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Knotworking, system opacity and the potential of social network technology in Children and Young People's Services

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Background

Previous research has asked whether it is possible to train professionals to knotwork (Warmington et al. 2004) however the systemic transformation of Children and Young People's Services in England raises the question of whether it is possible to develop local systems that facilitate knotworking? Children and Young People's Services are being transformed through the articulation of broader objects (e.g., the Every Child Matters agenda), an integrated organisational architecture (e.g., Children's Trusts) and an increasing number of stakeholders seeking to collaborate to impact upon these broader objects. These 'divided terrains' (Engeström 2001), gaps and boundaries between activity systems (Engeström 2008) and the opacity of the system constitute significant challenges to researchers and practitioners.

Research Questions

Knotworking is a coherent tool for conceptualising inter-professional practice in multi-organisational fields however previous applications of knotworking have tended to focus on 'established and stable' multi-agency teams (Anning 2006) or knots where the 'centre' is identifiable and accessible. A system-level approach emphasizes the administrational and communicational barriers for knotworkers in locating, accessing and monitoring the 'centre' of a knot, rather than the managerial concern that 'the centre does not hold' (Engeström 2000). To knotwork professionals must overcome a series of obstacles, not least in the, 'movement of tying, untying and retying together seemingly separate threads of activity' (Engeström 2000). In developing a system for knotworking a significant contribution would be developing the rules, training, tools and infrastructure to enhance the capability of professionals in a multi-organisational field to share information to enable professionals to identify, access and monitor knots.

Methods

The paper reports on a small case study of the facilitation of a knotwork – the Dalewood Town Management Group – that was formed to increase inter-professional collaboration to improve outcomes in Dalewood in line with the Every Child Matters agenda. The case was identified as a promising example of collaboration at the desired stage of development. The research consisted of a participant observation of one of the DTMG meetings and eight semi-structured interviews with group members. The interviewees were drawn in a self-selective sample that was managed to represent the diverse professions within the group. The interviews focused on effective approaches and barriers to collaboration and perceptions of the DTMG. Miles and Huberman's (1994) technique of data reduction and display, with member checks were used to analyse the data and generate meaning.

Frame

This paper situates the discussion of knotworking within collaborative processes on an area-wide level, such as a town or local authority. The paper utilizes the metaphor of knotworks that were proposed by Engeström (1999) within the tradition of Cultural Historical Activity Theory (Vygotsky 1978; Leont'ev 1978, 1981). To incorporate the system-wide focus the paper draws on the notions of bounded rationality and the congested state (Skelcher 2000) to highlight the cognitive limitations knotworkers face and the complicated organizational fields knotworkers have to negotiate, which is expressed as system opacity. It is important to note that knotworking is used to conceptualise collaboration but this does not itself define the activity. There are many ways to define collaboration

(Huxham 1996), as there are many different forms of collaborative activity. The form of collaboration considered in this paper is collaboration as a process of innovation in service delivery.

Research findings

The key finding was that the opacity of the multi-organisational field fostered information asymmetries along sectoral lines that impinged upon the effectiveness of the group. The head teacher who initiated the group had imperfect information of the extensity and intensity of collaborative activity in Dalewood and thus was perceived by other members of the group to make strategic decisions that signified negative cultural beliefs. The head teacher's decisions were partly the result of the infrastructure and tools available that promoted sequential and individual decision-making where more transparent and collaborative decisions would enabled mutually beneficial strategic decisions to cohere the group. The group was successful in forming relationships that led to collaborative working and improved outcomes for, for example, young offenders. What is significant is that the facilitative conditions for collaboration were organisations realizing that they had common interests and shared capacity. The communication tools used – such as meetings, emails and newsletters – meant that people not engaged in active collaboration lost touch with the centre of individual knots of activity and the group.

The paper argues that new, less stable and exploratory forms of knotworking present distinct challenges for professionals, especially in terms of identifying, accessing and monitoring the collaborative activity. These collaborative forms emphasise the need for appropriate infrastructure for facilitating and sustaining knotworking (Engeström 2008). Knotworking implies that different knotworkers will enter, leave and re-enter the knot as the activity requires but the communication tools used in the DTMG meant that the opacity of the system necessitates a prohibitive amount of effort to track knots. Social network technology is proposed as an appropriate material infrastructure that could address the barriers to collaboration experienced in the DTMG. As a theoretical contribution the paper identifies the crucial role of infrastructure in less identifiable and accessible knotworking, and suggests that the tools and functionalities in social network technology can cultivate distributed agency for collaborative working. In practical terms, the paper identifies system opacity as a priority for policy makers and practitioners in Children and Young People's Services and suggests that social network technology may reduce opacity and create the space and opportunities for the identification and realisation of hidden system capacity.