

Educational developers as “insider researchers”: possibilities and pitfalls.

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Towards a Global Scholarship of Educational Development.
ICED Conference, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA. June 12-15, 2008



Aims for the session

- Review aspects of insider research as an educational developer;
- Introduce an illustrative case study on the organisational implementation of e-learning;
- Explore how this research activity might be affected by the researcher's insider status;
- Enable you to identify three key features associated with insider research;
- Identify strategies to minimise potential pitfalls to enhance the possibilities offered by insider research.



Session structure

- 10 mins Introduction to the case study – presentation
- 10 mins Group activity to identify potential pitfalls and possibilities of insider research
- 15 mins Review and discussion of participants' findings
- 15 mins Overview of insider research issues, illustrated through examples from the case study - presentation
- 5 mins Further opportunity for questions and discussion
- 5 mins Summary and Conclusions



Context for the research

- Doctor of Business Administration: a professional doctorate making a contribution to knowledge, to professional practice and to the researcher's own career development;
- Research arises from interests and concerns in the researcher's workplace.



The research/work site

- My workplace: a medium-sized university in the South of England;
- Academic focus geared to the professions;
- Strategy to introduce a standard VLE platform across the University to replace in-house systems;
- My research considered the impact of this on those affected by an increasingly 'managerialist' approach to strategic development in HE.



The starting point: the call from the Vice Chancellor

The English government department for education has invited the University to submit a case study on the innovative ways in which we use e-learning, please write 2000 words.

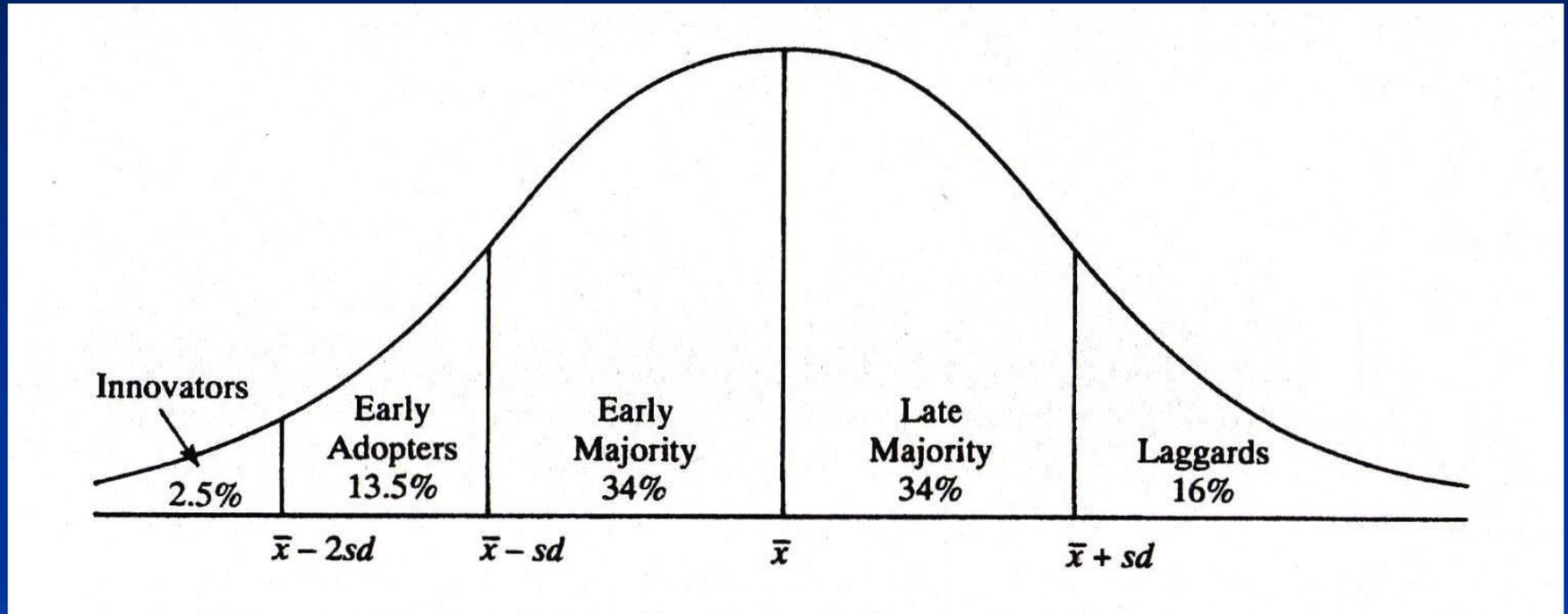
Collect information from six Schools (Faculties) and summarise the stories.

Why are there so many differences between them?

Why am I portraying this account as one corporate story?

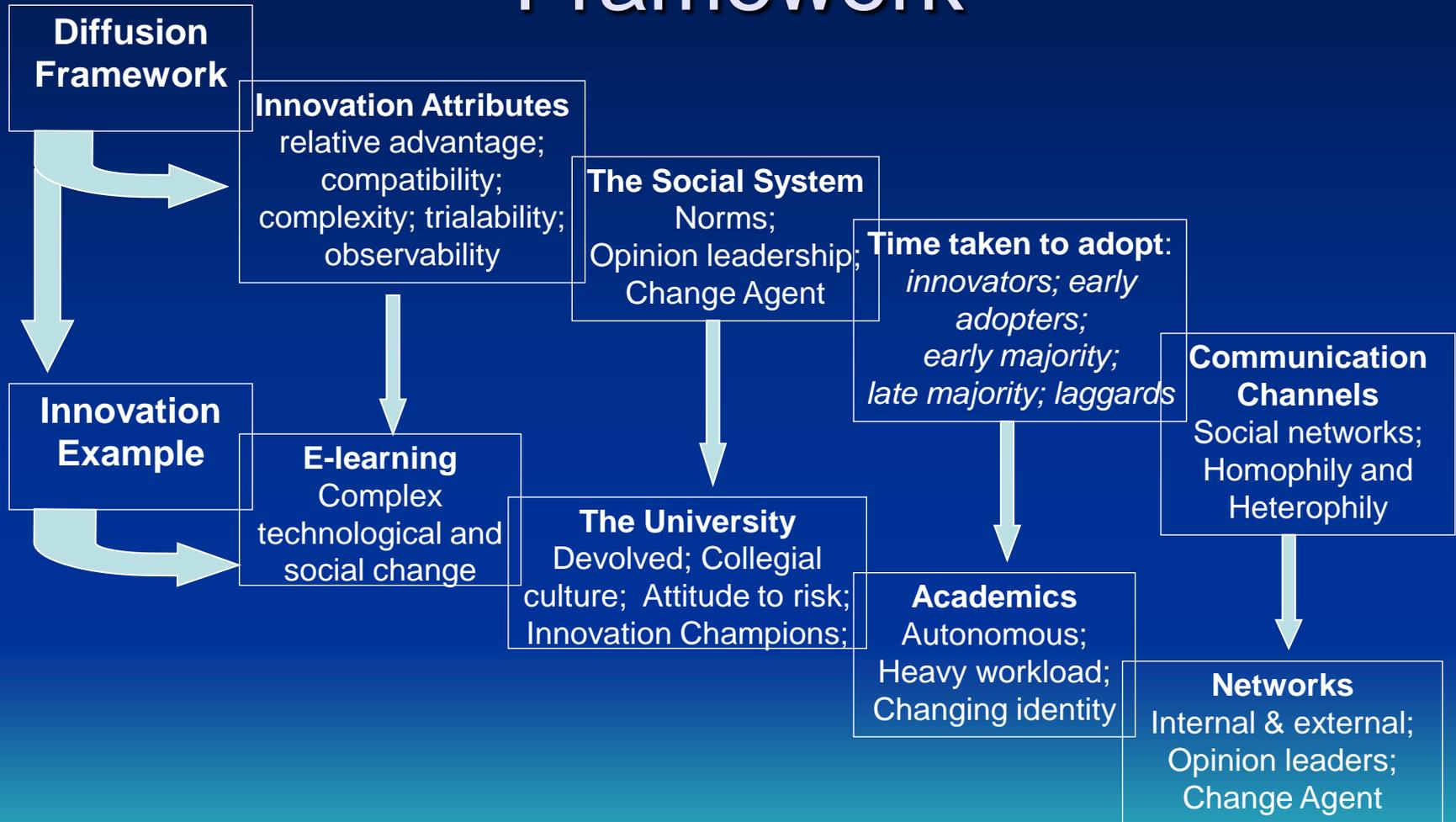


Innovation Diffusion: First Impressions (Adopter Categories)



(Rogers 2003)

The Innovation Diffusion Framework



Alternative views



Managerialist voice

Recalcitrant academics portrayed as laggards

“Irrational” (Arnaboldi and Azzone 2005:562)

“Conservative and sceptical of change”

(Bottomley et al. 1999:240)

“Reluctance to embrace technology” Bennett and Bennett 2003:2)

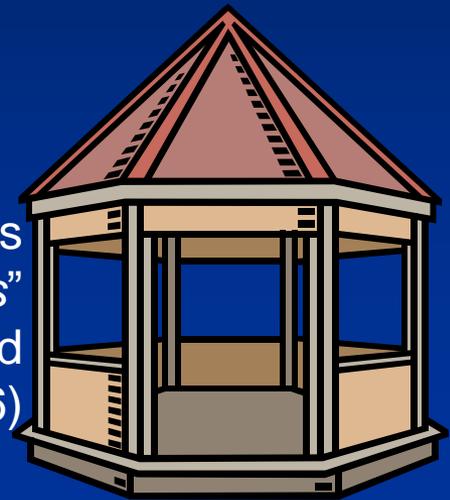


Collegial leadership *“Forever grappling with the problem of culture and institutional personality, how to change something but not everything, to challenge but not destroy”* (Bargh et al, 2000:129)

Complex organisations

“Congeries of little ivory gazebos”

(Greenwood and Levin,2001:436)



Research design

- Interviews with:
 - Vice Chancellor and Pro-Vice Chancellor – innovation champions?
 - Heads of Department (Middle managers) - innovation champions?
 - Academics, mainstream majority
- My role as Change Agent – reflexive analysis
- Insider researcher position



Educational Developer Role

- Change agent role - Organise and undertake interventions on behalf of the agency promoting the innovation in order to influence potential adopters “in a direction deemed desirable by the change agency” (Rogers 2003:366)
- Marginal figure with one foot in each of two worlds (Rogers 2003:368)
- Recognition of pressure to embrace managerial performativity (Manathunga 2007)
- “A problematic enterprise”, “growing in influence though paradoxically still vulnerable and marginal” (Land 2004:191)
- Shape-shifter (Grant 2007)



Activity

In groups of three/four

Individually take a different transcript, underline any interesting passages, words or phrases
What words or phrases stand out for you?

Discuss these in your groups

What aspects stand out? What do they signify to you?

Are there any common themes emerging?



Insider research

“Conducting research with communities or identity groups of which one is a member” (Kanuha 2000)

“An insider is a member of a particular work organisation who takes some part in a range of networks of relationships with other individuals and groups and who shares to some degree knowledge, values and beliefs of others within the organisation”
(Humphrey 1995)



Impact

The position of insider researcher has the potential to influence:

Entry to the research site

Sampling

Data collection

Analysis

Observational techniques

Construction of meaning

Reporting findings



Influences

- Pre-understanding of your environment or organisation;
- Your role duality and status as a researcher and educational developer;
- Organisational politics.



Pre-understanding

Pitfalls

- Don't question taken-for-granted assumptions
- Superficial descriptions
- Insider? or outsider to academic departments?
- Heterophilous or homophilous

Possibilities

- Sample selection of unknowns
- Use own knowledge to gain richer data
- Gain easy access to respondents and win trust
- “Charade proof”
- Ability to blend in



Role duality

Pitfalls

- Everyday conversations
- Others may regard you as subversive
- Respondents may filter their responses
- Responsibility towards your respondents
- Pro-innovation bias
- Duty of care, being aware of passive silencing

Possibilities

- Formality and role-play as interviewer
- Pursue vague answers
- Don't allow innuendos to go unchecked
- Locate yourself within the organisation, acknowledge your beliefs, values and knowledge



Organisational Politics

Pitfalls

- Others may regard you as subversive
- Status differences
- Limits to collaboration and participation
- Socially acceptable responses
- Biased responses in your favour
- Filter responses or withhold sensitive information
- Individual-blame bias

Possibilities

- Ask broad questions and funnel down
- Don't give too much away about the research
- Don't tape record interviews
- Use focus groups



Qualitative research

Traveller rather than miner of data (Kvale 1996:11)

Co-construction of knowledge, look for emic as well etic issues arising from the data (Stake 1995:78)

Authenticity, trustworthiness and credibility (Lincoln and Guba 2000:178)

Accept the multiple dimensions of voice (Hertz 1997:ix)



Health warning: Insider research is not be undertaken lightly

The implications or outcomes of insider research have led several researchers to report that they considered changing the direction of their research (Edwards 1999) or even felt obliged to resign from their post (Holian 1999)



Thank You



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