

## Collaborating Colleges and Castells: networking theory applied to H.E. Institutions

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**Keywords:** *networks, networking logic, Castells, 'informationalism', dialectic, VLE, Marx*

### Introduction

While this paper represents work in progress it starts from the familiar academic theme of applying theory to practice and in particular, to a neglected area of our practice as lecturers – how we engage with, develop and create networks.

We tend to accept networks as part of the educational scenery something natural and unremarkable but this paper suggests that they may not be so. By taking theory primarily used to analyse the business environment and applying it to HE institutions, the aim is to develop insights and foster an awareness that networks are not just a passive tool for us to use but, once created, that they have an internal logic of their own - a logic of which we need to be aware so that we can make explicit choices about our entry into them and then further choices about how we use and develop the various networks.

It may seem obvious to anyone in higher education (or business) that networks are proliferating and educational institutions are being encouraged to collaborate to maximise information flows. At the same time there is a proliferation of theories about this phenomenon in the business environment. Dordick and Wang (1993) introduced the idea of the 'Information Society'; Mantovani in 1996 develops an approach to 'New Communications Environments' with perspectives on virtuality. Earlier Mackenzie & Wajcman (1985) examined the effect of technology on social construction. Harvey (1989) discusses it in the context of 'postmodernity' and Featherstone (1990) adds the familiar context of global culture. However the theory on which this paper will focus is that of Manuel Castells, developed in the late 90's in his trilogy 'The information age, economy, society and culture' (1996-1998). This theory has the advantage of offering a coherent explanation of all the trends mentioned above and is one of the few over-arching theories to survive into this century. Furthermore, it is not burdened with the weight of determinism as it takes a dialectical approach.

Castells' theory will be applied to the context of the HE sector and the discussion of insights generated will be illustrated with a case study, that of a collaborative

network of universities formed to develop a virtual learning environment designed to enhance students employability ('E-evolve'). Illustrations will also be provided by a number of discussions which have taken place with colleagues in various universities, companies and agencies both in the UK and abroad.

There are few firm conclusions that can be developed at this stage of the investigation, only a number of interesting questions that hopefully may prompt some useful discussions, tentative recommendations and areas for further exploration.

## **Castells**

The Castells trilogy, as mentioned earlier, can be classified as an overarching theory which attempts to explain and integrate various disparate modern developments in one unifying theoretical structure. It has been hailed as comparable to the ideas of Marx or Weber by, respectively Peter Hall and Anthony Giddens. Castells takes three independent processes arising in the 60's and 70's – the information technology revolution; the economic crisis of Capitalism and 'Statism' (Communism) and the blooming of new social movements such as environmentalism and feminism, and argues that they have prepared the ground for a new era – that of the 'Information Age'. This is a society where the 'dominant functions and processes in the information age are increasingly organized around networks'. This insight is generally accepted but, more disturbingly, Castells goes on to warn that 'the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operation and outcomes in the processes of production, experience, power and culture' (Vol.I:469). Institutions and States become 'hollowed out', commanding less and less loyalty (e.g. Institutions using more and more part time staff and sub-contractors, States succumbing to the power of globalization). People increasingly live in a condition of 'real virtuality' communicating by networks – unless they are excluded from or oppose such networks and as a result stress their 'concrete, historically rooted particular identity'. 'Informationalism' becomes the new technical-economic paradigm. By this Castells mean there are certain key features:-

- Information becomes the key raw material for action
- Information Technology becomes truly pervasive
- The logic of the network dominates
- Flexibility is the key attribute
- All technologies converge, so:-

'Information processing and transmission become the fundamental resources of productivity and power' (I:21)

## **The validity of Castells theory**

Discussion about this has been continuing since the late 1990's. Critics point to the fact that 'networks' have existed as long as humanity – markets being only one manifestation of this form - but it is also generally accepted that developments in the 21st century do not contradict many of his insights into how society would change. The most convincing and powerful part of his analysis is the direct inheritance of dialectical analysis from Marx. Thus he argues that the collaborative logic of the network will be opposed by the competitive logic of the market, just as those in the network will be opposed by those excluded, just as various networks will vie for dominance, while the network society will only gradually take over from earlier forms (as in the industrial revolution). This dialectic allows for greater complexity in the analysis and prevents simplistic determinism being applied.

## **Implications for the HE Sector**

These are clear. On a fairly superficial level all of us have seen some signs of the hollowing out of our institutions, the growth in the number and importance of networks and their struggle for dominance. The research assessment process shows both this and the formation of elites based on information control. What we need to have is a continuing discussion on how we may prevent groups being excluded from information, the implications of pervasive, converging technology, our use of 'real virtuality' in teaching and finally, how we handle the conflicting pressures to share material on the networks and/or keep it exclusively for our institutions as a form of competitive advantage. There are difficult personal choices wrapped up in this discussion for, like all worthwhile visions of future change, there are optimistic and pessimistic aspects which we, as educationalists, will play a key role in developing or stifling.

## **Illustrations**

Let us look at a microcosm of the 'networking society' – the LTSN for business or 'BEST'. This exists to promote the rationale that by sharing good practice we will improve the student experience yet it also supports the idea that efficiency is best promoted by competition. So alongside the networks with open access websites we have invitations for institutions to compete for CETL and FDTL5 funds and as individuals, for us to compete for 'star' lecturer status via the NTFS. We owe a loyalty to our institution, but also to our profession and to the students we teach. The particular case study was, as mentioned earlier, a collaborative bid for FDTL5 funding by a consortium of five universities – Central Lancashire, Derby, Hertfordshire, London Metropolitan and Wolverhampton. The project was based on creating a VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) to be used to enhance student's employability. After reflecting on Castells theory we can see that it can be analysed using his approach. Note:-

- It is aimed at preventing exclusion from the information needed for employability
- It aims to encourage students to learn in a network of 'real virtuality'
- It relies on converging and pervasive technology
- The bid's success was highly dependent on us having a convincing strategy for diffusion across the sector, yet –
- To win the bid we had to keep our ideas secret from our competitors

As the project leader commented in her 'diary' of events – 'this anti-networking environment (during the bid process) was heightened by the pronouncement that we could drop our partners... (-in the next round of bidding?)'. But not only were there conflicts of competition and collaboration in the networks there was also conflicts between the institutions and the staff trying to operate the networks. Again our project leader comments on when she needed to give up departmental responsibilities to spend time running our network - 'Despite being warned it was a bad career move I was finally allowed to fulfill the role of project manager'.

My experience and that of numerous other colleagues confirms that universities want the visibility and the funds that comes from networks but are very reluctant to grant time and facilities to allow staff to properly participate in them – it seems to be a case of 'ask not what your institution can do for you, rather what you can do for the institution!'. There are also numerous small irritating blocks to networking, such as our first attempt to use a web cam to conference 'we had not anticipated the barriers to our virtual network... a web cam could not be plugged into a PC because of regulations on the use of peripherals'. Again discussions with colleagues suggest we have a long way still to go in HE to achieve pervasive and converged technologies. Finally we have to produce a VLE which is has a recognizable 'core' which fulfills our generic aims and can be widely diffused but which can be customized to fit the competitive needs of different institutions. How will we each feel if we work hard to produce a quality product and then we are asked to hand over all the information to another institution that is in direct competition with us for the same pool of students?

Particularly interesting for this debate were the discussions recently held with colleagues in another network – our European Socrates links with Copenhagen. Here our Business Education Research Group visited Copenhagen Business School, RUC, a European Environmental Agency and some marketing consultancies. All were familiar and appreciative of the power of networks and information flows; all had different stories to tell of how they balanced the need for collaboration and competition. For example the Copenhagen Universities decided to solve one problem by setting up a joint graduate school in one area but to allow competitive recruitment by agreeing to give a revolving high profile to a different institution each year.

All institutions commented on the ‘hollowing out’ that had been necessary to enhance flexibility – but spoke of a counter move to maintain and support their core workers more. Many were troubled by the lack of personal contact and the retreat into virtual networking and superficial communication. A colleague from RUC on a teaching exchange at a University of London College complained that she might just as well have stayed at home as she never saw any colleagues or students, only emails and websites. An important shift was noted from the traditional concept of your ‘social capital’ driving the network to the current situation where the individuals’ presence on the network provides their social capital. A qualitative change seems to have occurred from networking for useful information to networking for visibility ‘to be seen’. In marketing firms the oft-repeated comment was that subject disciplines no longer mattered as institutions were plugged into a ‘creative network’ with a ‘portfolio of talents’.

The main criticism of grand ‘overarching theories’ is that they are at too high a level of generality to be useful for when their practical insights are laboriously extracted, they result in trivial and obvious recommendations. However if we ignore the big picture we are likely to find ourselves reacting to events not shaping them, crouching naked and bewildered as the winds of change sweep over us. Castells give us the perspective to interrogate our current environment by asking such questions as:-

- Is our future with the institutions or the networks?
- Which strategy - competition or collaboration, will dominate? (and which one do we want to dominate?)
- Which networks will dominate?
- Should we accept or oppose ‘hollowing out’ and ‘real virtuality’?
- How do we construct strategies to reintegrate groups excluded or opposed to our information networks?

A final thought is that the current consensus on E-learning is that it is best deployed in ‘blended learning’ so that they added value to traditional forms of face to face teaching. Most commentators also remark on the slow take up of E-learning – but perhaps after Castells we should view it as a ‘sleeping giant’ rather than just one constituent in blended learning. If networking logic prevails and technology converges and pervades (broadband in every home, laptop for every student) we then may then see the virtual university in its full ‘glory’. But whichever trend manifests itself we should always remember Marx’s dictum that ‘men make their own history albeit not in circumstances of their own choosing’. Most critical commentators emphasise the second, deterministic part of this quote but both Marx and Castells are more truly represented as forecasting what might be - as to paraphrase Marx, the point is not to interpret the world but, as educationalists, to change it...

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