reconnect

Reconnecting relationships through technology

The Youth Justice Portal and Transformative Digital Education in Criminology

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The ideas in this paper explore how learning design intentions developed by academics, practitioners and learning designers, intersect with students' development of pre-professional identities (PPI) in the field of youth justice. We propose a theoretical framework built on Activity Theory that situates the learning environment as a set of two activity systems – teachers and students – that come together through a boundary object called the 'Youth Justice Portal'. The portal is the main avenue through which teaching, and learning takes place, and we examine how the technical and theoretical framework that we have adopted can be applied in open-ended domains that require the development of students' PPI. The practical implications related to the adoption of the model in disciplines which require placement-based learning opportunities are discussed.

Keywords: Pre-professional identity, youth justice, activity theory, dialogue-based learning

Introduction

Universities should develop in their students the competencies which will enable them to cope with uncertainty, poorly defined situations and conflicting or at least diverging norms, values, interests and reality constructions (Wals and Jickling 2002, p.224).

Higher education offers more than 'job ready graduates', it has the potential to produce active citizens equipped to confront complex social situations in both the context of work and civic life more generally. In the context of criminology more specifically, Thurgood (2020, p. 24) argues that the task of transforming pedagogy in criminology involves awareness that "Deeper skills require instilling if students are to be successful as critically thinking professionals in an increasingly complex arena. This includes producing graduates who can challenge the discipline, their profession, and wider society." In this context, learning opportunities that facilitate the emergence of pre-professional identity (PPI) amongst undergraduate cohorts have been identified as critical. However, little is known about how PPI may be facilitated outside of placement-based Work Integrated Learning (WIL). For example, the affordances of Non-Placement Work Integrated Learning (NPWIL) are relatively unknown. This project advances scholarship on 'at scale' partnership informed NPWIL by exploring how undergraduate students' PPI construction is affected through interactions with a practitioner-based rich media interface known as the Youth Justice Portal (YJP).

It is well documented that placement-based WIL affects pre-professional identities (PPI) by offering learners an 'experience' that aids them in 'sense making', particularly in relation to their future selves and professions (Jackson 2017; Baxter Magolda 1998). PPI has been identified as significant in facilitating the transition from higher education (HE) to the labour market as PPI and employability attributes overlap (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021; Jackson 2017; Outi Veivo and Salmi 2020). However, the focus on placement and PPI chains WIL to place and time and this can lessen the potential for learners to develop PPI throughout the degree lifecycle, and through *non-placement WIL* experiences.

There has been significant research in the definition and emergence of PPI (Jackson 2017; Tomlinson and Jackson 2021; Outi Veivo and Salmi 2020), the shape of student identities, and the role of the self in 'becoming' (Fellenz, 2016; Baxter Magolda, 1998). Additionally, re-conceptualisations of what is understood as 'acceptable' WIL activities/experiences embrace advances in technology-enabled learning, highlighting the affordances of digital platforms, resources, and virtual environments in increasing student participation in diverse WIL opportunities (Glavas and Schuster 2020; Rowe, Kelliher & Winchester-Seeto 2012; Dean, Eady and Yanmandram 2020). However, there is a notable dearth of research investigating the intersection between

the digital, NPWIL and PPI construction in HE. Moreover, few projects have interrogated how pre-existing digital elements with pre-existing learning design intentions interact with a learner's PPI. The question remains - what exactly are learners 'making' of themselves as they interact with digital and virtual forms of NPWIL curricula? It is at this juncture that this project aims to extend the scholarship of NPWILand PPI by exploring the design of an existing digital platform known as the Youth Justice Portal (YJP) through the lens of Activity Theory.

The Youth Justice Portal

The YJP caters to an annual cohort of 600 students, drawing on expertise from practitioners in the youth justice system in an Australian jurisdiction. The depth and breadth of partners contributing to the YJP, result in a distinct, authentic, and holistic focus on the practice of youth justice through rich media content. Practitioners function as 'co-educators', pre-recorded interviews covering themes and debates in youth justice are organised into 'snippets' of insights that inform 'nodes' (See https://tinyurl.com/r6am5bn4). Critical thinking and applied skills are foregrounded through 'wrap-around' learning activities designed with input from practitioners, including interactive case studies requiring learners to exercise consequential thinking through decision making, and assessments are scaffolded to mirror work-related tasks. For example, in synchronous learning opportunities students are engaged in debates and role-plays that require them to take on a practitioner 'position' and enact their role or argue their position from that practitioner's perspective – informed by what they have been learning via the practitioner interviews. Then students reflect on the tensions and conflicts experienced when comparing the research about youth offending against the pragmatic environment of a practitioner.

In line with Paulo Freire's (1970) philosophy of education that challenges the 'banking' model of education as knowledge transmission, the YJP replaces lectures and adopts a student-oriented approach. For Freire this involves a **dialogue-based** approach in which students are actively engaged, leading to the emergence of a 'critical consciousness' (1974). The empowering effects of a dialogue-based approach have been connected to 'emancipatory education' (Nouri and Sajjadi 2014). An essential challenge inherent in a student-oriented approach is a decentralisation of the lecturer and by extension 'the lecture'.

The YJP was designed to deliver at scale, high quality NPWIL to a large multi-disciplinary cohort, with the support of industry and community partners. Exposure to multiple practitioners in the field was viewed as central to the construction of students' PPI. Multiple voices were embedded as 'content nodes' in the YJP and the result has been a polyvocal approach that exposes students to diverse perspectives and settings represented by youth workers, police officers, child and adolescent forensic psychologists, legal aid, magistrates, youth detention officers, advocates, and the president of the Children's Court. As each practitioner narrates their experiences working in the youth justice setting, 'troubling' perspectives emerge with regards to the ideals of youth justice and the practicalities faced by practitioners. The polyvocality of these worlds of different experiences and narratives highlights the incoherence and contradictions that are inevitably present in the youth justice system. In this sense, polyvocality facilitates the problematisation of how youth justice is practised from a range of perspectives and this challenges traditional conceptualisations of higher education which presents 'the lecturer' as a 'sage' whose dominant perspective automatically legitimates what is 'important' knowledge. In facilitating access to multiple perspectives, the YJP is an object informed by the principles of 'emancipatory education'. Nouri and Sajjadi (2014: 81) describe emancipatory education as empowering since it has the capacity to enable students, as citizens, to "select and transform their world". The selection and transformation potential exists in the ways that students construct pre-professional selves through the learning afforded by the practitioner interviews and learning activities that encourage 'reflexivity' and critical thinking.

The YJP is significant because it broadens our understanding of digital NPWIL and its potential for developing students' PPI. This has implications for how traditional placement-based learning is positioned (Dean, Eady and Yanmandram 2020; Schuster and Glavas 2017) and illustrates the potential for digital forms of WIL to complement or even substitute aspects of workplace-based learning. It is also an example of what Bayne et al. (2020) describe as a new mode of communicating and consuming knowledge in academic contexts – a mode that goes beyond text to represent knowledge as an interconnected and yet discrete set of digital artefacts.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that guides this research is third generation Activity Theory (AT) typically associated with the work of Engestrom (2001). AT posits that the analysis of human activity reveals the fundamental characteristics of human behaviour (Kaptelinin & Nardi, 2006). Additionally, all human activity takes place in a

sociocultural context and the relationship between individuals (subjects) is mediated through tools which are either conceptual or physical in nature. In our case, the tool that is under investigation is the YJP and AT argues that tools serve as the means through which an intended or purposive objective is carried out (Verenikina, 2010). Through the lens of AT, the YJP is the tool through which students develop their PPI and the tool that teachers use to help promote PPI through the practice of learning design and curriculum development. The importance of AT for this project is twofold. It represents both a grounding philosophical framework for a conception of the production and consumption of knowledge (sociocultural theory) and a lens through which to investigate how the various components in an activity system, such as the use of the YJP can constrain, promote or facilitate the construction of PPI in the student cohort under investigation.

There are three aspects of AT that shape the project. The first is the conception of teaching and learning as a set of activities that intersect, complement and combine to create complex learning environments mediated through and by tools (either conceptual or physical objects), students and teachers and other members of the community. In our case, the YJP is the primary site of learning and its use is subject to the range of implicit and explicit rules that govern the shape of the learning process. The second aspect of AT is that it provides a lens through which learning can be evaluated and, as such, it can be used as a framework to examine the complex set of interactions that constrain and facilitate the process of learning. The third feature of third generation AT is that it describes how multiple activity systems generate contradictions that can help to drive change in complex organisations. It is, in other words, a more expansive framework (Engestrom, 2001) that can be applied to organisations such as universities in which teaching and learning activities can be divided between objectives that shape the student learning experience and objectives that drive teacher-based activities such as facilitation, learning or assessment design.

The focus of this paper is on how AT guides theorisation of the intersection between the learning design intentions that are embedded in the YJP and how it is used as a tool for teaching and learning in the curriculum. The second phase of this project, an empirical exploration of student engagement with the portal, is underway and the outcomes will be the subject of a subsequent report. However, it will be useful to describe the nature of the relationship between teachers and students through the lens of AT to highlight how teacher and learner practices intersect.

A student and teacher activity system

In terms of AT, teachers and learners are positioned as constituting two activity systems each with their own set of rules, tools, communities and ways of structuring how activities are carried out. In a student-based activity system, students might alternate between individual and group work and this may be governed by formative requirements to be met prior to attendance in a tutorial setting (individual student work) or as part of a group assessment activity which requires intentional design of the division of labour to carry out certain tasks. Both of these tasks are student-centred but crucially they both have different objectives which require different sets of tools (conceptual and physical) and they feature a difference in how tasks are distributed (or how the labour is divided). The rules that govern both activity types also differ – one assumes the alignment between the implementation of a 'flipped model' and the benefits of self-regulated learning that are conferred on students in meeting learning outcomes (individual student work) and the other is governed by formal assessment tasks that are required to be completed in a group environment. An activity system, therefore, becomes a useful lens for providing a picture of the elements that constitute the learning process and these elements will differ depending on the subject (individual or group, for example) and the objectives that drive the activity in question.   Teaching staff, on the other hand, may facilitate in a team-teaching environment or conduct tutorial sessions on their own in online learning settings. The mediating artefacts and rules for these activities will differ. These activities are bounded by their own set of rules each with different objectives.

Learning design intentions of the YJP

Students are required to interact with the YJP as their main source of learning material in the unit and the portal is provided to students by staff to engage with interconnected and authentic content and as a foundation for undertaking formal assessment tasks.

Third generation activity theory provides us with a way to theorise about this relationship by proposing boundary objects or points of collectively meaningful objects between multiple systems – in our case, the two activity systems of students and teachers. In our work, the portal represents the "collectively meaningful object" and the intersection between the "collectively meaningful object" can be considered the boundary object or the

space in which students are interrogating, modelling, practising, analysing and potentially integrating the content from the portal into their own emerging pre-professional identities - practising what Engestrom (2001) has called 'expansive learning'. The boundary object was constructed using three learning design intentions. Each learning design intention is underpinned by a theoretical rationale and together they form the philosophical foundation of the YJP.

Learning design intention one – foundations of the learning environment:
   To ensure the constructive alignment between learning materials, activities and assessment tasks complemented by the promotion of the active exploration of learning materials. This intention is informed by Biggs' (2003) theory of constructive alignment.

Learning design intention two – dialogic learning:
   To encourage the development of professional identity through authentic voices and different perspectives. Students cultivate epistemic cognition (Kitchener, 1983) when they engage in open-ended and complex fields and this encourages the development of dialogic learning approaches in the classroom setting (Cui and Teo, 2021) helping to shape and facilitate 'emancipatory learning'.

Learning design intention three – 'writerly' texts:
   To promote and encourage exploration across nodes in the YJP. This is related to the second learning design intention but refers more specifically to the affordances of the YJP. The architecture of the YJP features a set of categories that are linked semantically but do not determine the students' trajectory through the portal. This relatively open architecture promotes exploration and can be characterised as a 'writerly' text (Sumara and Luce-Kapler, 1993) that encourages students to negotiate how the material relates to their own contexts and their PPI.

These learning design intentions represent the teacher-based objectives of the YJP and it is through them that the construction of PPI is developed by students. These intentions form the foundation of the learning design approach that was developed: foundational learning design to frame the student learning experience, epistemic complexity to reflect the real-life complexity of the profession and to encourage dialogic learning in the classroom and the underlying knowledge architecture that promotes the negotiation of meaning in a 'writerly' text characterised by a complex network of perspectives, ideas and professional roles. Taken together, these three intentions form the core of the learning design of the YJP.

What are the next steps?

The next phase builds on the theoretical ideas we have been exploring in this paper. At present, we are collecting qualitative data through student and staff focus groups, student interviews and student photo diaries. Patterns of student behavioural engagement with the YJP are being recorded and analysed using learning analytics tools in the Learning Management System and Google analytics. The qualitative and quantitative data will be analysed through the lens of the three learning design intentions of the YJP. This phase is currently underway and it is expected that initial findings will be available at the end of 2022.

What is the significance of the YJP?

From a technical perspective, the YJP is a 'data structure' that reflects the knowledge architecture of the real-life practice of youth justice. Since content is divorced from the 'data structure' this means that the model can be easily applied to different domains that share similar characteristics to the youth justice. More specifically, the YJP coding and digital design has been developed as a template to house alternate subject content.
The YJP is also significant because it is underpinned by a theoretical framework informed by the sociocultural tradition of teaching and learning that recognises learning as a complex activity of social interaction mediated through conceptual, physical and digital tools. This framework is portable across domains. Additionally, our adopted approach has implications for WiL-based learning in those domains that are interested in promoting students' PPI. If PPI-based learning outcomes can be met using digital tools, this has the potential to reduce the need for students to undertake orthodox, placement-based learning. This can help to reduce the pressure of finding in-situ professional placements which are increasingly difficult for workplaces to offer students.
The YJP illustrates how NPWIL can be implemented in the curriculum and the model of the YJP that we have described has the potential to be applied in at least two ways. First, we have provided a methodological framework which can be used to conceptualise and evaluate the use of digital artefacts in complex domains which include the voices of students, practitioners and academics. Second, areas that share similar

characteristics of epistemic and practice-based complexity such as disciplines in the health sciences, for example, could benefit from the approach that is being described in this paper and use the model as a stepping-stone to build digital artefacts that reflect disciplinary contexts.

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