Chapter 2
(Un)Locating Learning:
Agents of Change in Case-Based Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an account of field research into case-based learning in a management course, guided by the questions: 'what is making change in this setting', and 'where is learning located'. Multiple forms of relations between human and nonhuman entities were identified through extensive research, which, analytically does not sit well with more traditional understandings of learning or case-based learning. A critique of those understandings is offered, drawing on concepts from post-modernism and adopting sensibilities from actor-network theory, follow the action in the setting. The authors demonstrate that the case is an assemblage of heterogeneous connections that are made by the teacher and then by the students in the classroom. In working with ANT sensibilities, examination found that tracing the action offers radically different accounts and possibilities for education research and practice. The pragmatic issues in following the action and the challenge of staying coherent and ambivalent are acknowledged.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of learning and the rallying call to enhance learning are ever present in our culture. If only we could have a comprehensive understanding of human learning (Illeris, 2009). If only learning could be made more fit-for-purpose then society would see a difference. If only the design of learning technology was less technology led and more about how people learn. Those of us who teach and do research into learning recognize the ambivalence of learning in practice. This state of indeterminacy is described by Law (2004) as generalization that can go so far and no further; and by Latour (2005) as uncertainty in the nature of action where in "each course of action a great

variety of agents seem to barge in and displace the original goal" (p. 22).

The notion that there are "agent(s) of change" is central in wide ranging discourses around learning and education. Various candidates are proposed as being the prime 'agent (s)' or at least important ones: the learning material, the teacher, the curriculum, the student, and so on. Yet, assigning primacy or even degrees of relevance to particular candidates has also proven to be difficult. The perception of complexity of the educational endeavour, of many elements being inextricably interwoven and interrelated, remains, and much of the history of learning and education research revolves around attempts to disentangle these elements.

In this paper, we adopt sensibilities from actor network-theory (ANT) to tackle the problem in a different way. Rather than trying to isolate elements, we take the position that complexity is the starting point for analysis and description. The question about an agent of change and of there being a locus of learning – adopted traditionally by cognitive and social models of learning – is reframed as showing distribution and dissipation. We support our claims through an empirical examination based on two years of fieldwork on a higher education course on Maritime Operations and Management (MOAM), where teachers and students are engaged in activities that they understand as case-based learning. Drawing on concepts from ANT this paper poses the question 'where is the locus of learning here' and what does this imply for understanding the idea of there being an 'agent of change' in case-based learning.

Case-based learning pedagogy has a long history of research and practice (Stenhouse, 1975) in which the case artifact (usually text or collection of texts) is the focus of attention. The research and practice discourse(s) on case-based learning starts by reifying the case as having an existence at the outset. In this the possibility of bringing about change and learning is firmly located in the case. This is reviewed in the next section called 'The case located'.

In contrast, the next section '(Un)locating the researcher's work' is a retrospective reconstruction of what turned out to be useful, important and also problematic in the doing of research and tracing the things we found in the fieldwork. 'Un(locating) the research setting' connects the account of ANT-ish sensibilities to the field work and orientates the reader to the research setting.

This is followed by two detailed accounts in which the case is notably made as we follow the action. The case is made as we follow the teachers' account of why he chooses it, how he conceives and designs the case. We follow the action again in small-group case exercises, normally thought of being the core of learning with cases. In following the action we find that learners, drawing in material and other sources, transform the task into something that reflects their background, experience and especially the future imagined by them. We conceptualize these as assemblages but find that implications for practice are elusive and this is discussed in the final section of this article.

THE CASE LOCATED

The literature on case-based educational practices offers accounts in which cases have multiple roles and characteristics, and are tightly intertwined with specific pedagogies, in dependence of the domain, institutional aims, learning goals, and other elements. There is, though, a relatively small number of common characteristics and uses of cases. This paper does not require an exhaustive overview of the Case-based learning landscape, but two examples the Business Case Method, and the use of cases to learn/abstract stable knowledge structures – give a sense of the terrain.

In the Business Case Method, cases are practitioner's accounts, narrative reports of real-world situations that give a sense of what the real world of work looks like and how practitioners operate in it (Barnes, Christensen, & Hansen, 1994). The accompanying rubric is that the case here is employed to develop attitudes of mind to address

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