An e-Learning Team's Life On and Offline: A Collaborative Self-Ethnography in Postgraduate Education Development

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Abstract: This paper primarily discusses the methodology of a case study into interactions and working practices of an e-learning team, on and offline. Although several ethnographies have been published on online learning, there are apparently none involving communities developing courses. This is a unique insight, bringing a new view of course and staff development. The e-learning team develops courses in the Faculty of Medical Sciences Graduate School in a UK higher education institution. Interactions occur online and offline, the team's workplace 'setting'. The ethnography is to inform future staff development by analysing interaction outside the team with the subject specialists, generally time-poor clinicians and research scientists who have varied experience of e-learning, but are required to provide course content and to teach their subjects in online distance learning courses. Records kept by team members were enlarged upon via weekly interviews and collated by a team member who developed a narrative, subsequently coded into content themes. The main themes were technology, pedagogy and communication. Conversation analysis provided theories on methods useful in staff development for later action research. Consideration was also given to issues of power within the interactional relationships. The paper discusses challenges and strengths of this collaborative self-ethnography as a research methodology in this e-learning setting. It was concluded that collaborative self-ethnography is a highly suitable research methodology for this type of study.

Keywords: E-Learning team, online distance learning, ethnography, staff development, pedagogy, technology, communication, power, Foucault

1. Introduction

Teaching online employs a different pedagogy to teaching in face-to-face situations (Kim & Bonk 2006), and has a requirement for technical support to develop and maintain course content in an accessible and stable form. Expertise in interface design and graphics is required to improve student learning experience (University of Edinburgh 2016). In addition, administrative duties need addressing. Ellis and Phelps (2000) describe the change from an academic working alone in course design, to teams of people providing online course development. This may facilitate all these requirements; Restauri (2004) suggests there is greater student success if team development of distance learning courses is carried out.

Such a team is employed in the Graduate School of a Faculty of Medical Sciences in a UK higher education institution (HEI), working with clinicians and scientists (the subject specialists), who may have previously lectured face-to-face, to develop courses. Conversion from the traditional face-to-face lecturer and subject specialist to online moderator with knowledge of online instructional design is an important aspect of development for many faculty staff in online distance learning (ODL). In order to teach online courses they require knowledge of online pedagogy as well as knowledge of use of the technology (Salmon, 2005).

A collaborative self-ethnography to investigate the interactions of the aforementioned e-learning team developing ODL postgraduate courses was carried out. This was the inductive cycle of planned action research into staff development for clinicians and biomedical scientists who are required to develop and run these ODL Masters courses in their specialist subjects. Faculty staff and clinicians in particular have limited time available to undertake staff development so knowledge of the most beneficial and time-economic methods of staff development would be useful. This study into interactions of the e-learning team, initiated and funded by the HEI's Equal Acclaim for Teaching Excellence Project (EquATE), set out to inform how staff development for time-limited subject specialists is designed and implemented. Findings of this study are presented below.
However, this article mainly discusses the use of collaborative self-ethnography as a research methodology in the study.

1.1 Aims of the article

The article aims to answer the following research questions, which are listed in order of detail provided in this article:

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1. How and why is collaborative self-ethnography useful as a research methodology in the investigation of teams developing e-learning?
2. How does the collaborative self-ethnography of the e-learning team inform us of future requirements and methods of staff development for online teaching?
3. What are the dynamics of the inter-relationships of the e-learning team with clinicians and scientists who are subject specialists?

2. Background

2.1 Collaborative self-ethnography

Ethnography, as defined by Bryman (2012, p432), is a data collection method where the observer/ethnographer is immersed in a group or community where they observe the interactions and behaviours of the populace recording fieldnotes on their observations. These are then used in descriptions of the population. Self-ethnography is defined by Alvesson (2003) as "a study in which the researcher describes the cultural setting to which he/she has natural access".

Collaborative self-ethnography involves more than one researcher in a setting to which all the researchers have access (Burford May and Pattillo-McCoy, 2000). Methods of data collection in these types of study are mixed rather than just observation; participant observation, a characteristic of ethnography, is employed, but so also are interviews and other context-specific methods.

Ethnographic methods are novel for communities involved in online course development; Alvesson (2003) states that: "It is rare that academics study the lived realities of their own organizations". There have been many ethnographies published about online learning (Browne, 2016; Fitzsimons, 2013) but apparently none involving communities developing courses rather than about those immersed in learning online, so this study is a unique insight, bringing a new view of course development and staff interaction. There appears to be a dearth of collaborative self-ethnography as research methodology around e-learning altogether.

However, Ngunjiri et al (2010), although describing the 'blurred distinction between researcher-participant' in auto-ethnography, say it allows a narrative to be produced where the self is seen in the context of the social world around it.

As a research methodology of choice for this study, collaborative self-ethnography was thought to provide a rich source of commentary by experienced e-learning design and development staff on their interactions with current and proposed subject specialist faculty staff. The immediacy and simplicity of recording interactions with other team members and faculty staff out-with the team made it an ideal method for use both on and offline.

2.2 Staff development for online course design

Staff development for online course design has been much-researched with many case histories published. These describe various development methods and strategies, but none stand out as more efficient than others.

Taylor (2003) describes the move to online teaching having a requirement for situated learning (citing Brown et al 1989) which is within both a social and physical context. Describing staff development in the University of Southern Queensland this approach using 'immersion in interactive online learning' seems to have been highly successful as this is now a well-known e-university. Here teams of early adopters created an online course to facilitate staff development in pedagogy and technology for ODL.

Ellis and Phelps (2000) discuss action learning and collaboration with an online course development team finding that the collaboration was one of the most useful aspects. Staff enthusiasm for online course development was high which is likely to lead to greater success, although there were issues around how much academic staff were meant to contribute to course development compared with the team. This study used action learning and research as at the time there was so little other research done to inform staff development.

Jenkins et al (2011) reported that a 'committed local champion' is one of the best drivers for the increased use of technology in education. However, they showed that since previous surveys had been carried out there had been an increase in the lack of staff knowledge of online learning as a barrier to the use of technology, suggesting that staff development is as important as ever as ODL progresses from its' infancy to maturity.

2.3 Staff inter-relationships between e-learning teams and subject specialists

Consideration is given to power relationships and how these may affect staff development within the study, including how e-learning specialists share their knowledge with subject specialists, whose mastery is in another discipline. Personal authority may affect the resultant level of staff development.

Foucault wrote:

> *"Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order." (Foucault, 1972)*

This implies we all have to change but the change is forced upon us by the power of other people within their own structural systems. In order to change from a subject specialist with a history of face-to-face lecturing to online teaching, a subject specialist will undergo some changes in knowledge which may also require changes in attitude. Response to this requirement for change will have a bearing on the success of any staff development methods.

Cramp (2015) cites Lave and Wenger (1991) stating 'the importance to learning of negotiating meaning, constructing shared understandings'. Both *negotiating* and *sharing* imply an equal level of power amongst the participants suggesting that less success in staff development may be the result of unequal relationships, with the perception of greater power in the more knowledgeable party.

There can be resistance to the change to online teaching for varying reasons. This may be lack of time, recognition, perception of quality, lack of knowledge of pedagogy and technology and particularly considerations of workload (Panda and Mishra, 2007; Maguire 2005). Delgaty (2015) argues for a cultural change in institutions developing ODL courses, suggesting there should be support allowing staff development and the possible change in identity that comes with changing teaching practices and working with others in teams.

3. The e-learning team

The e-learning team consists of a faculty e-learning co-ordinator (team leader), two programme co-ordinators, a pedagogic specialist, an e-learning administrator, an e-learning technician and an e-learning illustrator. Within the Graduate School office the team are seated closely together enabling rapid communication with each other offline. In addition to this close proximity there are monthly team meetings which allow the team to keep up to date with each other's work as well as mind-mapping to solve any problems and providing constructive criticism. The team members are encouraged to attend university-wide events involving technology-enhanced learning, seminars and meetings useful for their individual, as well as team, functioning. Occasional social events are organised for the whole team.

The team has grown with the need to employ more individuals in the development and running of e-learning courses over the past three years as the university policy includes capacity building at Masters level. Prior to this, individuals were employed according to programme requirements since the inception of the first fully online Masters course within the faculty eleven years ago. Then it was sufficient to have a single e-learning co-ordinator for the programme. As expectations of further markets for other programmes increased there was a greater need for the development of courses and improvement of content management systems and their aesthetics. Over two years the team was formed. There are now four different programmes containing several strands running or in development by the team.

The faculty e-learning co-ordinator (FELC) not only directs the team but also acts as an interface between the team and the postgraduate dean, helping to inform policy for future directions. The e-learning co-ordinator (ELC) and the programme e-learning co-ordinator (PEC) work on different programmes but have similar jobs, providing pedagogical, technical and to a greater or lesser extent, administrative support. The e-learning

academic specialist (ELAS), the author of this paper and researcher, provides pedagogical support as well as actually leading two of the twenty credit modules as lecturer/moderator. The ELAS is responsible for legal aspects such as obtaining licenses for copyrighted images. Administrative duties are undertaken by the e-learning administrator (ELA); the e-learning technician (ELT) develops the content management system and the e-learning illustrator (ELI) provides images and animations for the courses which not only add to the learning experience visually, but in many cases make up formative assessments such as drag and drop quizzes. However, all the team may use their multiple skills when appropriate, for example the ELA is able to use illustrative software when required and the ELI directs technical aspects of the virtual classroom.

The team communicate with each other whenever necessary to ask for others to provide material or technical expertise. This usually occurs several times each day. Communication is mostly offline and verbal but may take the form of emails to ensure records are kept or when the recipient team member is too busy to provide instant attention. Team meetings are very informal with no minutes kept. Communication throughout the team is excellent. The team has been together long enough to know each other well, including who has skills sets for anything outside their day-to-day roles.

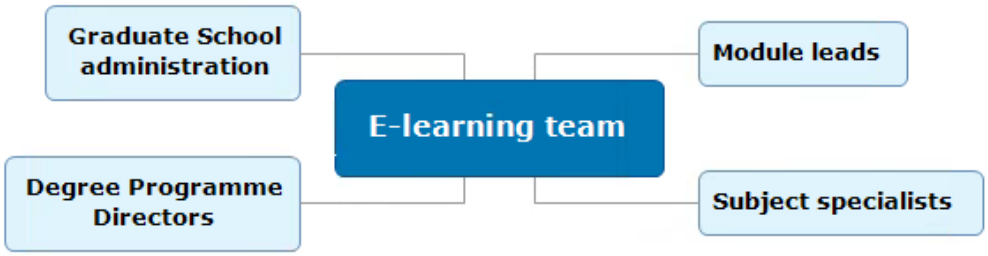

Figure 1: Team interaction with other faculty members

Figure 1 illustrates the team interactions with other faculty members. These interactions may be face-to-face or online as emails, and occasionally via Skype or the web-conferencing facility Adobe Connect. When a new course is planned, the programme or module leader usually finds subject specialists who will decide on assessments, learning outcomes and provide content with suggestions for activities to engage the students once these have been suggested by e-learning team members, or by themselves when they have prior experience of e-learning. This tends to be the exception rather than the norm. The subject specialists are usually clinicians and research scientists who may already teach face-to-face, whose experience ranges from none through some, often as an online student in the case of clinical staff, to a very small minority with a high degree of experience in teaching online, mostly at other HEIs. All need some training on the use of the content management system as it is purpose built. However, many need training in online pedagogy in addition to this. There is nothing specific within the study team's work descriptions that they will engage in staff development, but it is assumed that this is implicit within the job.

4. Methodology

The e-learning academic specialist (ELAS) approached data collection with the questions:

- What can interactions of the e-learning team tell us about staff development needs?
- Through our working practices how do we help other faculty staff engage in e-learning?

It was felt that an interpretivist approach would be most suitable for the study design compared to positivist approaches, as this study was to form a theory rather than test one. Any theory developed would be used to design methods and content which would be later tested by action research for staff development. The choice of ethnography was governed by the ease of access to 'observees' and their willingness to take part.

4.1 Study design

Firstly, ethical approval from the Faculty Preliminary Ethics Committee was obtained to carry out the collaborative self-ethnography within the team. Prior to commencement the study design was discussed and agreed upon at a monthly team meeting. Team members recorded their own interactions electronically (including email records) or on paper with the ELAS interviewing them approximately weekly about their records. The interactions were either online via email and occasionally virtual classrooms and Skype, or face-to-face in meetings. This was essentially an open study for the team, removing the ethical issues of

ethnographies with data collected in a covert way. Where any comments from staff outside the team would be used in the study, details of the study were fully explained to staff members and their permission sought for use ensuring maintenance of open-ness.

Considerations about power and workload issues led to the FELC maintaining her own records, concentrating on recording those interactions which were of interest to staff development only, rather than for example future policy meetings which would have a more indirect interest for this study.

Fieldnotes collated by the ELAS were shared electronically for all to triangulate for accuracy. The weekly 'interviews' were semi-spontaneous and constitute 'participant observation' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995, p1-2). Questions were unstructured and timing depended on the participants rather than procedure. In addition, the ELAS recorded team interactions at monthly meetings where new technical developments and problems are discussed. Minutes of the programme meetings were investigated for content relevant to staff development. The notes produced by these methods formed the narrative text for data analysis. The narrative was made available electronically for team members to triangulate the data.

Team members were interviewed at the end of the study by the ELAS to ascertain the training they had themselves received prior of during their employment in this field. In developing the study design, no consideration was given to the history of those outside the team and only small consideration was given to the history of the team itself. When the narrative was being written historical features became apparent so some consideration was given to this alongside the ethnography.

The study ran for five and a half months starting mid-January and finishing late June 2016, covering a full semester which was commenced and completed along with the run-up to another within the study period. This enabled the preparation, running and evaluation of programme modules to be completed during the study. This does run counter to traditional ethnographies which are carried out over twelve months or more to cover each season (Gonzalez, 2000) but the full cycle of 'seasons' was covered by this timescale, the full academic year merely repeating this cycle three times.

4.2 Data analysis

Content coding of a narrative produced by the research was used as the first step in data analysis. A scrutiny-based technique fitted the research questions to produce different themes. The author considered that further analysis of the themes would provide areas in which staff development could be built upon later.

Preliminary hand-coding of the narrative text at 6 weeks was carried out by the ELAS. 'Pawing' divided it into themes (Ryan and Bernard, 2003), which are detailed below. The themes found divided the areas of working practice. At this point only three themes were used: communication, pedagogy and technology which informed the author's development of some preliminary materials for staff development of subject specialists newly engaged in ODL courses, the subject of a future study. The final and complete narrative text was stored in the NVivo 11.0 database (QSR, 2016). Coding here divided it further into nine themes: pedagogy, technology, communication, time issues, training, marketing, aesthetic issues, external advice and social. The ELAS then took the content of each theme to interrogate further in conversation analysis in context, to make meaning of the interactions by considering what they achieved (Bryman 2012, p529).

Conversation analysis of the e-learning team narrative was used to provide answers to the study questions within the account of the study.

5. Narrative

This narrative first details the training and prior experience of team members which was gleaned from individual interviews. The purpose of this was to understand how they had developed their knowledge of ODL with a view to formulating development materials for subject specialists, shown by Table 1:

Table 1: Team members' development of expertise

Team member	Formal training	Informal training	Experience
Faculty e-learning co-ordinator FELC	PGCertEd (online education)	Work in USA HEI and school where faculty and teachers willing to share online teaching knowledge and techniques; online PGCertEd student	Started by supporting module leads then developed full masters programme before becoming academic faculty e-learning co-ordinator, developing and overseeing programmes
E-learning administrator ELA		Natural administration skills and previous administrative experience	Ran the administration side of the new online modules in one programme and now inputs admin, design and pedagogy in several programmes
Programme e-learning co-ordinator PEC	MSc Digital Education (Masters year student)	Self-taught on VLE use	Role changed from admin to more pedagogically orientated with running of VLE and other teaching aspects then increased
E-learning academic specialist ELAS	PGDip Digital Education Current PhD student studying online education	Online MSc and PGDip student Mentored by experienced tutor during first course design	Developing, editing and in some cases leading modules in various programmes
E-learning technician ELT	Course for creatives in advertising industry	Self-taught website design	Website design and development both in HEI and freelance
E-learning illustrator ELI	HND multimedia design	Self-taught design	Developing medical education e-learning in industry before provision of images, animation and film editing for HEI
E-learning co-ordinator ELC	Certificate in teaching IT Masters in Computing	Self-taught website design	Developing websites in other HEI before developing programme in HEI

It can be seen that training was both formal and informal. Most subject specialists would have little time for formal qualifications so informal staff development is the likely path for future training.

There was much overlap between the categories produced by coding: training involved technical or pedagogical issues and there was an overarching category of communication. The importance of communication is such that without it team function would likely cease, but within the themes it was used solely for areas not necessarily covered by the other themes.

5.1 Technology

Of all references in the themes, perhaps unsurprisingly given the nature of the teaching mode, technical details and issues made up a large proportion. Technical training of non-team members was given one-to-one in many cases on an ad hoc basis. This could be described as just-in-time but had the advantage of immediate experiential learning. As an example, telephone conversations allowed practise in the use of virtual classrooms to enable tutorials to be run in evenings, with the ELI as technician 'in residence' to prevent and solve problems:

> *"The ELA offered lots of advice over the phone and occasionally asked the ELI for more technical details for running the virtual classroom".*

> *"Worked with a face-to-face administrator, teaching her how to upgrade tests on the virtual learning environment (VLE) for the next running"*

These comments show that one of the primary functions of team members was staff development in an informal way. Incidences such as these showed how individual team members inducted non-team members into the e-learning community of practice. Cochrane et al., (2013) cite Lave and Wenger (1991) who describe communities of practice as "groups of people with a common interest exploring issues within a particular context". The support given by e-learning staff to less experienced staff enables them to join the community of practice via Zygotsky's 'zone of legitimate peripheral participation' (Smith, 2016). The just-in-time mode may

seem lacking in organisation and poor time management, but it suits clinical staff in particular who have little time to attend organised sessions. This 'knot-worked' approach may form the basis of future action research.

The ELT responded to the needs of team course designers by creating a new page type to display content as a slide show (in this case for patho-histology). This is an example of the on-going continuous improvement of the technology which makes up the bulk of their workload. Demonstration and training the team to use these improvements often occurs at team meetings but is also on a one-to-one basis as needed.

The ELT, the PEC and the ELA commented on the lack of confidence many non-team staff have with technology. The ELT and the PEC both said that staff members were generally happy to edit and apply content to the content management system once they had received a short session of one-to-one training. Some staff appeared too busy to implement their new knowledge immediately and often required emailed instructions later in addition to the initial training, which sometimes caused irritation amongst the team. Historically many of the subject specialists had lectured face-to-face but had little to do with the institution's virtual learning environment (VLE). This may have provided some tension with the expectations of the team that faculty staff would learn 'new tricks' with the technology, whereas these staff may have had no particular wish to change the status quo where previously they handed their PowerPoint slides to an administrator to post on the VLE. Furthermore, despite training, some staff did not gain the necessary confidence and preferred course changes to be carried out by the ELA. Whilst on the whole 'digital natives versus digital immigrants' (Prensky 2001) are controversial: we are both immigrants and natives at one time or another when using different technologies; however, confidence in technological use depends upon experience and practise will encourage self-belief in technological capability. Provision of a 'sandpit' where staff could practise uploading and editing content in the safety of privacy may improve confidence with technology.

5.2 Pedagogy

Much of the team's work involved developing new modules and updating old ones, eliciting many interactions with non-team staff. At two team meetings the progress of a new module development was peer reviewed by the rest of the team who provided constructive criticism on learning activities. In other modules under development the emphasis was on the application of the knowledge students would gain, so clinical staff were asked for case studies and reports based on real life for students to discuss.

One module being updated after student feedback suggested it was too heavy on content needed videos of 'talking heads' and diagrams added to more succinctly explain the details a large amount of text had failed to address. The PEC commented that specialists do not necessarily understand how hard content is to understand for non-experts; this may be core knowledge or threshold concepts (Meyer & Land 2003). This may form a barrier to students fully grasping concepts, but the PEC commented that if she could understand then so will the students, providing a solution in the course editing. Another module which the PEC was updating required alterations so the increased number of students taking the course would still be able to participate in collaborative activities successfully without their role being reduced or the tutor being inundated with work to provide feedback on.

At the other extreme, the ELAS found that in one course there needed to be more content, explaining to the subject specialist that some factual content as text and video was necessary rather than the suggested reading alone which needed scaffolding first. It was however the norm to be given too much material as content. Subject specialists all showed great enthusiasm for their disciplines and the knowledge they had to impart, not realising that the workload they would produce within an ODL course would be oppressive to the students as well as being beyond the 20 credits specified. The course developers (FELC, ELAS, PEC and ELC) had to strike a balance between enough information for useful student activity and an excess of content for students to navigate.

In the development of new modules the response of staff with no experience of ODL was enlightening. In meetings with clinicians on more than one occasion the ELAS found that there was a high level of discomfiture with the idea of teaching online as opposed to lecturing. This may be historical, due to clinicians receiving lectures as their main means of knowledge transfer in their own degrees. Some expected to use PowerPoints with voiceovers or lecture capture systems. This was a common occurrence and showed the typical transmission mode of teaching in face-to-face lectures where knowledge was presented rather than knowledge being discovered by the students. Many of these subject specialists were experienced face to face

lecturers. Others had a little knowledge of running ODL in that they realised PowerPoints from lectures online would be a dreary learning experience for the students, but they did not know which alternative methods to use. Once the ELAS explained how the team would work with the subject specialist to develop content with mixed media and plenty of individual and collaborative student activity there was a great deal of relief expressed. This was summed up by one clinician:

> *"I was really dreading doing this, but it sounds as though it might be interesting".*

This statement expresses a change in views as well as a willingness to engage, suggesting that care in depicting ODL and what is required for staff development will lead to greater enthusiasm for the task. The acceptance of differences in online teaching and learning from face to face and the willingness to develop their online pedagogy was generally at a high level once it had been understood that help from the e-learning team would be given and the onus was not solely upon the subject specialists. However, the notion that nothing could surpass lectures for teaching was not mentioned, but implied in a few cases ("You can't use online for *everything*"). The majority of knowledge transfer in medical schools is by lecture (Brown and Manogue 2001). Discourse showing regression to their original training and rejection of new methods suggests a certain amount of clinging to the past and resistance to change.

The ELI has developed many useful illustrations including self-test limb anatomy drag and drop animations which will be used as re-usable learning objects. Over the study period these were catalogued via a personal staff web-space and also sent to non-e-learning staff who might find them useful in teaching. It is noticeable that whilst there is a willingness to share resources there are no specific means to communicate their availability to other staff. A repository of resources linked to by staff areas on the institutional VLE would be useful to showcase reusable learning objects.

5.3 Communication

Whilst coding the narrative into themes it was realised that virtually all overlapped with 'communication'. It was decided to look at only those aspects of communication in this section which had not been covered by the other sections in the narrative and discussion.

Within the daily lives of the team communication was both a positive and negative force. Many of the positive incidences of communication involved non-team member e-learning 'champions' who were already very knowledgeable on the subject. In addition, people who had been given enough information at the beginning of the conversation to enable them to understand how ODL courses function were then able to grasp how the team could help them in course design. It was easier to meet and discuss course development with a champion:

> *"It's really easy to discuss pedagogy as he totally gets e-learning".*

Where some training had been given to those lacking in experience:

> *"This was a more positive meeting ….she has a number of images, history and the accompanying report so it should make a very nice activity."*

The FELC commented at the end of the study that carrying out the study had brought the team closer together. This may have been due to increased communication and a greater depth of understanding of each other's roles developing courses.

5.4 Other coding themes

The other categories found when coding were: time issues, training, marketing, aesthetic issues, external advice and social. These will be discussed in less detail as they were only a small representation of the whole narrative; the majority have less bearing on staff development and are of more use to future policy.

Time issues were seen as a problem by clinicians.

> *"She was concerned about the amount of time it would require her to be online when running the module, particularly if the module is going to attract a lot of students."*

Other issues with time were how long it often took for the team members to receive course content:

> *"She is busy with stuff until the end of May and will start sending content then"*

The time issues experienced suggested that greater emphasis on time management during the planning stage of new courses must be given. All subject specialists are informed how long to expect course development to take, but their clinical and research workload take priority, often until the last minute when courses are then prioritized. In one case a subject specialist was replaced by an e-learning champion (also a subject specialist) in an effort to speed the provision of material for a new module, showing the importance of planning and time management.

Training for the team often took the form of workshops and seminars either within or outside the institution, sometimes for specific needs such as training in new software use for the ELI. The PEC and the ELAS are both engaged in higher degrees in online education. Continuing professional development also occurred by attending conferences although it was surprising that these sometimes missed their mark as described by a comment post-conference about a regional teaching event:

> *"This year was probably the least useful with the most it was geared towards e-learning being talks on blended learning. One lecturer with a flipped classroom had an almost an evangelistic view of e-learning; what we have been doing for years still appears to be avant garde to other people"*

Discussion about marketing involved the provision of illustrated materials by the ELI, potential venues for course information adverts to be placed and possible funding for students.

Aesthetic issues often involved discussion how to display content to the best advantage as well as improving the look of particular courses. This involved all the team and ideas were always welcomed by the team from individual members, such as icons to delineate different activities developed by the EI and deployed by the ELA.

External advice often came from other technical staff outside the team. A meeting of the FELC and the ELT with the IT support services in the institution was fruitful in that they mapped out how servers could be used and maintained for the content management system. Maintenance and planning are essential for the smooth running of ODL courses.

Within the life of the study the team had two social events: both were visits to local restaurants. This is an excellent way of increasing team bonding in a relaxed atmosphere. It is also said to increase creativity: Gilson and Shalley (2004) found that the more a team socialized, the more creative they were.

6. Discussions

6.1 The use of ethnography as a research methodology in the study

In this study ethnographic methods were chosen over single interviews to provide detailed descriptions of tasks over an extended period. The father of modern ethnography, Geertz, tried to ensure that meaning was considered from 'discourse' which enabled 'thick description' to be produced (Geertz, 1973, p20). The use of documented lists of tasks/interactions as a starting point for the ELAS to provide further detail from weekly interviewing team members developed the thick description required in ethnography.

Ethnography emphasises the importance of social and cultural contexts as well as the value of peer-like relationships between ethnographer and participant (Brown and Dobrin, 2004, p5). The cultural context was one of the strengths of the study: it allowed a picture to develop of the e-learning experts at work, how they carried out the everyday tasks and how those with less experience found challenges and were helped to meet them. Interviews, while providing an intimate view of certain aspects of the culture, would form an incomplete picture. It is unlikely that in an interview the level of discomfort of those engaged in e-learning for the first time would be catalogued. This is especially so if the interviewer were the ELAS as this would bring issues of positionality (Mikecz 2016); clinicians could be described as 'elites' and a single interview is unlikely to unearth anything which would have the effect of dispelling this position. Within the workplace, the researcher working

together with the 'elite' brings in trust and a shift in positionality to a more equal relationship as both start to rely on each other for the task ahead, each with their own capabilities.

Using collaborative ethnography leads to a rich picture being developed; however, there are limitations. Some may have reported as others expect to hear, leaving the question of whether there is 'no one shared or consistent reality' (Hoeber and Kerwin, 2013). This was not obvious in most instances with the ELAS being present for much of the time to observe as well as receiving the record of interactions from each team member. However, there was one omission noted by the ELAS. None of the other team members recorded their weekly or fortnightly 'catch-up' meetings with the FELC. This was not commented on by the ELAS in any interviews as she considered it their privilege to regard conversation with 'the boss' as a private space. However, this omission made for a less rigorous ethnography whether it had any bearing on the goal of considering staff training or not. It is also a demonstration of power structures; acceptance that time with an authority is built-in within work patterns making this a mundane activity going unreported.

Over-familiarity with the setting may lead to omissions (Burford May and Pattillo-McCoy, 2000); subjects may be considered too mundane to warrant reporting. An example of this was observation by the ELAS of several team members suggesting to an allied, but non-team member how to solve a computer problem. The exchange took less than five minutes and was not noted by team members participating, probably due to the mundane nature of the problem rather than a desire to exclude this from the study. In ethnography there is "a tension of involvement and distancing" (Hill, 2000). This is an example of involvement within the minutiae of life but a lack of distancing when it came to record details in that the study itself was forgotten.

Some aspects of power issues were considered in planning the study design; this could have taken the form of oppression of the team members if someone in a position of authority examined the minutiae of their working life. This possible conflict was overcome by having a team member rather than the team leader collecting the data, giving the team members the capacity to describe their lives at work without fear of adverse comment. Tew (2006) cites Weber (1968) who considered power as a capacity to do something despite opposition from others; it was empowering for team members to consider their working lives in conjunction with an equal peer, providing much rich data.

However, all ethnographic studies have some issues of power and as the study went on greater consideration was given to this. This includes power of the researcher to reveal truths which are damaging to those observed; the power the observer has in their choice of material for narratives and what to leave out as unimportant or considered too controversial to use. In the case of this close-knit team this does not appear to be an issue. The narrative will be discussed in this paper as comprehensively as possible by the researcher in order to answer the other study questions and in order to satisfy academic integrity, although there has been consideration given to the choice of words over sensitive issues. Furthermore, the problem of over-closeness in a study (Gallinat 2010 p26) has generally been avoided here as each participant has their own separate role and therefore differing ideas about life on and offline in the e-learning team. Power issues from a Foucauldian point-of-view will be discussed later.

There are also ethical issues, as with any ethnography. Just because we can access, should we? Taking issues of ethics into account within the workplace, do employees want management to know exactly what goes on? Highly detailed narrative descriptions of interactions may be above and beyond what actually occurs. The observer's idea of 'truth' is merely a construction of that of others in the interpretivist mode espoused by Geertz (1973, p9). The observer will always bring preconceptions which may cloud the clarity of their data collection. In the practicalities of this study having the team triangulate the data will go towards ensuring its' veracity although it is impossible to ensure every interaction is reported without individual bias. Fieldnotes were electronically available for this triangulation and there were no comments on any discrepancies leaving the ELAS to believe that this version was the 'truth' and the notes were a good record of reality.

6.2 Considerations for future staff development for online course design

Throughout the course of the study it became apparent that where 'staff development' was discussed there had been no definition of this term and therefore no expectation of an 'end product'. This was not necessarily a disadvantage as it removed constraints on what was expected for a very diverse group of people. It could be argued that staff development should be on a continuum and indeed the team themselves engaged in further professional development. The argument for informal training is shown by the team progressing the courses

with the subject specialists once details of pedagogy and technology had been provided. It would also be wise to extend informality to the term 'staff development for online teaching' which could cover anything from developing student activities to the use of different social media and collaborative tools and meaning an increase in knowledge and practice in the subject. Assessment of development could also be diverse and could include student course evaluation and a decrease in questions to the technical side of the e-learning team.

Cramp, 2013 mentions 'the pedagogy of discomfort' citing Joyes, Hall and Thang (2008) who suggest that it is common to find staff teaching online without any training having moved from face-to-face teaching. This takes them "outside comfort zones and challenging assumptions to encourage emotional engagement may be important in developing meaningful dialogue in DML [distance mediated learning]". The ethics surrounding this as well as the practicalities of developing and running a functional course make this a hit-and-miss method of encouraging dialogue and may decrease the standard of the courses provided. The author considers it should be mandatory for training before teaching online.

The e-learning team ethnography showed that one-to-one sessions for staff development in technology were vital. The same could be true for online pedagogy and this could benefit from the provision of previous examples of online teaching materials. Greig and Skehill (2008) found benefit in peer action learning for staff development.

More use could be made of champions in light of the enthusiasm shown towards their knowledge and abilities by the team, perhaps talking about course design and running via short videos available to new online teaching staff. Jenkins et al. (2011) considered champions improved the standard of e-learning courses. Mentorship might also be beneficial.

6.3 Team inter-relationships with subject specialists

Of interest is the influence of power in the interactions of the team with faculty staff and clinicians with the e-learning team members which became apparent to the author on scrutinising the conversations within the content themes. In the author's view all these players are specialists in their own world which have a bearing on attitudes, making it of interest to consider these in the Foucauldian turn.
Downing (2008) cites Foucault (1976) that:

> *"Discourse is a much more specific context, describing the intersection of knowledge and power and the forms of expression and articulation they take in various fields"*

Hill (2009) also found it useful to analyse the results of ethnography in an educational context in conjunction with genealogy in the Foucauldian turn. Analysis of the discourses within the narrative shows that as a team there is a certain amount of judgement of those who 'get' e-learning, and those who don't, creating divisions. Here, Foucault's bio-politics, the different bodies, are apparent where the world is categorized according to those who understand ODL teaching and learning (the e-learning team) and those who don't (almost everyone else). Hill (2000) shows teachers as politically situated as they have "theoretical ideas about disciplinary power, hierarchical observation, normalizing judgement". This suggests care must be taken within staff development approaches to avoid alienating those who show 'otherness' to the team experts in their knowledge of e-learning. Approaches should be empowering rather than emphasizing the differences in knowledge of teaching activities. Burke (2000) comments that understanding differences in cultural practices in context, searching for that which is common and an acceptance of the differences will counteract a fear of change. To this end communication between team and subject specialists as Foucault's discourse 'as a foci for struggle and resistance' (Burke, 2000) should be sensitive to possible issues of standing within the community of practice of online teaching.

In terms of power relations perhaps too much is assumed that training equals change; staff specialists may see this training as a new way of adding to their workload without empowering them and perhaps demeaning them if they are used to someone else doing technical work for them. Sensitivity needs to be shown when working with specialists highly skilled in their own world who may be reluctant to embrace new teaching methods, at the same time clinging to the older and more familiar methods. The high esteem in which they are held as clinicians could interfere with the relationships with others who are engaged in teaching them something new in an apparently unrelated subject they have been coerced into participating in. There was no

evidence of this found in this case study, just a reluctance of some to teach online as this would add to their workload as well as requiring time to develop the new teaching skill.

7. Concluding remarks

Ethnography has provided a rich description of the working practices and interaction of an e-learning team in a HEI. It has shown many ways in which they interact with faculty staff who are subject specialists with varying experience of teaching online. Considering the results in the light of Foucault's attribution of power in all aspects of life, future staff development should be sensitive to the ethos of subject specialists who are already experts in their own field. Using ethnography as an interpretivist approach has enabled theories about what is beneficial for staff development to be synthesised. A positivist approach would be less attractive as it would be hard to elicit from staff what training they need if they have yet to understand what the new work would entail and the study was to formulate suggestions for staff development, not to test them. From the interactions it can be concluded that the following ways of staff development will be beneficial for future engagement in ODL:

- Course 'samples' as examples to show the multimedia and text content and how social media may be used in ODL
- One-to-one training for simple use of content management system
- Mentors and champions for support

Provision of a 'sandpit' within the content management system where ideas can be tried and tested
Whilst not all HEIs have e-learning teams involved in developing courses, where clinical lecturers and research scientists require a knowledge of ODL when required to act as subject specialists in their development and running, the suggestions for staff development are likely to be generalisable.

The use of ethnography could have been complemented by interviews with other subject specialists who were engaged in running ODL but not necessarily interacting with the team during the period of the study. This would provide a more comprehensive picture than that constrained by interactions during the time period. Questionnaires sent to a wider audience, in other faculties and other HEIs in the UK and the wider world on the type of training staff receive for ODL, or wished they had received, would also complement the findings of this study in the planning of staff development activities and could provide information on cultural differences and therefore requirements. Both these research methods will be utilised by the author for planned future research into staff development.

A narrative developed over several months has provided a much deeper level of knowledge about the culture of the e-learning team than single interviews would have done. Avoiding issues of power and sensitive reporting in this case has provided a good framework to answer the research questions without courting controversy. Ethnography has been beneficial to unlock the development needs of subject specialist staff for ODL Masters courses and can be recommended as a research methodology within this type of e-learning situation.

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