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QUANTUM LEAP: PRACTICE ARCHITECTURES AS A CONCEPTUAL TOOL IN INFORMATION PRACTICES RESEARCH

Abstract or Résumé:

This paper makes the case for practice architectures (Kemmis, et al., 2014; Mahon et al. 2017) as a useful conceptual tool in information practices research. It argues that practice architectures provides a meso-sociological framework which might be used to address long-standing critique of the narrow focus on the individual information seeker in traditional information research. The paper provides a brief overview of the framework's key concepts (e.g. *cultural-discursive, material-economic, social-political* arrangements). It uses findings from an ongoing study of information practices in archaeological contexts to provide an example of how they can be applied to information practices research.

1. Introduction

This paper makes the case for practice architectures (Kemmis, et al., 2014; Mahon et al. 2017) as a useful conceptual tool in information practices research. Savolainen, in his key work analysing information practices emergence as a critical alternative 'umbrella discourse' to prevailing information behavior approaches, defined information practices research as moving:

... the focus away from the behavior, action, motives and skills of monological individuals. Instead the main attention is directed to them as members of various groups and communities that constitute the context of their mundane activities. (Savolainen 2007, 120)

Despite this, this paper asks the question whether information practices research has fulfilled its promise to become more socially oriented: whether information practice researchers – including the author! (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017) – have perhaps become too focused on studying information practices in the moment of practice, leading to not enough empirical attention being given to exploring how these practices relate to their broader socio-material environment (Olsson, 2022).

McKenzie (2022) in her keynote for the Information Seeking in Context conference acknowledged that *"as a research community we have struggled with exactly where – at what scale – to draw the analytical boundary delineating context"*. This is problematic because:

Drawing the boundary too small risks the legitimate critique that our research is too narrow, ... Drawing the boundary too large risks returning to a system-centred focus that loses sight of the individual seekers... (McKenzie, 2022)

It is in this context that the present paper puts forward the practice architectures framework developed by Kemmis and his collaborators (Kemmis, et al., 2014; Mahon et al. 2017) as a useful conceptual tool for information practice researchers, providing a meso-sociological middle ground between the narrow focus on the individual information seeker of traditional information research and the broad socio-historical lenses of thinkers such as Bourdieu (1982), Foucault (1972; 1978) and their peers. It will argue that practice architectures offers information practices researchers the ability to understand their participants' information practices as inextricably linked to the social/political/economic/technical arrangements which shape, afford and constrain them.

The utility of practice architectures in information practices research will be illustrated through reference to a study in which the author has employed it: an ongoing, collaborative study of information practices in archeological contexts.

2. Practice Architectures

Drawing on practice theory (Schatzki, 2002), Kemmis and his collaborators, including information practices researcher Annemaree Lloyd (Kemmis et al., 2014, Mahon et al, 2017, Lloyd, 2010) have developed a framework which seeks to understand not only how participants complete tasks but also to gain some insight into how their sayings, doing, and relatings (Schatzki, 2002; Kemmis, et al., 2014) are related to the complex practice architectures with which they interact. The actors in this environment include not only other people but a range of socio-technical systems that both enable and constrain their ability to pursue their practices.

Practice architectures has emerged:

...through a process of problematising practice theory and offers a distinctive ontological view of what practice is, how practices are shaped and mediated, and how practices relate to each other (Mahon et al, 2017, p.2)

This paper argues that practice architectures is a particularly useful conceptual tool for information practices researchers because it is designed to provided "an account of what practices are composed of and how practices shape and are shaped by the arrangements with which they are enmeshed in a site of practice." (Mahon et al, 2017, p.7)

A good starting point for unpacking the practice architectures framework is Kemmis et al.'s (2014) model (Figure 1):

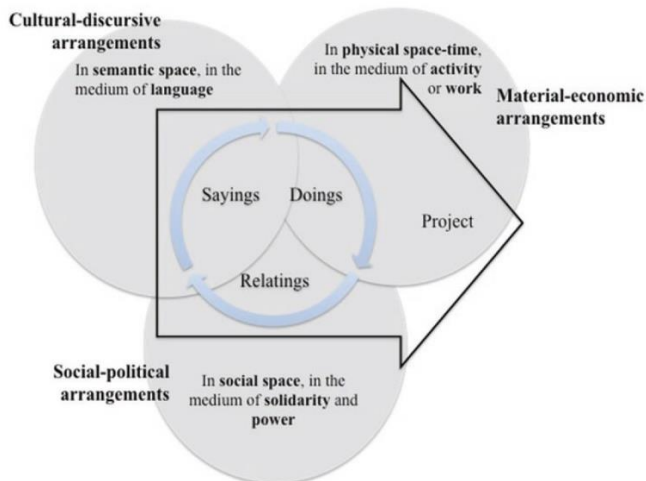


Figure 1: The media and spaces in which sayings, doings, and relatings exist. Kemmis et al. (2014, p. 34)

The model is a useful illustration of a key feature of the practice architectures framework: that practices do not occur in isolation but are inextricably linked to the practice architectures that make up their information environment/s. These architectures are multifaceted and include different types of *arrangements*:

cultural-discursive: “the resources ...that prefigure and make possible particular sayings in a practice, for example, languages and discourses used in and about a practice” (Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 32)

material-economic: “are resources (e.g., aspects of the physical environment, financial resources and funding arrangements, human and non-human entities, schedules, division of labour arrangements), that make possible, or shape the doings of a practice by affecting what, when, how, and by whom something can be done” (Mahon et al, 2017, p.10)

social-political: “are the arrangements or resources (e.g., organisational rules; social solidarities; hierarchies; community, familial, and organisational relationships) that shape how people relate in a practice to other people and to non-human objects; they enable and constrain the relatings of a practice” ” (Mahon et al, 2017, p.10)

These arrangements should not be seen as discreet domains but are “bundled together in characteristic ways in practice landscapes” (Mahon et al. 2017, p. 13).

3. Research Applications

The paper will illustrate the utility of practice architectures as a conceptual tool in information practices research by providing examples from findings from an ongoing research project which “*investigates what information about the creation and use of research data (that is, paradata) is needed ... The empirical focus of [the project] is archaeological and cultural heritage data*” (CAPTURE project website, 2024). Having recently joined the project, the author has used the information architectures framework to analyse the transcripts of interviews with 16 archaeologists conducted in English by two of his co-researchers (Olsson et. al., 2024). The author has previously used practices architectures in an earlier study of the information practices of YouTube content creators (Olsson, 2022).

The analysis demonstrated that participants' information practices are always shaped by the *cultural-discursive, material-economic* and *social-political* arrangements operating in the practice architectures they work within. The findings demonstrate that the study's participants are experts in their life-world (Dervin, 1999) who have developed the knowledge, skills and understanding of their information environment they need to be effective researchers. However, the findings also make clear that understanding their expertise provides only a partial portrait of their information practices. They also provide many examples of institutional practices and non-human actors which negatively impact participants' ability to work effectively.

Participants in the study expressed frustrations with the limitations and opacity of the systems they worked with. For example, participants were very conscious of how archaeology's move towards Open Data was hampered by the disciplines' (*cultural/discursive*) writing and publishing practices developed over more than a century in the context of print being the dominant dissemination medium:

...the format we get the data in is not reusable, so I'm interested in data that's collected in the field, and how that can then be reused. But what I receive, ... is a PDF report. So, plan information and all the sort of GS spatial data is just fossilized into print, so it's very frustrating. Jove

As well as such *cultural-discursive* issues, the archaeology participants also faced significant *material-economic* problems:

It's part of our core work, so there's a recognition that we should be doing this, we should be up to date, but it relies on people in the data management team having the time to do it. There's no dedicated resource. Jove

As well as *social-political* issues:

I'm not saying that you should publish everything straight away, because there are good reasons for it, for keeping things away from public access ... especially when you're not completely ready with everything. ... I mean, my own archaeological data for this project, I haven't put it in a repository mainly for this reason, because I'm still working on it. Heimdall

4. Conclusion

These findings provide insights into how applying a practice architectures lens can provide information practices researches with a framework for exploring how people's information environments (*cultural-discursive, material-economic, social-political*) both enable and constrain their information practices. It provides a conceptual tool that allows researchers to consider a broad range of arrangements and in doing so offers possibilities for new avenues of information practices research.

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