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Networks and super connectors

Abstract: This study addresses the linguistic integration of adult migrants by exploring English language provision in a super-diverse community in Sheffield, Northern England. The research was planned and developed in collaboration with English language students in response to cuts to adult community education. The study foregrounds the importance of dynamic local networks, English language classes linked to service provision, and engagement with local campaigns and activities.

Résumé : L'étude traite la question de l'intégration linguistique des migrants adultes et examine l'offre de cours d'anglais dans un district très diversifié de Sheffield, dans le Nord de l'Angleterre. Elle a été conçue et développée avec des étudiants en anglais en raison de la baisse des budgets alloués à l'éducation populaire pour adultes. Elle met en avant l'importance des réseaux locaux dynamiques, des cours d'anglais pour l'offre de services et la participation aux campagnes de sensibilisation et activités locales.

1 Introduction

In a period of cuts to public services the study focused on community education in Burngreave, a ward in the city of Sheffield. The legacy of radical community development work could be seen in key structures in the area which derived strength from organising and campaigning. Consistent with this ethos, “the community research approach aims to empower community members to shape and have some ownership of the research agenda” (Goodson and Phillimore 2010: 489). The research was conducted in three stages. Firstly 325 questionnaire interviews were conducted in 35 classes, generating baseline data about the student population and the English language classes. Collaborative analysis of the data with groups of students, teachers and providers informed the next stage of the research process. Three interviews were then conducted to explore community networks and the roles of key links or “super connectors” in relation to the networks.

Incumbent on researchers who embrace the concept of super-diversity is the acknowledgment that super-diverse areas face continual change, that each area

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is different, and a flexible and reflexive approach is integral to community research. “As scholars of humans in society and culture, our research instruments demand perpetual reality checking [...] methods that were adequate yesterday are not guaranteed to be adequate tomorrow” (Blommaert and van de Vijver 2013: 1). In practice this research in Burngreave was possible because of a flexible understanding and use of language as students, tutors and supporters engaged with each other and the process. Jufferman’s (2015) use of the terms “Englishing” and “languaging” illuminated the processes which enabled communication in Burngreave; a flexible focus on meaning enabled people to “English” as a communicative tool. This article focuses on findings about community networks, exploring the importance of local concerns and community knowledge to develop and sustain appropriate connectors in local education and campaign networks.

2 What is a network?

“The network approach reduces complex systems to a bare architecture of nodes and links” (Caldarelli and Catanzaro 2012: 17). Network diagrams are visual tools and in a super-diverse community they support understanding. The network diagram of the tube in London has international resonance and is an example of when a reductive approach to information is useful. Conducting a census questionnaire and analysing the findings involved many people across the area. Information about the research travelled round at surprising speed and overlapping networks became apparent. This phenomenon is known as the “small world property” (Caldarelli and Catanzaro 2012: 49) and “super connectors” in Burngreave were found to link many diverse networks together.

How do networks relate to integration? “It is important to realize that it is the researcher – by choosing a set of nodes and a type of tie – that defines a network” (Borgatti and Halgin 2011: 3). I began to experiment with network diagrams of classes from information gained from visiting the community venues.

In Figure 1 the diagram on the left shows a tutor-centred class where the tutor controls the interactions, mediating student inputs. By contrast, the diagram on the right, a networked community class in Burngreave, shows students linked to other students and regular visitors to the classroom. Workers and volunteers, career officers, health and advice workers, and students were given space and time to network, to make links which had relevance outside. Students were involved in writing for the community newspaper in campaigns to prevent cuts to provision, then later in campaigns for the local adventure playground and the library. Three of the super connectors identified were women: Aram,

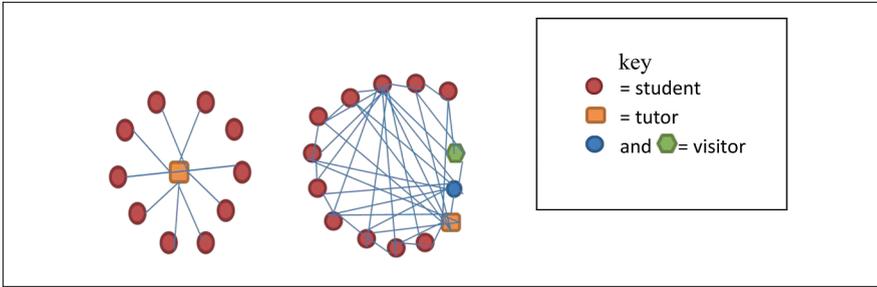


Figure 1: Network diagrams of English language classes

Isla and Aisha and the information which follows comes from three semi-structured interviews with them conducted in the summer of 2014.

The first super connector discussed was the Adult Learning Working Group (ALWG) and the following excerpts were from an interview with Isla, the editor of the community newspaper and chair of the working group. “The ALWG brings the different networks together. The extended schools network with the adult learning network and the community newspaper.” It planned and co-ordinated provision, reviewed classes, supported recruitment, circulated information, organised the Adult Learning Guide, and fed into the citywide ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) directory. “The meeting [...] has been continuous over 15 years. What gave it continuity and constancy is that the money was always there and the council development worker had the collaborative approach [...]. It was a very democratic, collaborative sharing of resources and the meeting had a very practical purpose.”

The second super connector, the community newspaper, had explicit aims to be a tool for cohesion: to increase awareness of services and opportunities available to residents, increase their involvement in local groups and community activities, and build confidence and pride in the Burngreave community; to increase the capacity of Burngreave residents to identify and address problems in their community; and to increase understanding between different sections of the community. The newspaper was delivered free to every household in the Burngreave ward.

The third super connector was the Adult Learning Guide, which was published in print once a year and every term on-line. It publicised courses and classes. Isla explained: “The Adult Learning Guide is an incentive to keep in touch and submit details to both the printed version and the on-line version as it recruits students and everyone is aware of the scope of the provision.”

The next three super connectors were the three women mentioned above, who lived and worked in Burngreave. Their networks were both formal and informal (Gilchrist 2009). They had paid roles which served the local community and in addition were active community members. Aram as coordinator of the extended schools provision said, “My job is to oil the wheels: for example there are lots of agencies that want to work in Burngreave. If I weren’t there they wouldn’t know who to talk to. They wouldn’t get started until six months down the line.” In addition she led and supported women to become involved in the life of the community through ESOL and family learning courses: “I’m a local mum. I live in the area. The children go to the local school. On every count I can speak with passion. I can encourage action without it being negatively construed.”

Isla was editor of the community newspaper and chairperson of the Adult Learning Working Group; in a personal capacity she was a member of the local history group and a member of her Tenants and Residents Association. She worked to involve the schools and the community learning classes in the newspaper and to publicise local campaigns and interests: “What started it was the ESOL. Ever since the ESOL campaign, people are not afraid to campaign on issues they care about. A woman asked me ‘Is it really OK to complain to a councillor?’ I said, ‘You don’t need to worry, that is what they are there for. They are there to hear your complaints.’”

In her interview Isla was critical of the city council and Aisha, the director of a community organisation, discussed the detrimental effect campaigning can have on relationships with potential supporters and funders. City councils have multiple roles: as funders, service providers, contract managers. Elected members are also representatives of individuals and areas and sometimes these roles can conflict. Aisha’s role was to connect with wider city networks, legal networks and regional and national initiatives. At an individual and group level campaigning can have a positive impact on students’ skills, but community organisations that scrutinize council policy and campaign can lose supportive mechanisms. Aisha said: “You get political strength from politicians but we challenge politicians. When we took the City Council to court for a judicial review, I lost supportive mechanisms from councillors. It is important to have councillors’ support.” Community organisations in the area had to compete at national level for funding because of a lack of access to local funding. The research enabled a process of analysis about the dynamics within and around the community and has contributed to change.

Van der Aa and Blommaert (2015: 13) discuss the value of long-term field work in areas of super-diversity. They argue for an understanding of what Bourdieu describes as a *sens pratique*, in other words, the experience or good practice

of social workers. They explain that this can become “expertise” shaped by researchers’ observations and understandings: “The ethnographic presence turned people’s ideas, routines and beliefs into an epistemic tool that generates ‘theory’. Knowledge was shaped by finding and co-constructing a logic for knowledge that was already there.” In Burngreave, the process of the research had a similar effect for the people involved and enabled us to “formulate counter hegemonic knowledge” as Van der Aa and Blommaert (2015: 12) describe.

After the first dialogue, students initiated dialogue with another group of students. Network concepts enabled community members to analyse and identify their roles in relation to each other. Isla once said, “I’m not a hub but I know who the hubs are”, and another community worker at a celebration event looked over and said, “The super connectors”, and took their photo. These are small but clear examples of how research changed the way that people thought and spoke. Van der Aa and Blommaert (2015: 13) also discuss a false distinction between researcher and researched: “Creation of knowledge always takes place through a communicative process [...] we need to work in our respective fields with both immediate and long-term feedback.” Immediately the research process began, I was concerned to share, verify and validate findings. Some had immediate impact for the provision, but I was also aware of an academic pressure to “get it right” and be polished in my ideas and words before I could speak. I was not constrained by the people in the community, and our dialogue has remained dynamic throughout the time of the research. The “process of co-constructing a logic for knowledge that was already there” (Van der Aa and Blommaert 2015: 12) is continuous for us. Network theory can be used to describe how integrative processes develop in areas of superdiversity, and there is also the possibility that by engaging in network dialogues within communities it can contribute to processes of integration.

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