 'gain further knowledge on partnerships and learn how they can assist me to work smarter' (Tony). Paul, once again, hit the theoretical nail on the head in his entry: 'The interests of each student are more than likely going to be affected by their current goals and objectives determined by their current employment'. Sam expressed the desire to assess what was happening in a developing country against 'contemporary academic experience'; in addition to the group project, he worked on a personal one:

A national highway passes through the district which has been the location of a significant number of traffic crashes resulting in fatalities and serious injuries. [...] I thought this was an ideal opportunity to combine my professional, personal and academic interests to track the method of tackling this issue. (Sam, week 3)

Following these and other discussions, the students formed the two sub-groups mentioned above.

Knowledge construction in context

As the students must meet occupation-related criteria to enrol, constructivist assumptions underpinned subject design and opportunities were provided to share understandings. Paul assessed his knowledge against the literature and his fellow students:

In the initial stages of this subject, I was really a fish out of water, and I felt I didn't have the experience of some of the other students in the field of partnerships in crime prevention. [...] my experience as a police investigator was a quantum leap from facilitating a crime prevention strategy. (Paul, week13)

Ken, in introducing 'his' youth project, showed how his understandings had been constructed over time:

Although this is a problem that I have encountered throughout my career it has become a growing concern since moving to the country. The last time I was a uniformed member I was dealing with this problem at a 'street' level. I must admit I didn't give much thought on how to reduce the situation other than charging offenders and moving people on. Now that I am in a managerial position I suppose I look at things from a different perspective. I now find myself looking for reasons why this is happening and what can be done to prevent it. I am hoping that the partnership will mirror a sentence from Stokes-White (2000:113). [...] (Ken, week 3)

Exploration

The action research processes underpinning effective partnerships are inherently exploratory and emergent. There was evidence of students sharing exploratory tools (Paul wrote, 'Brainstorming seems to be one area where strategies are hatched. Surfing the net is another way too. '); going to unfamiliar people to inquire into their perspectives (Marissa accessed colleagues, and, in so doing, forged a new, and needed, relationship with the Parks Manager in her own Council); and finding novel ways around problems (Sam, who was overseas, had his respondents recall what it was like being a young person in a country town). Experimenting with processes of inquiry unexpectedly led to tangible social change:

I decided to try my hand at a focus group. [...] Once the 'ice had been broken' and the participants were freely sharing their ideas I narrowed the topic by steering the conversation to the specific problems at Memorial Park. A white board was then used to jot down ideas and build further discussion. [...] The forum lasted for two and a half hours, with a ten minute break in the middle. There were a few areas of disagreement, but these were talked through and a general consensus was gained. [...] At the end of our forum diaries came out to organise the next meeting! (Ken, week 10)

Feedback

Weekly entries, and my synthesis of the entries and general comments upon them (to ensure that I was not praising some students and neglecting others), ensured ongoing feedback from myself to the students. Self- and peer-assessment was also required:

The group that I was part of was not able to work together as a group. I must accept responsibility for this to a great extent because I found it difficult to find the time to put into the forum activities on a regular basis, and hence communicate with the other members in the group. [...] (Paul, week 13)

Marissa [...] successfully brought together many of the contributions of myself and Ken and added value to them in her weekly presentation. The negotiating skills she displayed in doing this tended to set the scene on many occasions for the following weeks entries. (Sam, week 13)

Feedback was also spontaneous and ongoing as students negotiated paths forward:

Although Sam, Marissa and I have been agreeing on a majority of issues so far, I believe a couple of areas need to be clarified between us. (I suppose we are at the *storming* stage.) (Ken, week 7)

Mastery

Mastery, the intended conclusion to authentic learning experiences, involves the synthesis of disparate elements into a whole, evident in Marissa's review of her use of the Delphi technique:

All this, funnily enough, reflects what the research says and what we have been doing already. Does this mean the participants came to a natural agreement or that the facilitator managed to shut down opposing opinions? My opinion is that two things happened. The first is that the 3 people in the group are used to this method of working and happy to rely on a partnership approach (which is sometimes an easy answer when everyone is blaming everyone else), and also, the participants are the type of people who generally accept all viewpoints as valid and were simply trying to be accommodating. (Marissa, week 9)

Conclusion

Effective partnerships demand openness and equality, which can only become part of students' workplace practice through a focus on process as much as product in subject design, that is, through building appropriate affordances into the learning environment (Burkitt, 1998; Forsyth, 1983; Stokes-White, 2000). This approach allows students to see others' perspectives and actions, enhancing self-assessment and self-correction in meeting the diverse and contradictory demands of work in the late modern context (Giddens, 1991; Wiggins, 1998).

The small numbers of students, and the use of just one form of data analysis, are limitations in this study, and to address the shortcomings of this approach, further data gathering is required. At this stage, the students' entries merely illustrate that an authentic learning environment (learner-centred, active and discursive) can be established for professionals engaging in further education in an online environment.

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