Becoming a Networked Learner: Unpacking identity development in networked learning communities

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Abstract

The aim of this autoethnography is to explore my identity development across three learning communities, underpinned by networked learning to varying degrees, to understand the impacting factors and their results. Networked learning has been described as the teaching and learning paradigm of the twenty-first century, requiring the adoption of networked learning ontology and epistemology. In this paper, I argue that it is therefore imperative to prepare teachers, educated in earlier and possibly contrasting paradigms, for the identity work this shift requires. The literature presents insight from the perspectives of researchers and teachers in higher education. There is, however, a dearth of insight from primary school teachers who also participate in this paradigm. This paper contributes the insights of a primary school teacher navigating and enculturating within the networked learning paradigm, part of which is networked learning identity development. From a Bourdieusian perspective, the findings suggest that networked learning values and identity can be developed and supported to escape the habitus of older educational paradigms. This can be achieved through the proactive facilitation of critical reflexivity in combination with eight essential networked learning features. This study is of relevance to teacher educators, school leaders, local education authorities and educational practitioners interested in the adoption of networked learning. Recommendations are provided.

Keywords
networked learning; identity; Bourdieu; habitus; reflexivity
for teachers, teacher trainers and teacher developers who may wish to adopt the paradigm of networked learning.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Technological advances of the twenty-first century have brought about what has been described as the ‘network society’ (Castells, 2000). The field of education has subsequently embraced networked learning (NL) and in many quarters, this has become a paradigm advocated for sustainable teacher development (Gaved et al., 2020; Katz et al., 2009; Ministry of Education-Singapore, 2017; Seto, 2019; Toole, 2019). Proponents of NL argue that it is the educational paradigm for the twenty-first century (Harasim et al., 1995; Fetter et al., 2010; Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Hodgson et al., 2011; Ansari et. al., 2012 & Toole, 2019). However, as the field of NL evolves, both benefits and challenges continue to emerge. NL has been defined as “learning that uses communication and information technologies (ICT) to promote connections between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors and between a learning community and its learning resources” (Jones et al., 2001, p.7). As a primary school teacher who has embraced lifelong learning, my own teacher education has entailed NL and participation in networked learning communities (NLCs). In the literature and throughout this research, I highlight the identity development required to become a networked learner and the challenges this can pose. I share the experiences of similar others in the literature, newly navigating NL, juxtaposed with relevant theory and extant research. I conclude this paper with recommendations for teachers, teacher trainers and teacher developers who may wish to adopt the paradigm of NL.

This autoethnography explores my experiences in three learning contexts, underpinned by networked learning to varying degrees, with the goal of unpacking and understanding my changing ontology, epistemology and resulting identity evolution. Autoethnography helps researchers make meaning of their struggles (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008). This study has therefore facilitated sense-making of my identity struggles in NLCs. It may also provide insights on NL for facilitators and designers of NLCs and NL-based teacher training programmes regarding the challenges participants may encounter and ways to overcome them.

This study’s relevance is derived from two widely held claims that: (1) NL is the educational paradigm for the twenty-first century (see opening paragraph) and that (2) for teachers habituated in the conventional values of face-to-face teaching and learning, it is essential for participation in NL to shift onto a new set of requisite values, forging a new, networked learner (NLer) identity (Hodgson et al., 2011). I argue that for teachers to participate in NL-based teacher development programmes, this identity development must therefore become an integral part of initial and continuing teacher education where it can be fostered and sustained organically.

My evolving identity in NLCs has not always been intentional or comfortable. The current trend towards the adoption of digital pedagogies has at times triggered my resistance, an experience mirrored by similar others in the literature, explored in the findings. If NL is indeed the educational paradigm of this century, with the benefits it promises (Lieberman & Mace, 2010; Ansari et. al., 2012 & Toole, 2019; Hodgson et al., 2011), it is therefore pertinent to pre-empt such resistance and proactively pave the way for its (NLs) understanding and adoption. This study inquires:

• RQ: How can networked learning communities support the networked learner identity development of primary school teachers?

This is broken down into the following sub-RQs:

• RQ1: What have been my experiences participating in the three focus networked learning communities?
• RQ2: What ontological and epistemological challenges have I experienced during the identity development process?
• RQ3: How have I addressed these challenges and developed a new teacher identity?

In the following sections, I present my story, this study’s theoretical framework; an overview of the relevant literature, theory and key concepts; this study’s methods and findings and I unpack the latter in the discussion.

1.2 My story

Autoethnography has been described as the story of self against the backdrop of the story of society (Chang, 2008), told through the lens of culture (Adams et al., 2015). My ‘story of self’ is my identity evolution in my NL journey across three contexts, A, B and C. The ‘story of society’ against which I juxtapose my own is of challenges associated with adopting new digital pedagogies. This story of society falls within the bigger, ‘global story’ of the drive for educational change due to globalisation. The cultural lens through which my story is told is that of teacher professional development. This relationship is illustrated in Figure 1.
1.2.1 Context A

My first NL experiences were on a training programme in the early 2000s, Context A, henceforth referred to as A. Before A, my last formal education had been my undergraduate programme completed in 1986. As my undergraduate studies and earlier professional development were undertaken well before the digital age, I had no experience of NL until A. A was a blended learning programme incorporating the open-source learning management system, Moodle, used for accessing course materials and connecting peers and tutors plus face-to-face teaching. The NL in this programme occurred during the online interactions between tutors and students, sharing of resources and collaboration on assignments. Various Facebook groups formed additional online learning spaces. I acknowledge that the face-to-face component of A may have impacted my experience in contrast to B and C.

1.2.2 Context B

My next NL experience was in Context B (henceforth B), a distance-learning programme. This was fully a NLC, with Moodle used to access resources, submit assignments and respond to tutor-posed questions in dedicated forums. In my experience, the forums were formal, tutor-led and my participation was tentative. I viewed assessment in B as more transparent than in A, however, not transparent enough for me to understand it. I arrived with apprehension from A which had featured constant harsh appraisals. I was therefore on guard and working hard to establish a track record of good scholarship. At some points in A, I had also experienced racial and gender-based discrimination. I therefore decided that in the early stages of B, I would keep my ethnicity and gender hidden until I had established trusting relationships. With B being entirely distance learning (DL), and with no face-to-face, video or audio contact required, this ‘hiding’ was made possible. As B progressed, I maintained strong grades, received positive tutor feedback and won the confidence of my peers. This boosted my confidence and I evolved from tentative to a more confident NLer.

1.2.3 Context C

Following B, I began another programme, Context C (henceforth, C), by DL and NL-based. C was more cooperative and collaborative than A and B, tutor-facilitated, involved several group projects, discussions and peer feedback, and learner autonomy was stressed all through. I still had reservations from A and was therefore still not open to sharing my challenges in the forums. Even after gentle urging from a tutor to share my questions in the forum for group learning, I continued emailing the tutor privately. I decided at the time that I would learn in whatever way I felt most comfortable. However, this apprehension soon gave way to becoming comfortable with the discomfort of ‘fishbowl learning,’ the opposite of ‘hiding’ in A. This unfolded as I learned to trust peers and tutors, feedback was established.
as supportive rather than harshly critical, I saw assessment as transparent, and the programme promoted autonomy and reflexivity. I began to feel safe enough to enjoy and contribute to deeper learning through collaboration and knowledge co-construction with peers.

This story charts my NL evolution from *Apprehensive Outsider* in ‘A’, to *Tentative Beginner* in ‘B,’ to *Invested Networked Learner* in ‘C.’ I am still evolving. There were several critical incidents (CIs) that provoked the re-evaluation and recalibration of my teacher values, ontology and epistemology. Some of this, I welcomed. Other aspects I initially begrudged but later embraced. This experience is further unpacked in the discussion, supported by the literature.

## 2. Theoretical framework

This section provides an overview of Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, reflexivity and fields of practice, the theoretical framework for this study. It also lays the ground for unpacking the findings using this Bourdieusian framework.

### 2.1 Habitus

Bourdieu put forward the concept of habitus, a system of socially ingrained dispositions acquired through experience (Maclean et al., 2012). Habitus is influenced by previous experiences and goes on to influence future ones, hence Bourdieu described it as both structured and structuring. Habitus is however not static and may change with one’s experiences such as age, time and travel. Habitus does not determine practice but operates as a limiting framework (Mouzelis, 2007). One example is a teacher’s ontology (e.g. that knowledge is fixed and external to the learner) and epistemology (e.g. we learn by being taught), acquired through their own teacher-centred education and now influencing their practice. This concept of habitus has been criticised as simplistic and deterministic (Mouzelis, 2007). However, even with more recent extension and restructuring of this theory (Mouzelis, 2007), Bourdieu’s habitus continues to influence sociological understandings.

### 2.2 Reflexivity

Also fundamental to Bourdieu’s perspective is the concept of reflexivity (Bourdieu, 1990a), defined by Maclean et al. (2012) as:

> “the capacity of an actor to construct practical understandings ... of the location of self within a social system, to act accordingly ... and to reflect further and refine understandings in response to events and the consequences of actions taken” (p. 388).

Through critical reflection (CR), individuals can break free from habitus (Maclean et al., 2012). Though not without criticism (Mouzelis, 2007), there is consensus that this unfreezing most likely occurs when a critical incident (CI) is encountered. In such CIs, habitus becomes incongruent with a shift in the field of action (Bourdieu, 1990a; Jordan, 2010), prompting radical self-questioning, re-positioning, growth and possibly identity development, until the new self aligns with the shifted field (Maclean et al., 2012).

### 2.3 Fields of practice

A third element in Bourdieu’s framework is the concept of fields of practice (Bourdieu, 1990a). These are the structured social and professional contexts within which people, or actors, interact and operate e.g., the fields of education or sports. Each actor has a position within their field and positions are arranged in hierarchies by how much social capital an actor holds. Capital may be social, cultural, economic or symbolic. There is therefore a power differential between players, who compete and play to win more capital. This competition is ‘the game.’ Each game has rules and knowledge systems, which Bourdieu calls doxa.

## 3. Literature review

This section summarises key issues, concepts, theory and research relevant to NL and the connection between identity development and NL is established.

### 3.1 The nature of networked learning

The definition of networked learning continues to evolve (NLEC, 2020 & 2021). Hodgson et al. (2011) and Jones (2015) present eight essential components of NL: cooperation and collaboration; group working; discussion and dialogue; learner self-determination; difference; trust and relationships; reflexivity and learner investment and the role of technology in connecting and mediating. The power of NLCs to facilitate deep learning lies in the relational dialogue (Koole & Stack, 2016) and collaborative inquiry they facilitate that question thinking and practice (Toole, 2019). It is argued that this collaborative inquiry is powered by the strength of the relationships between the actors or nodes in the network i.e. the learners, tutors and resources (Church et. al., 2002; Haythornwaite & de Laat, 2010).
3.2 Benefits and conditions for success of NL

NL is hailed for its potential to facilitate enhanced social learning processes; learning across barriers in time and space; transformative collaborative inquiry and its power to help minimise isolation in the case of remote learners (Fetter et al., 2010; Lieberman and Mace, 2010; Hodgson et al., 2011; Ansari et al., 2012 & Toole, 2019). Hodgson et al. (2011) discuss the shift this paradigm requires from “conventional face-to-face teaching and learning, towards a new set of values associated with networked learning.” Furthermore, new NL identities must be forged (pp. 295 – 296). Hodgson et al. state that:

“A strong element of this socio-cultural view of learning is that participation in authentic knowledge-creation activities, coupled with a growing sense of oneself as a legitimate and valued member of a knowledge-building community, is essential to the development of an effective knowledge-worker. Action and identity are key.” (2011, p. 355-356)

This growing sense of oneself underscores the relevance of reflexive identity development to the NL paradigm. However, even with the benefits enumerated in the literature, the success of NLCs cannot be taken for granted. Each NLC must deploy its unique features and contexts to make NL successful (Toole, 2019).

3.3 The role of identity and identity development in NL

Identity has been defined as “the way a person understands and views himself (sic) and is often viewed by others” (Horn et al., 2008, p. 62). Koole (2010) and Clark (2020) describe identity as transformative i.e. we perform the identities we adopt. It could therefore be argued that what and whom we believe we are impacts what and how we perform, and to perform the role of a NLer, we must adopt and develop the identity of one. This aligns with Hodgson et al.’s call for NL identity development (2011). Identity development involves critical reflexivity (CR). CR leads to self-assessment and deep questioning of prior-held assumptions (Maclean, Harvey & Chia, 2012). This in turn can provoke iterative changes in consciousness and subsequent identity repositioning. These changes bring about transformative learning (Merriam et al., 2007) characteristic of effective NLCs.

3.4 Critique and challenges of NL

Even with the benefits and affordances of NL and NLCs enumerated, the literature reports that some students and teachers in online university programmes struggle with the culture of online or NL (Koole & Stack, 2016). Lee and Bligh highlight the challenges of developing trust among diverse groups of people, contending that the assumption of underpinning trust in NLCs is naïve and incongruent with “everyday NL” (NLEC, 2021, p.341). They argue that any authentic definition of NL needs to acknowledge the everyday reality of shared challenge rather than promoting a romanticised ideal (NLEC, 2021).

In my professional journey as a teacher, from the analogue 1980s to the present days of digital pedagogy, my teacher values, ontology and epistemology have certainly been challenged and changed. Some change has come naturally, akin to the transformative learning through CIs, described by Toole as a feature of effective NLCs (2019). Other changes have been initially difficult, such as the vulnerability of exposing my learning challenges or becoming comfortable with asking for help. A teacher or student who is unable to make these necessary shifts (Mann, 2010) or form strong, trusting relationships in NLCs (Koole & Stack, 2016) may struggle to come to terms with this alien terrain. Reflecting on the arguments of Lee and Bligh in the preceding paragraph (NLEC, 2021), this could portend disadvantage for developing NLers.

Vermeulen et al. acknowledge the paradoxical role that diversity can play in NLCs (NLEC, 2021). They argue that on the one hand, diversity can facilitate sense-making as participants encounter difference and seek alignment and common ground, resulting in amended perspectives. On the other hand, when sense-making and re-alignment cannot be achieved, there is the risk of the breaking up of learning ties and disconnection (NLEC, 2021). Thus, NL ties can be precarious and a continuous balancing act, echoing Lee and Bligh on the assumption of trusting relationships.

Reynolds cautions on the darker side of communi
ty-based pedagogies (2000) such as NL, warning that traditional communities can be oppressive, with unequal power (as in Bourdieu’s hierarchical positions, 1990a) and control, driving conformity rather than autonomy. Participants may have different working and learning approaches and be at differing stages of readiness to participate (Bali et al., 2015). It can also be argued that since all pedagogies have merits and demerits, teachers should not be made to adopt NL if it does not align with their professional values, ontology or epistemology. Adoption imposed by organisational change would amount to imposed conformity. Indeed, Koole and Stack, in a study on Doctoral students’ identity positioning in networked learning environments, amidst positive reports from some participants also report “competitiveness, defensiveness and varying levels of participation.
in online discussion forums” (2016, p.49). To mitigate these possibilities, The Networked Learning Editorial Collective recommend prior equipping of participants with NL skills (NLEC, 2020). This study therefore documents and unpacks my own challenges as I have journeyed through NLCs with a view to informing such NL skills training.

Drawing these arguments together, NL indeed has great potential for facilitating sustainable teacher CPD. However, the excitement to embrace NL for this purpose must be balanced by a consideration for its everyday realities, as warned by Lee and Bligh (NLEC, 2021). For some teachers, one of such everyday realities is the challenge of overcoming the habitus of earlier contrasting paradigms to develop NL values and a NL identity.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This is an autoethnography for the subjective understanding of my own experiences. It is therefore underpinned by subjective interpretivism (Cohen et al., 2011; Saunders et al., 2015). Much of the existing literature reports from the perspective of NL as a Higher or Further Education (H.E. or F.E.) paradigm. This study presents my perspective as a primary school teacher and doctoral researcher exploring the use of NL in teacher professional development. Though a self-study, participant data and reports from similar others found in the literature have been used, as well as feedback from a ‘critical friend,’ for member-checking and triangulation (Chang, 2008). Critical friend input was used to check for possible alternative interpretations. Data from memory have been used, capturing the past, and from reflections, capturing the present. Bourdieu’s sociological lens has been applied for analysis and interpretation.

4.2 Methods and data collection

Data were collected regarding three of my postgraduate study contexts, ‘A,’ ‘B’ and ‘C,’ in which I have participated in NLCs. The following methods were used for rich descriptions and depth of understanding:

1. My social media posts made in NLCs – contributions I have made on various Moodle, Facebook and WhatsApp platforms, spanning my teacher education;
2. My student journal entries spanning my teaching career, as memory joggers;
3. Self-reflections over my teaching career to unpack my experiences; and
4. Stories of similar others found in the literature, presented in the findings and discussion.

4.3 Sampling

From each context, I have selected the one CI that I found most challenging to resolve. CIs were selected for their transformational learning potential (Bourdieu, 1990a & 1990b, Toole, 2019). Stories of similar others found in the literature (i.e., H.E. students and academics new to NL) were selected for comparison using the following criteria: level of study (H.E. like myself) and experience with NL (beginner). I collected these stories from the literature as I sought to compare my experiences with those in extant studies, for subjective understanding (See Appendix A).

4.4 Data analysis

The data were compiled, prepared and read iteratively as one set for familiarisation.

Analysis was then implemented at three levels, described as follows.

4.4.1 Level 1

Both inductive and deductive coding, line by line and blocks of text as applicable, using basic themes from the data, the literature and the theoretical framework. These were: Support, confidence boost, security/insecurity/trust, autonomy/self-reliance, reconstruction (reflexively reconstituting self in response to CIs), relationships, learner investment, reflexivity, habitus, collaboration, accumulation (acquiring personal capital), embracing opportunities and isolation. Attempts to organise these further into analytical codes neither yielded coherent patterns nor did this address any of the RQs. Hence, I proceeded to Level 2.

4.4.2 Level 2

The codes were sorted by context, ‘A,’ ‘B’ and ‘C,’ as they applied. Some were expanded such as trust (growing, established). Additional codes were developed such as ‘integration’ and ‘tentativeness.’ Others were subsumed, such as ‘embracing opportunities’ into ‘accumulation.’ This sorting is illustrated in Table 1.

A pattern of growth began to emerge going from A to C.
Table 1. Sorting codes by context

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context A</th>
<th>Context B</th>
<th>Context C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reconstruction</td>
<td>Accumulation</td>
<td>Security (growing)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security (absent)</td>
<td>Security (growing)</td>
<td>Accumulation &amp; Reconstruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Peer support</td>
<td>Peer support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence boost</td>
<td>Trust (growing, established)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trust (growing)</td>
<td>Confidence boost</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Integration</td>
<td>Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tentativeness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.4.3 Level 3

Next, I assigned descriptions to each context, as obtained from the data, along with a description of the focus CI. This can be seen in Table 2 (see Findings and discussion section). Sorted by context, along with the category descriptions and related CIs, the emerging patterns of identity development began to provide responses to the RQs (see Tables 3 and 4).

4.5 Ethical issues

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Lancaster University. No identifying details regarding the three contexts have been used. Data sources from similar others in the literature are appropriately cited and referenced.

4.6 Limitations

Memory is not reliable as a data source. I have therefore used extant data from my own social media posts and journal entries for validation. My own biases have influenced my choice of CIs and my perspective on them. Thus, autoethnographies are subjective in nature and the findings not generalisable. However, generalisability is not the aim but understanding of self and others (Adams et al., 2015; Chang, 2008). Albeit, to mitigate this subjectivity, I have compared my story against those of similar others and member-checked with a ‘critical friend’ (Chang, 2008). I have also used established theory in unpacking my experiences.

5. Findings and discussion

In this section, I present overviews of my NL journey and then unpack the findings in response to the research questions. With the data coded and sorted as described, NL identities and patterns of identity development began to emerge. Across 'A,' 'B' and 'C,' my evolution from Apprehensive Outsider to Tentative Beginner, to Invested Networked Learner can be seen (Tables 1 and 2).

5.1 What?

As the data answers RQs 1 and 2 simultaneously, I present the findings for these ‘What’ RQs together.

- **RQ1:** What have been my experiences participating in the three focus networked learning communities?
- **RQ2:** What ontological and epistemological challenges have I experienced during the identity development process?

Drawing from Bourdieu, I arrived at ‘A’ with a positivist ontological and epistemological habitus (see Table 2). Not only had I last studied formally in what is known as the Industrial Age, characterised by instructivism and standardised learning and assessment, this education had taken place in a collectivist society (Bourdieu’s field) where knowledgeable elders pass on knowledge to eager but passive learners who are habituated in the practices of: (a) receiving knowledge and (b) unquestioning acceptance of the wisdom of more experienced elders (doxa). Even though interested in the subject of the self-taught module (see Table 2), habitus influenced my decision to pass it up. However, challenged by this new field (‘A’) with its new constructivist doxa, I began developing reflexivity.
Table 2. My Networked Learning Journey Across the Three Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>‘A’</th>
<th>‘B’</th>
<th>‘C’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Corresponding basic codes</strong></td>
<td>Insecurity</td>
<td>Tentativeness</td>
<td>Tentativeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low trust</td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Trust growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Trust growing</td>
<td>Autonomy growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Peer support growing</td>
<td>Confidence growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Integration growing</td>
<td>Security emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Confidence boost</td>
<td>Trust established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Security emerging</td>
<td>Security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Context descriptions</strong></td>
<td>- Tutor-led</td>
<td>- Tutor-led</td>
<td>- Tutor-facilitated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Moodle used to teach, deliver/access resources, submit assignments and organise activities</td>
<td>- Technology used to teach, deliver/access resources, submit assignments and organise activities</td>
<td>- Technology used to facilitate group activities, peer support and collaboration, co-construction of knowledge, as well as to deliver/access resources, submit assignments and organise activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Participants mainly working individually</td>
<td>- Participation in online forums</td>
<td>- High degree of learner autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Low degree of learner autonomy</td>
<td>- Medium degree of learner autonomy</td>
<td>- Constructive and supportive tutor and peer feedback that I could use for improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Highly prescriptive</td>
<td>- Vague assessment that I could hardly make sense of</td>
<td>- Peer selected forum groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Highly critical assessment</td>
<td>- Peer-created WhatsApp groups used for informal peer support and resource sharing</td>
<td>- Peer-created WhatsApp groups used for informal peer support and sharing information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- University-created peer groups, mandatory and peer-created Facebook groups used to coordinate group activities and share information</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical incident</strong></td>
<td>I was given the opportunity to choose between two optional modules. One was to be taught face-to-face. The other was to be self-taught by distance learning (DL). Though I was interested in the second option, I chose the first as I was not comfortable with DL or self-teaching. Later, I thought, why did I do that? What was uncomfortable about DL and why?</td>
<td>Fresh from ‘A,’ with experiences of discrimination, I started off at B hiding my ethnicity and gender. This was made possible by the DL nature of the programme. I only began to ‘come out’ after establishing trust with peers and tutors and acquiring some social capital on the course. I later thought, “Why did I feel the need to hide and how did I qualify safety?”</td>
<td>With initial hesitance from ‘B,’ I started off uncomfortable asking for help publicly in the forum, insisting on privately emailing the tutor. Only after building trust and more social capital did I begin to appreciate the role of collaboration and sharing in my own learning and in strengthening the value of the group experience. I later thought, “Why was I apprehensive about being vulnerable in the group?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>NL self-identity description by programme end</strong></td>
<td>Apprehensive Outsider</td>
<td>Tentative Beginner</td>
<td>Invested Networked Learner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

My new ‘selves,’ aligning with the changing fields across ‘A,’ ‘B’ and ‘C’ (Maclean et al., 2012).
Williams (2000) argues that identities are formed through sense-making of one’s experiences. Through reflexive journaling, studying my own CIs, self-evaluation and iterative practice modification, ‘A’ triggered the renegotiation of my teacher identity. I began to question my positivist understanding of knowledge, my behaviourist teaching, learning and assessment foundations and my avoidance of the self-taught module. This began my shift from Apprehensive NL Outsider to Tentative NL Beginner. As Tentative Beginner, I had sufficient self-efficacy to enrol on a distance-learning programme, ‘B.’ I had been introduced to digital pedagogy in ‘A.’ This was worlds apart from the educational field I was inducted into through my Bachelor of Education degree and teacher qualification in the 1980s. Learning for me in the 1980s was individualistic, and knowledge sources, static. By the 2000s, learning had become collaborative and cooperative, with learners interconnected via ever updating and expanding knowledge sources and communities. This required major shifts in ontology and epistemology, but I was happy to make them. Olsen speaks of teacher education experiences which could confirm, disconfirm or have no impact on a teacher’s identity (2008). Koole and Stack report the same among distance-learning PhD students encountering discourses that support self-conceptions, those that trigger renegotiation and others eliciting discomfort and rejection (2016). Hence, identity is continually renegotiated, and since it is performative (Clark, 2020), changing identity leads to changing practice.

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With my new shifts, I felt that I could take charge of my learning in this new world. I could study via DL and self-teach rather than depending on being taught. I embraced self-construction of knowledge in ‘B,’ studied asynchronously with a cohort and only reached out to peers and tutors when I needed help.

I enrolled in ‘C,’ happy to participate in group and forum activities and continued to contact tutors privately if I needed help. One tutor requested that all questions be posted in the forum to support group learning. I was uncomfortable with this ‘fish-bowl’ approach. I felt it was my prerogative to either share my challenges or have them addressed privately. In hindsight, I was still habituated in self-construction and individualistic learning and the penalties of not knowing, from ‘A.’ The new socialconstructivist field, ‘C,’ with its doxa and collaborative actor relationships challenged the vestiges of my cognitivist habitus. Before this journey, I would have been unaware of this habitus. Now stirred by reflexivity, this challenge became a CI for self-study.

I must clarify that this study does not negate the contributions or continuing relevance of behaviourism and cognitivism. It rather seeks to highlight how I became stuck in the educational paradigms contemporary to my own earlier teacher training and education and how reflexivity both alerted me to this habitus and helped free me from it. This is aligned with the consensus in the literature that reflexivity fosters new perspectives, facilitates self-reconstruction and enables individuals to escape their own habitus (Bourdieu, 1990a; Cunliffe, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2008; Maclean et al., 2012).

Bringing the three contexts together, the one common feature that helped to address my ontological and epistemological challenges is reflexivity. It enabled the construction and refinement of practical understandings; repositioning within changing fields and doxa; renegotiation of inter-actor relationships and reflections on the consequences of actions taken. All this has resulted in stronger metacognition and deeper integration in my NLCs.

The vertical arrow in Table 4 shows the progression of my experiences in each context, from beginning to end.

In ‘A,’ I experienced insecurity as I sought to enculturate in a new field with new doxa; low trust in a harshly critical environment with opaque assessment practices and discrimination; minimal integration and subsequent isolation, from the beginning to the end.

‘B’ began with tentativeness and isolation as I fell behind due to illness. However, a peer-created WhatsApp group midway helped to build trust, peer support and integration.
Table 3. My ontological and epistemological challenges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>‘A’</th>
<th>‘B’</th>
<th>‘C’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology</strong></td>
<td>Knowledge is fixed and can be known.</td>
<td>Knowledge is fixed and can be known.</td>
<td>Knowledge is socially constructed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Epistemology</strong></td>
<td>You learn by being taught by more knowledgeable others. Knowledge is transferred from one who knows to one who does not.</td>
<td>You acquire knowledge through constructing it in your own mind. The more knowledgeable other facilitates this self-construction.</td>
<td>You gain knowledge by constructing it with others through iterative critical and reflexive dialogue. The more knowledgeable other facilitates this dialogue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Critical incident/challenge</strong></td>
<td>I rejected a self-taught module, being used to teacher-led instruction.</td>
<td>I embraced a new paradigm of distance learning but spent the first months ‘hiding.’</td>
<td>With ‘fishbowl learning,’ I could no longer hide. I was urged to ask and respond to questions in the Moodle forum.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Impact</strong></td>
<td>I avoided the self-taught module as I believed I needed to be taught.</td>
<td>I became more accepting of DL as I developed confidence in self-study, with minimal peer and tutor support.</td>
<td>I embraced group learning, seeing the value of NLCs for deep learning. I learned NL skills.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. My Networked learning experiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Context</th>
<th>‘A’</th>
<th>‘B’</th>
<th>‘C’</th>
<th>Beginning of programme</th>
<th>End of programme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corresponding basic codes</td>
<td>Insecurity, Low trust, Minimal integration, Isolation</td>
<td>Tentativeness, Isolation, Trust growing, Peer support growing, Integration growing, Confidence boost, Security emerging</td>
<td>Tentativeness, Trust growing, Autonomy growing, Confidence boost, Security emerging, Trust established, Security</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By the end of ‘B,’ I experienced a confidence boost from good grades, tutor feedback and peer validation, plus increased sense of security as a NLer and scholar. While this validation happened organically and repeatedly and I did not set out to obtain it, it resulted in social capital gain – some colleagues became as quick to respond to my queries as I had been to theirs and deeper connections with others formed away from the WhatsApp group.

‘C’ began with tentativeness, some trust, autonomy and confidence from B. This grew into an established sense of security where I became comfortable with the discomfort of fishbowl learning.

Koole and Stack report similar challenges among NL PhD students in their study. Some tried to locate faculty members with approaches and expectations similar to theirs (2016) rather than shifting from habitus.

“The participants sometimes found themselves trying to locate individuals (professors and supervisors) whose approaches and expectations were compatible with their own ... Rather than attempting to modify their orientations to conform to expectations and philosophical perspectives, two of the participants of this study elected to work with faculty members who could support their needs and growth” (Koole & Stack, 2016, pp. 50 – 51).
Koole and Stack also report students feeling “alignment or misalignment,” questioning their abilities (p. 54) and epistemological and ontological repositioning:

“Feelings of alignment and misalignment in the academic department and the academy appeared to result in participants’ questioning their own abilities ... Self-doubt appeared to arise from the struggle to understand their intellectual and social positions (academic language and norms) as they progressed through their doctoral studies ... One learner’s description of ‘standing on the same plank’ and ‘taking part’ in the academic conversation online with a recognized academic may suggest that the learner was psychologically and emotionally crossing the threshold into academia” (Koole & Stack, 2016, p. 54).

This can be seen in one participant’s response:

“I was lost for the first week or two. I really questioned if I should be in [the program] because when you’re kind of out in the practitioner world and you do very well at your job, and you’ve performed well in any courses you’ve taken, you’re really very confident in yourself—what I found is that when I went in the doctoral program, all of a sudden you’re exposed to articles and readings that are a foreign language to you.” (Koole & Stack, 2016, p. 50).

My changing identity summarised across the three contexts can also be compared to the range of experiences reported by Cutajar (2017) in a study of the NL experiences of 32 FE students. Cutajar’s findings present experiences ranging from learning divergent from others, to in parallel with others, to in convergence with others and finally in mesh with others across 4 categories.

Mann’s (2010) challenges on first encountering a NLC show similar epistemological challenges to mine. While my epistemological clash in A took the form of believing that “You learn by being taught by more knowledgeable others. Knowledge is transferred from one who knows to one who does not,” against the NL position that knowledge is socially constructed, Mann grappled with not being able to see her peers and teacher, plus identity concerns and orientation anxiety:

“It seems that the process of managing my identity as a learner entering and becoming part of this new learning community is exaggerated in the online learning environment. We know ... that any new group member is concerned with issues of whether one will be liked (acceptance anxiety), whether one will succeed and be able to perform (performance anxiety), and whether one will be able to understand (orientation anxiety). It seems to me that these ‘anxieties’ were exaggerated online rather than mitigated. The factors that seem to be at play here for me are to do with the invisibility of one’s peers and teacher; the lack of or limited amount of feedback and clues as to who they are and what they are making of me; the loss of speed, and concomitant increase in effort required to communicate in writing; and my sense of clumsiness and illiteracy in this new medium. It is as if learning to express myself and engage with others in a new medium highlights and exaggerates processes I normally take for granted.”

In summary, my experience of incongruence with a new field and doxa, or new learning paradigm, aligns with extant research and established theory.

5.2 How?

In this section, I answer the ‘How’ RQ.

• RQ 3: How have I addressed these challenges and developed a new teacher identity?

In alignment with Bourdieu (1990a), reflexivity has helped me to identify my habitus as CIs triggered the renegotiation of my teacher identity. This has led to my embracing socio-constructivist pedagogies where I had once been stuck in largely behaviourist approaches to teaching and learning. The change in my identity from Apprehensive Outsider to Tentative Beginner and then, to Invested Networked Learner led to my changing teacher practice since identity is not just something we are but also something we do (Clark, 2020).

5.3 Overarching RQ

Drawing the findings together, I respond here to the overarching RQ:

• How can networked learning communities support the networked learner identity development of primary school teachers?

The main factor that has supported my identity development in the three focal NLCs has been reflexivity. This is because without reflexivity, I might not have been alerted to, or recognised that I had a pedagogical habitus. In the face of critical incidents, like Koole and Stacks’ two participants (2016), and as Lee and Bligh warn (NLEC, 2021) I might have disengaged from the NL and NLC. I therefore argue that NLCs and NL pedagogy need to promote learner reflexivity to facilitate NL identity development. In addition, to
develop reflexivity, a NLC needs to support the development of trusting relationships, as where there is no trust, defensiveness rather than reflexivity develops. This can be seen in my experiences as an Apprehensive Outsider, among Koole and Stack’s participants resisting change (2016) and in Mann’s NLC experience which she at some points describes as alienating (2010). Lastly, my experiences in NLCs and those of the similar others whose stories I have used in this study all agree on the essential components of an effective NLC outlined by Hodgson et al. (2011) and Jones (2015).

6. Conclusion

Through this autoethnography, I have explored my experiences in three NL contexts with the goal of unpacking and understanding my changing ontology, epistemology and resulting identity evolution. The aim has been to extend this insight to the challenges primary school teachers may face who are new to NL and find themselves having to embrace it as part of their teacher training and/or development. Drawing on Bourdieu, I have unpacked my experiences to reveal the key roles of reflexivity and trust in developing NL identities and values and the role of habitus in helping or hindering this. I have also reiterated the importance of Hodgson et al.’s eight features of effective NLCs. I therefore recommend that rather than requiring teachers to adopt NL values and forge NL identities, thus risking resistance, teachers should be supported to achieve this paradigm shift through ITE and teacher CPD programmes. These should consist of learning experiences that lead to deep questioning of ontology and epistemology through CIs. This way, the paradigm shift can be self-initiated through reflexivity, and identity development can begin before arriving in the NLC, mitigating culture shock. For further study, I would suggest action research in the development of a pre-NL unit of study to precede a NL-based ITE programme.

References


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## Appendix A: Comparing my experiences and those of similar others in the literature

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>My experience</th>
<th>Experiences of similar others in the literature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discomfort with NL paradigm;</td>
<td>“I was given the opportunity to choose between two optional modules. One was to be taught face-to-face. The other was to be self-taught by DL. Though I was interested in the second option, I chose the first as I was not comfortable with DL or self-teaching.”</td>
<td>It seems that the process of managing my identity as a learner entering and becoming part of this new learning community is exaggerated in the online learning environment. We know that any new group member is concerned with issues of whether one will be liked (acceptance anxiety), whether one will succeed and be able to perform (performance anxiety), and whether one will be able to maintain identity (identity anxiety). It seems to me that these anxieties were exaggerated online rather than mitigated. The factors that seem to be at play here for me are the invisibility of one’s peers and teacher, the lack of limited amount of feedback and cues as to who they are and what they are making of me, the loss of speed, and concomitant increase of effort required to communicate in writing, and my sense of clumsiness and illiteracy in this new medium. It is as if learning to express myself and engage with others in a new medium highlights and exaggerates processes I normally take for granted.” (Mann, 2016, p. 269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epistemological doubts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity concerns</td>
<td>I believed that “You learn by being taught by more knowledgeable others. Knowledge is transferred from one who knows to one who does not.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Orientation anxiety</td>
<td>“Thought I was interested in the second option, I choose the first as I was not comfortable with DL or self-teaching.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges with self</td>
<td>“I started off at DL, hiding my ethnicity and gender. This was made possible by the DL nature of the programme. I only began to ‘come out’ after establishing trust with peers and tutors and acquiring some social capital on the course.”</td>
<td>“Contrary to my expectation that working online would allow for greater freedom of self-presentation, the paradox emerged for me of being more self-conscious online than face to face. There is a record of everything one says. One becomes very much involved in the text. I was conscious of masking myself. How much do I disclose? How anonymous do I remain? … I became conscious of wishing to keep my professional self out of my self-presentation.” (Mann, 2016, p. 269)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>presentation;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiding/withdrawing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change triggered</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identity concerns</td>
<td>“I therefore decided that in the early stages of DL, I would keep my ethnicity and gender hidden until I had established an identity of competence rather than being assumed incompetent by default as I felt had been the case in A.”</td>
<td>The participants expressed concerns about whether or not their cohort mates viewed them as being reliable and supportive, having integrity, or being a leader.” (Kooles &amp; Stack, 2016)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Mann, 2016)  

(Kooles & Stack, 2016)