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CHAPTER 10. Why constructivist grounded theory? and the importance of researcher reflexivity

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This chapter comprises a reflection on the use of constructivist grounded theory together with a previously published open access article (Catherine Cronin, 2017, [Openness and praxis: Exploring the use of open educational practices in higher education](#). IRRODL, vol. 18, no. 5) which describes the related research study.

As an educator and researcher, I have used open educational practices (OEP) for many years: teaching, blogging and publishing openly; creating and sharing open educational resources (OER) and supporting students in doing the same; and working with faculty and students to explore the practices and politics of networks. Like many other ‘open educators’ working in higher education, however, I have experienced tensions between my academic/institutional roles and my experiences of open scholarship and open teaching. Amongst my reflections on these tensions, I wondered why some educators and not others chose to move their teaching practices from institutionally-managed systems onto the open web, and also how open practices worked, and felt, for educators across diverse contexts. These reflections were the origin of my PhD research study on the use of OEP for teaching in higher education. I used a qualitative, interpretive approach to explore faculty practices, decision-making, and meaning-making regarding openness.

I chose to use constructivist grounded theory as the research methodology as it is particularly suited to exploring meaning-making and to building emergent understanding, in the form of mid-range theories or models, based on participants’ central concerns (Charmaz, 2014). The aim of grounded theory, as a methodology, is to build useful theory to describe or explain a phenomenon of interest – in this case, the use of open educational practices. Theory is developed through “an interactive process that involves the creation and refinement of abstract conceptualisations of particular phenomena” (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014, p. 77). The term ‘ground’ in grounded theory refers to the grounding of findings in rigorous qualitative inquiry and analysis of data. Grounded theory research is iterative, nonlinear and recursive, with data gathering and analysis proceeding simultaneously and in parallel.

The data in this study were gathered in interviews with 19 members of academic staff. I asked participants about their research, teaching, use of the virtual learning environment (VLE), digital identities, use of social media, and knowledge and thoughts about students’ use of social media. I also used open-ended questions to explore participants’ subjective experiences and to unpack taken-for-granted meanings. My aim throughout was to be honest in my discussions

with participants, acknowledging my positionality (including my existing knowledge and practice in the area of open education), but also being clear about my role in this study as a critical-interpretive researcher of OEP.

Constructivist grounded theory is located firmly within the interpretivist tradition; reality is recognised as multiple and interpretive rather than singular and self-evident. Thus, primacy is placed on meaning-making and interpretation of and by participants, *but also researchers*. For this reason, constructivist grounded theory foregrounds the importance of researcher reflexivity, i.e. researcher accountability in data collection and interpretation, but also reflection on “self, process, and representation, and critically examining power relations and politics in the research process” (Sultana, 2007, p. 376). Reflexivity played an important role throughout my study, from the earliest decisions regarding methods, through the long process of data collection and analysis, through to theory building. This included paying attention to how my own experience as an open educator intersected with the research study and how others constructed my identity. Memo-writing, a key feature of grounded theory, was instrumental in facilitating reflexivity, as well as in understanding and conceptualising the data. Indeed, it is suggested that memo-writing is “*the* fundamental process of researcher/data engagement that results in a ‘grounded’ theory... the distillation process through which the researcher translates data into theory” (Lempert, 2007, p. 245). I wrote memos continually throughout the study; many were private, but as an open researcher I shared others as public blog posts, inviting feedback.

As an iterative and comparative methodology, grounded theory requires immersion on the part of the researcher. I immersed myself in the data throughout: reading and re-reading transcripts, re-listening to interview segments, exploring similarities, differences and links between codes, categories and participants. Although I struggled at times to make sense of the data, I wrote memos to record ideas and reflections throughout. I worked with NVivo to facilitate data management, analysis and visualisation, but also hand-sketched very many tentative models and diagrams. Together, the computer-aided analysis, sketched models, and reflective memos were essential in formulating the final grounded theory (Cronin, 2018).

Researchers are part of what we see, not apart from it. The nature of qualitative research means that varied, complex and sometimes contradictory data is analysed and interpreted through the lenses of both the participants and the researcher. The grounded theory emerging from this study reflects the concerns and conceptions of openness expressed by the academic staff participants, as interpreted by me. Participants in this study rarely described their practices and decisions in binary terms as either ‘open’ or ‘closed’. Rather, rich descriptions of a range of practices, values, motives, reflections and assumptions were shared. I analysed and reflected on these in order to identify processes, actions, meanings, concepts and themes, and shared my emerging findings with participants to include them in this process of interpretation. Thus, the grounded theory model is a subjective and social construction; it represents a deeply considered, if necessarily incomplete, description of faculty practices, meaning-making, and

decision-making regarding openness, with an invitation for others to use, adapt and/or reinterpret the theory.

References:

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