The cachet of constraint: Learners, ownership and power

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The innovation explored in this paper reveals some of the complexities of power and ownership that practitioners need to negotiate if they are to create institutional spaces where learners can find their own voice. The paper sheds light on current debates about personal learning environments versus VLEs, and argues that an either/or approach is unnecessarily limiting. It proposes, instead, that practitioners will be able to operate more effectively if they recognize the diversity of actors and influences that shape the spaces in which learning takes place. The paper tests this proposition by examining the introduction of a synchronous online tool, highlighting the practitioner values that the project team revealed in its pedagogic choices.

Keywords: ownership and learning; synchronous; PLEs; global heritage; Elluminate; power

VLEs and student-owned learning: are they incompatible?

The story is familiar to many practitioners. A VLE is being enhanced in a university, bringing fresh tools for teachers and learners. This opens up the potential for new teaching and learning practices; and if the changes are judged to be radical, there may be discussion about new conceptualizations of 'teaching' and 'learning'. Once this point is reached, the debate is likely to include questions about who owns the learning. If a tool affords greater ownership for the learners, thereby allowing them to choose and direct their own learning in a way that has affinities with Web 2.0, which of us will conclude that this is not a good thing?

This paper will not argue that it is a bad thing, but rather will aim to open up this familiar story by exploring a nuanced position on issues of ownership within VLEs. In current discussions, it is often argued that learner-ownership is barely compatible with large-scale managed environments. The paper proposes that there *is* compatibility, and it does this by drawing on an alternative understanding of 'ownership' as being widely and unevenly distributed among learners, teachers and a number of other important actors within large-scale environments. The paper tests this proposition by closely examining a case in which a small project team recently contributed to a teaching programme, and helped to shape a key aspect of the teaching.

In testing this, the paper also examines one of the planks that has underpinned major activity in the past three or four years – around the claim that the 'students own learning' (Downes, 2006) and the accompanying idea that students increasingly seek such ownership and are making the running, with teachers hurrying to keep up. For practitioners, this is not an edifying image. What space does it leave for teachers' independence? And if learners own the learning, do teachers still own any of the teaching?

The field of education is not short of debate about these questions. For example, Coffield and Edward argue:

> We particularly wish to oppose the modish celebration of students' learning, as if it could somehow be dissociated from the teaching of their tutors or the assessment of their work. If we are right, then the main policy questions become: what are the characteristics of effective teaching and learning relationships? (Coffield and Edward, 2009, p.373)

The current study examines the context of one such 'teaching and learning relationship', and particularly explores the proposed role for a synchronous tool within a module about global heritage. The intention for the tool is that it will be used for online tutorials by the part-time tutors (broadly equivalent to adjunct professors) and by the learners, within a blended module – created by the course team as a whole – that also includes printed books and online materials, a DVD, and asynchronous and face-to-face tutorials.

The project team is leading the introduction of the tool, and has developed several ways of supporting its use within the module. Such 'supporting' also involves *influencing* its use, a point that meshes with this paper's broader discussion about ownership. For example (and not surprisingly), the project team has made decisions about how the tutors and learners will be supported in learning the functionality of the tool itself – in this case, through a mix of hands-on practice, moderated discussion in a separate asynchronous forum, and drop-in sessions in the new environment before the date of the first live tutorial.

More significantly for our discussion, the team has also made pedagogic decisions about how the tool can most effectively be used during the synchronous tutorials. These decisions and their underlying values are embodied in the materials or artefacts that the team has created for the tutors to use with their learners. The materials provide detailed guidance on suitable topics and concepts for discussion, visual images and related questions, and activities for encouraging student–student interaction in small groups. Tutors are free to adapt or discard this material; but for the first year at least, it seems probable that many will broadly adopt it – not least because this is likely to be the first time they have used this synchronous voice- and chat-based tool.

Which actors shape these synchronous tutorials?

The next section, 'Intangible beliefs and social meanings of heritage', outlines the module components, and examines in more detail the kinds of learning that the tutorials have been designed to facilitate. But first it is valuable, in discussing ownership, to analyse the context for these synchronous tutorials. For by the time they take place, the tutorials will have been shaped in numerous ways by a range of actors.

First and most obvious, the university selected this tool – with its particular pedagogic texture – for the VLE, and the course team adopted it as one component in the blend of online and face-to-face tutoring. Further, the course team conceived and wrote the entire module, and also set the assessment – a particularly significant shaping force, given that each synchronous tutorial is designed to relate to the forthcoming assessment task. The project team then developed the materials for these synchronous events, and will cascade them to the tutors. The project itself, including the employment of four consultants, was enabled by funding from the Practice-based Professional Learning (PBPL) Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at The Open University. Making the bid and obtaining this funding was a key stimulus to the initiation of the project, and hence to the introduction of the tool.

Those actors above can be conceived of as enabling and in some cases pre-shaping the events in varying ways. For the synchronous events themselves, the tutors will obviously play a major role – for example, in how far they adopt the prepared materials, in the detail of their choreography, and in the way they draw from other areas of their teaching expertise. The learners' engagement is likely to depend on a number of factors – including how much they are focusing on the upcoming assessment task, their ability to learn the new tool, and the extent to which the tutor encourages small-group work. This last point is significant in that the tool *can* be used entirely for tutor-led presentations. This project, however, encourages a different approach by emphasizing the value of student–student interaction as a significant component within each tutorial; and while such interaction does not of itself signify high learner-ownership, it may be a significant step towards it.

When the context is analysed as above, it becomes difficult to conceive of power as being the sole possession of either learners or teachers – or any other actor. Robinson and Taylor, in their discussion of 'student voice' in the school context, have set out various ways in which power has been theorized. One such theoretical framework is particularly useful in relation to the analysis above:

> …under the influence of postmodernism, power has become recognized for its diversity, subtlety and complexity…not as a 'thing' to be possessed or given away but a mode or relation which inhabits all social processes, and, importantly, not of itself a negative force. (Robinson and Taylor, 2007, p.13)

In exploring the 'diversity, subtlety and complexity' of power as perceived by the learners in the current study, data will be gathered on how far students ask their own questions, how much student–student

interaction takes place, and how far students organize and lead their own separate sessions without their tutor. While this last case is still not in Web 2.0 territory, student-only sessions can be seen as representing a 'crossover' between formal learning and Web 2.0 (Pettit, 2007). That 2007 study reports that the learners – on a languages course – spent in total considerably longer in their own student-initiated sessions than in tutor-led sessions, and that their interactions in student-initiated sessions were markedly less formal. The learners thus carved out at least a semi-independent space within a VLE, suggesting that learner-ownership and VLEs may not be inherently incompatible.

If the current study finds that the students organize synchronous sessions *without* their tutor, it will also be useful to gather data on whether they consider they are in a personal or in an institutional space during such events. It will be important to ask them to compare these events with their experience of interactions within social networking environments, and to compare student-led and tutor-led sessions in terms of formality.

If the research throws light on such similarities and differences, this should suggest ways in which practitioners can harness the vitality of Web 2.0 and bring some of it into their teaching. For that to be successful, it seems likely that students will need to retain at least some sense of ownership. The resulting paradox for practitioners is captured by Pettit and Kukulska-Hulme (2009) in their discussion of 2.0: '…can we as practitioners find ways to encourage learners to cross that border from "personal 2.0" to "tertiary 2.0"? And will they still enjoy – and still own – what they find on the other side?'

Such a discussion intersects with the 'PLE versus VLE' debate. Weller (2009), for example, argues that VLEs inevitably lag behind the new and exciting tools out on the web, and he further argues that students need to learn how to choose from these tools and from diverse sources so as to create their own learning environments. Certainly the ability to choose sources of learning is a valuable skill, which has roots back to the almost-pre-internet era when 'the independent learner' was much discussed. However, although exciting things can happen when learners choose their own tools and create their own environment, it should not be assumed that VLE spaces are inevitably pedestrian. They may tend to lag behind the curve technically, but there is still much to play for in terms of how the tools are used and the learning is designed. The next section explores these issues in relation to the heritage module at the centre of this project.

Intangible beliefs and social meanings of heritage

For the purposes of this paper, one of the easiest ways to convey some of the concerns of the module is to quote briefly from a description of one of the three books that have been written for it:

> …the uses of heritage by governments…a form of intervention in the way in which history is understood…the politics of world heritage, heritage and post-colonialism, heritage and class, and grassroots heritage movements.
> (http://www3.open.ac.uk/study/undergraduate/course/ad281.htm [27 July 2009])

Heritage practices are of course changing, and are highly charged. It would be tempting but facile to link such concerns – with their focus on the interrogation of dominant discourses of heritage – to the bottom–up emphasis on learner-ownership in the project's tutorial materials. Conceivably both approaches are nourished by the same intellectual and social tradition, but that is too big an issue for the remaining space here.

Nevertheless, the materials do embody the project team's values and decisions about preferred ways of using the tool (Elluminate) and about the design of the events. Some of the decisions are rooted in the commonplace conviction that it is valuable for students to engage with each other in small groups and to practise talking and writing informally about new concepts, and that through this process the students will integrate these concepts with their existing knowledge and frameworks. The subject-matter of 'heritage' is obviously highly visual, and lends itself to synchronous online discussion of images, and also of text – for example, discussion of the criteria that Unesco applies when deciding the importance of a heritage site. When exploring new discourses, students may find it particularly valuable (data will be gathered to examine this) to engage in informal small-group discussion online for fifteen or twenty minutes, where the tutor is absent or drops in only occasionally.

But this is not the single guiding pedagogic impulse. For example, the project team also envisages that, at other times during tutorials, the tutors are likely to adopt a more presentational approach akin to a mini-lecture – where they use prepared slides containing images and text to set out key teaching points, and

where they take questions from the learners. Indeed the pedagogic grain of the tool affords this latter approach.

There are additional impulses. The project team includes experienced tutors from a related heritage module, and at the beginning of the project they were invited to envisage the potential benefits of the tool. Their comments included practical considerations – for example, that online synchronous tutorials save the time and expense of travelling to face-to-face events, and may therefore lead to higher participation rates. This is balanced with a concern about the load on students in learning the new tool. 'More dynamic tutorials' and improved retention rates were also seen as possibilities, and 'a greater sense of belonging' for students as they speak and text-chat. Data will be gathered later in the project to see how far these hopes have been realized.

Conclusion

The paper opened by saying that its story, of a modest piece of innovation, is a familiar one. But it has also related it – in the space available – to larger debates about the 'diversity, subtlety and complexity' of power, to use a phrase from Robinson and Taylor quoted earlier (2007, p.13). It has aimed to identify some of the opportunities and constraints for both learners and practitioners in enabling the student voice to be heard within the complexity of VLEs, and has explored these within the specific context of synchronous live events.

This broadly optimistic position has been contrasted with a counter-argument that favours personal learning environments over institutional space, and that suggests that students need to find their own tools and their own learning environments. The contrast in this paper may have been too harsh, and no doubt there is something to be said for both positions. But to the extent that scheduled live events with tutors and students are desirable, the use of a VLE tool may be more reliable – and thus more accessible to many learners – than trying to bring together groups of students using disparate tools they have chosen for themselves.

Those tools have a role, and at The Open University and elsewhere there are many reports of students using their own tools for interaction at times of their choosing. But for more formal events – for example, where the tutors wish to prepare whiteboards with images and text, and where the learners wish and/or need to draw on support and technical guidance from tutors and the institution – there is value in converging on one tool.

While this reduces learners' choices and flexibility in obvious ways, it may be that many learners are willing to trade these for perceived benefits of scheduled, structured and supported interaction with a tutor and fellow students. If so – and the paper has aimed to explore diverse ways in which the structuring can take place – this may illustrate Goodyear's point from a different context that '[p]aradoxically, there is cachet in deploying technologies that *reduce* students' opportunities for flexible use of time' (2006, p.93; my italics).

Acknowledgement

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