Ethnographic Research Partnerships within an Interdisciplinary Team at Edge Hill

John Davey, SOLSTICE Manager

Simone Kruger, SOLSTICE Fellow & Research Officer

Lindsey Martin, Academic Liaison Co-ordinator

Dawn McLoughlin, Academic Support Manager

Sue Roberts, Head of Learning Services

Sue Williams, Skills Development Team Manager

rdfreflections@edgehill.ac.uk

Abstract

Developing and delivering supported online learning (e-learning) necessitates interdisciplinary approaches in order to facilitate the pedagogical, technological, information and learner support demands of flexible learning. Subsequent exploration of student experiences of supported online learning is equally complex, itself often necessitating an interdisciplinary approach. Collaborative research in interdisciplinary teams may, however, pose significant pragmatic and intellectual challenges pivotal to the success of a joint research project.

This paper aims to explore issues relating to the effectiveness and suitability of undertaking research within an interdisciplinary team and discusses whether this approach can be beneficial in terms of capturing and understanding the student experience. It will discuss such challenges in two ways: firstly, by illuminating—in theoretical terms—the unique and complex characteristics of ethnographic/interdisciplinary research teams; secondly, by critically reflecting on the particular challenges anticipated and encountered by six members of an ethnographic research team at Edge Hill, who bring with them—expectedly—unique roles and differing expertise as researchers and professionals. The paper will put emphasis on foundations and principles deemed absolutely pivotal for the success of this particular research partnership.

Introduction

Understanding complex social problems often requires interdisciplinary approaches in the form of research partnerships. Such partnerships typically involve an equitable collaboration between researchers and professionals around a common research problem, a process which may pose significant pragmatic and intellectual challenges to all participants. This paper is the result of critical self-reflections by members forming an interdisciplinary research partnership at Edge Hill, while capturing their experiences during the partnership's forming and formative stages. It therefore seeks to explore issues relating to the effectiveness and suitability of undertaking research within an interdisciplinary team and to ascertain whether this approach can be beneficial in terms of capturing and understanding the student experience.

The (Ethnographic) Research Project Background

The project resulted from a successful application to Edge Hill's Research Development Fund in 2005 and aims to understand student learning experiences in relation to learner support and the learning environment at Edge Hill, while particularly illuminating student experiences of using learning technologies (ICT). It focuses upon points in students' learning experience that are commonly associated with change and progression, an area that is generally under-researched, whereby the learner's voice remains still often unheard (Sharpe et al 2005).

The project follows an ethnographic research approach, and is thus supported by an ethnographer. It places emphasis on the views of participants (here students) while asking broad, general questions and collecting text-based data in a naturalistic setting, such as the student classroom. Aiming at description, analysis and interpretation while trying to make sense of the larger, holistic meanings of findings, ethnographers typically conduct their inquiry in a subjective, biased manner (see also Creswell 2005).

The ethnographic approach uses inductive (bottom-up), interactive (immersive) and recursive (cyclic) analytic strategies, drawing on various data collection methods, notably participant-observation and interviewing, but also descriptions of the group within its setting, and exploration of themes or issues that develop over time as the group's participants interact with each other. Research questions thereby continuously emerge and change, and are actively shaped by participants' responses and the critical self-reflexive stance of the ethnographer. As a result, the ethnographic approach provides a detailed picture of a cultural group's shared patterns of behaviour, concepts and beliefs, and sheds light on the ways in which people construct and make meaning of their world(s) (see also LeCompte and Schensul 1999).

In this project, the ethnographic approach has been deemed particularly suitable to gain an understanding of students' complex and entwined learning experiences using learning technologies at Edge Hill, while adopting a functionalist orientation that places student experiences within their sociocultural contexts in which they are embedded. Each member of the team leads and undertakes ethnographic research with students on specific programmes, which have been identified to cover a range of traditional and non-traditional study routes, encompassing a complete student lifecycle for each of the chosen programmes.

Seeing ethnography as a result of human interaction between researcher and participants, each team member thus regards him/herself as the primary tool for collecting primary data. Insights and data are pooled in a common database and shared within the partnership through face-to-face and online interactions. This process is at the same time informed by members' ongoing critical self-reflexivity, a process equally anchored in ethnographic approaches. As a result, our experience-based positions and continuous self-reflexivity are regarded as integral to the research process, and seen to impact on the transformation of both the partnership and the values of each team member.

The Interdisciplinary Team

The rising profile of learning and teaching within Higher Education and the opportunities afforded by technology to develop, inhabit, and interact with, new learning environments has 'had a significant impact on professional roles across HE and the ways in which groups work together' (Roberts 2005:207). The introduction of e-learning in particular has eroded boundaries and barriers between different professional groups, potentially causing a blurring of roles. The role of the library and information professional has grown closer to the academic, and is regarded in many instances as 'para-academic' or educationalist/ learning facilitator (Peacock 2001; Powis 2005; Roberts 2005). It is also closely related to the relatively new professional role of the learning technologist, particularly in the context of e-learning in which information professionals have developed new approaches to supporting learners in the electronic environment (Martin 2005).

It is helpful at this point to give closer consideration to what we mean by interdisciplinary team as there currently exist numerous terms relating to team development. These often include descriptions of partnerships that are multi-professional, multi-disciplinary, hybrid, multi-skilled, and/or cross-functional. In many ways it is easier to define what a multi-professional team is *not*: it "should not be confused with that of a group of professionals who work independently but happen to liaise with one another over a period of time." (Miller et al in Scholes and Vaughan 2002) The concept should exclude 'workgroups' and 'networks.' (McGrath 1991) Indeed, the definition of 'team' itself is rather woolly, "a team is a group in which the individuals share a common aim and in which the jobs and skills of each member fit in with those of the other," (Adair, 1996:vii) but common objectives and defined membership are not enough without self-perception. Often used interchangeably and without careful contemplation – in both the literature and in practice - the term 'interdisciplinary teams' is used here to refer to a partnership comprising six members of staff at Edge Hill with diverse research and professional backgrounds but with a common goal.

During the formation of our team, we have come to recognise that creating a solid foundation is absolutely crucial for the success of this research project and the interdisciplinary partnership itself. Yet there currently exists little evidence of well-established, successful interdisciplinary teams in practice. Some scholars have discussed crucial factors impacting on team success, suggesting, however that issues of 'professional territory' can have a detrimental impact on a team and that creating 'conditions for learning' is crucial to team success in a higher education context (see for example Roberts, Schofield and Wilson 2005). At the same time, others suggest that members' backgrounds in a variety of disciplines may inhibit a truly shared and mutual understanding (Pirrie and Wilson 2000).

For this reason, interdisciplinary teams often exist merely for *short-term* collaboration, restricting learning and teaching innovations to a project level (see also Beetham 2001) that is not necessarily long term nor sustainable. They are anecdotally viewed as effective at delivering change in learning and teaching, however, there is little concrete evidence to support this. There is thus a clear need for research into the ways in which interdisciplinary partnerships work effectively and share knowledge within an interdisciplinary context.

Exploration of such partnership working is the focus of the following sections, which have resulted from applying an ethnographic research approach to our individual, lived experiences of working and functioning within this particular interdisciplinary team. Critical self-reflexivity has hence enabled us to recognize our own strengths and weaknesses, and to complement each other's skills. Reflecting on our own experiences to date, certain pivotal and *shaping* factors are emerging. These factors, which are evidently interlinked, involved issues of reciprocity, team roles and trust, and communication. While the separation of these issues is artificial, it is merely intended here to achieve clarity in our ethnographic writings. The following analysis critically explores emergent themes taken from individual reflections and identifies where appropriate individual's personal responses.

Towards success: Factors impacting on an interdisciplinary partnership at Edge Hill

Reciprocity

The success of interdisciplinary partnerships greatly relies on notions of reciprocity, a shared desire and concern around giving 'something' of value to the team effort. This concept emerged throughout the majority of our team interactions with members frequently questioning the ways in which they could, uniquely and collaboratively, contribute to the project. For instance, one team member commented that 'I'm conscious that I feel I have not contributed a great deal in the developments so far' (Sue W).

As the main focus for the interdisciplinary partnership is around research and a common research problem, some team members seemed to bring with them the assumption that the most essential skills would resemble those related to planning and conducting research. Frequently, members reflected that 'my biggest weakness is likely to be my lack of real researcher experience…. My only concern is… that I do not necessarily have any research experience that I can offer to others to help in their up-skilling' (John). Yet importantly, members often bring with them differing expertise and experience, whereby our team consists of researchers and non-researchers, and professionals at differing stages in their careers. Indeed 'people are at very different points personally in their experience, careers and development' (Sue W).

For this reason, a solid foundation for the success of an interdisciplinary team also involves an acceptance that each team member 'can bring *something* to the group, but does not have to be an "expert" in everything' (John). Besides research skills (these are obviously crucial for any research project, yet insufficient alone), team members also bring with them 'contextual knowledge and understanding – of the student experience, transitions, learner support, learning technologies and Higher Education' (Sue R). The idea of reciprocity during the research process has helped to demystify research and to challenge some team members out of their comfort zones. Yet in this process it is absolutely necessary to identify the interdisciplinary 'strengths of… what each of us bring(s)' (Sue R) to the partnership.

The concept of reciprocity thus revolves around notions of learning, and particularly the mutual sharing and complementing of data and knowledge. To many team members, the possibility for *social* construction of knowledge seemed greatly to shape their motivation and enthusiasm, suggesting for instance that 'the good news is that others in the group have experience and abilities… and I have opportunity to learn from others in the group, and to hear their stories' (John). Thus the willingness to share and give (reciprocity), through which team knowledge can be socially constructed, forms the pillar for a solid foundation of an interdisciplinary partnership. Research from Martin et al. (2004), for example, has similarly shown that the willingness to share knowledge 'has proved a very valuable learning experience and the whole team has benefited from listening and learning from other disciplines'.

At the same time, reciprocity and social construction of knowledge necessitates 'meaningful social interaction' (Lindsey) and communication, and a genuine and 'strong interest in others' perspectives and experience' (Sue R). Reciprocity is thus a two-way process, involving both a knowledge provider and recipient who share through a meaningful dialogue. Strong social skills are thus absolutely crucial in the success of communication. Interestingly, all of the team members consider their social and collaborative skills a strength that they bring to the team and have been built upon in various ways, involving both face-to-face and online spaces.

Team Roles and Trust

A clear understanding of team roles by each member about what is expected of them has been deemed absolutely crucial for effective team collaboration (Bianey et al. 2004). Within our interdisciplinary team, however, active participation seemed to be affected by members' *self-perception*, while also recognising that our partnership is 'still at the team "forming" stage' (Sue R). While one team member clearly enacts the role of team leader, others seemed still to struggle with negotiating their team identity. Some members, for instance felt that they 'personally have a hurdle of confidence to overcome in this group setting where I currently greatly lack confidence' (Sue W). Thus senior professionals, and team members with strong research skills, seemed 'more vocal and comfortable discursively… to dominate' (Sue R).

It became evident that members' professional roles within Edge Hill had led to preconceived ideas about their roles within the team. Yet our critical self-reflective stances and subsequent discussions enabled us to renegotiate individual team roles, and to challenge members to step out into unknown (research) territory, while mentoring each other in new areas of expertise. Some members indeed conveyed that 'this is what makes the experience so valuable as the strength lies in the shared journey within which we are all developing not only in the research skills but in terms of interpersonal communication, self-identity, confidence, mentoring and other professional skills' (Sue W). Our self-reflexive, interdisciplinary approach therefore constantly challenges us to focus not only on the project outcomes, but also on the research *process,* and its personal and collaborative impact on our professional educational identities.

At the same time, all members demonstrated a predisposition to view the team as successful and effective, even prior to commencement, suggesting, for instance that 'I was aware that we definitely could develop trust based on previous relationships and projects' (Sue R), and 'I was impressed by the fact that this team was successful in a funding bid.' (Simone). Yet the length of time spent working at the institution seemed to impact on some members' self-perceptions and confidence, as evidenced by two team members who each described themselves as 'the baby'. In partnerships that involve people from all kinds of backgrounds and ages, establishing a sense of equality and trust may thus resemble a complicated and lengthy process. For this reason, our partnership has 'spent so much time on defining the project and sharing perspectives' (Sue R). To some team members, this trust existed 'from the start' (Lindsey), while to others, 'we still may need to work at trust building and clear understandings in our team' (Simone). Developing a strong personal and professional identity within our partnership, it then seems, requires *continued* consideration and effort, as some members feel that 'I'm not sure how I fit into such a group of senior staff' (Sue W).

Thinking about members' roles in an interdisciplinary team equally involves considerations of agendas, as egos (or hidden personal agendas) 'can so easily upset the balance of a team and prevent trust' (John) and even 'derail a project' (Lindsey). Team members were very vociferous and honest in admitting personal and professional agendas, which crystallised particularly in the form of research skills development.

To most team members, more generally, the *social* aspect pertinent in partnerships seemed to dominate their considerations, which seemed 'really important' (Simone) to the team forming phase, and to provide team members with a feeling of trust and comfort. To one team member, this helped to 'definitely feel increasingly confident' (Simone). Others referred to notions of enjoyment and suggested, for instance that 'I greatly enjoy team working, creativity, recognizing different contributions, and getting "high" on enquiry and discussion' (Sue R). Thus the feeling of enjoyment and fun working as part of a group crystallized as a pivotal issue for the success of this interdisciplinary partnership.

Reflecting on the process as a whole, the identification of team roles and establishment of mutual trust is thus a key ingredient in the formation of an interdisciplinary partnership through which *real* consensus can be achieved, and this necessitates recognition that 'everyone has an equal voice' (Lindsey). In other words, effective team collaboration somewhat necessitates a democratisation process in which members' concepts and beliefs are of equal value.

Communication

Besides reciprocity and team building, communication is equally pivotal to the success of an interdisciplinary team, and is indeed instrumental in, and inseparable from, each of the challenges raised above. Providing interactive fora to share and respond to developments throughout the project indeed allows the research to resemble an evolutionary process of constantly reforming and re-focusing. Our formal communication channels initially took the form of face-to-face meetings and email, but with increased interaction and further project development, a weblog (that is a frequently updated web site, organised in a diary form with entries in chronological order) was agreed as a suitable platform to share ideas and interact with one another. The intention was to introduce a social networking model of communication whereby team members could share a sense of community outside of the face-to-face meetings, which, according to other research, had already proven to be of significant value (see, for example, Martin et al. 2004). Importantly, a weblog was deemed suitable to capture–besides the research outcomes—the process of the project that we regard as a crucial element.

To our team members, these communication channels provided 'a good mix of structure and fluidity' (Sue R) through which we were able to reflect, explore, negotiate and define the issues surrounding team roles, notions of trust, self-identity and project developments. Team members reflected particularly on the positive outcomes of the weblog, which allowed 'the reality of the experience to be documented' (Sue W), and to 'capture thoughts and ideas as they emerge' (Sue R). As anticipated, this resulted in an opportunity to share more openly our individual experience of and feelings about the project as it developed. The challenge for the research team then is how to respond to these honest and—in some cases—vulnerable reflections in a way that enhances the experience for all concerned. It is at this point that communication moves significantly from being a process of sharing information to a relational tool that allows us to interact more fully in a process of shared experience and personal development.

Conclusion

Applying an ethnographic approach to our individual, lived experiences within this interdisciplinary team has given us an opportunity to further develop the necessary critical, self-reflexive skills necessitated by this particular methodology. It has, however, achieved much more than this; it has enabled those of us new to ethnography to test and establish the methodology by drawing out rich data from our own experiences. Learning in action has also allowed us to develop appropriate research skills in a way that is meaningful and productive. At the same time, ethnographic approaches have proven absolutely appropriate for capturing and understanding the student experience, the overall purpose of our project.

The use of a weblog for sharing our self-reflections has illuminated the process during the forming stages of our interdisciplinary team. In particular, it has provided us with an insight into our collective strengths and weaknesses that will hopefully allow us to work more effectively and collaboratively in achieving the project outcomes. How might we now benefit from this knowledge? The pivotal factors that have shaped our experiences centre around the development of trust, notions of reciprocity and the social construction of team skills and knowledge, as well as the importance of negotiating team roles. These acts of critical self-reflection have led us towards truly knowing ourselves, and understanding one another by illuminating what would normally remain hidden in such an environment.

Can we call our approach to the development of this particular interdisciplinary team as inclusive? It would be good if we could. The only barrier to active involvement would appear to be internal/ personal. Has the process and experience we have adopted already been considered an effective model that might be applied to other interdisciplinary teams? If so, what, if anything can we (so far) distill from our critical self-reflections?

What we have recorded to date is only part of a dynamic process in which ongoing critical self-reflexivity and dialogue allows the team to 'not only to focus on the project for the project's sake' (Sue W). Instead, our self-reflexive stances have 'become the vehicle for exploring and sharing experiences, skills and expertise that impact on the relational and professional experience of the individuals involved. This in turn continually refocuses and enhances the research itself thus enriching not only the process but the subsequent outcomes' (Sue W).

We strongly believe that our emergent knowledge about the development and operation of this interdisciplinary team may be equally of benefit to those seeking to understand the ways in which effective interdisciplinary teams work beyond the research team domain. While still only at an early stage of team development, there are indications that those leading and working in newly established interdisciplinary teams would benefit from a focus on the process of building trust and ensuring opportunities for reciprocity. The use of a social networking tool, such as a weblog may also add great value to the interdisciplinary team as a transparent method for communicating and as a powerful tool for facilitating and sharing reflections.

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