RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES

Cultivating Laterality in Learning Communities – Scaling of Innovation through a Networked Learning Community

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KEY IMPLICATIONS

- Even in centralized systems, teacher laterality is important to support and enable teacher learning.

- Social theories can be enacted to foster lateral interactions in networked learning communities (NLCs).

- Some design elements can be considered in the centralized system, for example,

  a. assignment of group membership influences the growth of laterality;

  b. repeated encounters can be designed to reinforce lateral interactions; and

  c. hierarchical roles and relationships can be designed as relational resources for developing laterality.

BACKGROUND

The Academy of Singapore Teachers aims to facilitate the development of NLCs for teacher learning. Yet, in the literature little is known about network laterality in centralized systems like Singapore (Muijs, West, & Ainscow, 2010). Although efficient hierarchical structures can be intentionally designed for teacher learning (Tan & Ng, 2007), it may also discourage the bottom-up growth of laterality. A converse argument claims that the emergent formation of teacher laterality could arise with the implementation of intentional designs of the hierarchical structures and processes. Hence, it is exigent to investigate whether and how laterality co-exists in the design-and-emerging dimensions of NLCs in the Singapore education context.

FOCUS OF STUDY

This study investigated the formation and development of laterality in Singapore educational NLCs, and its support for teacher learning.

KEY FINDINGS

Two signature cases (i.e., key personnel to key personnel, teacher to teacher) were found to support that laterality exists and enables teacher learning in Singapore. Social theories are found to be enacted to foster lateral interactions in networked learning communities (NLCs).

Intentionally designed task features were discovered to foster teacher laterality. Some of these design elements include a) assignment of group memberships that influence the growth of laterality; b) repeated encounters that reinforce lateral interactions; and c) hierarchical roles and relationships are relational resources for developing laterality.

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SIGNIFICANCE OF FINDINGS

Our findings suggested that the design of task features could influence task-relational interaction and facilitate the emergence of laterality. It complemented the existing NLC literature which focuses on understanding the dimensions of lateral networks (Muijs et al., 2010). Our study also contributed to the task-relational model by revealing a possibility to enact social theories into the design of task features. In essence, adopting a design approach is a way forward.

POPULATION

We adopted a snowball sampling method (Cohen & Arieli, 2011) to identify and follow-up with the lateral relationships formed between key personnel to key personnel, key personnel to teacher and teacher to teacher. Our participants consisted of four KPs, two teachers as well as the participants of NLC events whom we observed.

RESEARCH DESIGN

A qualitative case study approach was adopted. "Researcher as observer" was employed to develop a more trustworthy understanding of the non-prevalent phenomena. We used the task-relational model to understand how intentionally designed task features interplay with the emergence of social features, which eventually expanded hierarchical relationships into lateral relationships (Kraut, Galegher, & Egido, 1987).

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