The importance of power dynamics in the development of asynchronous online learning communities

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This research explored how a more student-directed learning design can support the creation of togetherness and belonging in a community of distance learners in formal higher education. Postgraduate students in a New Zealand School of Education experienced two different learning tasks as part of their online distance learning studies. The tasks centered around two online asynchronous discussions each for the same period of time and with the same group of students, but following two different learning design principles. All messages were analyzed using a two-step analysis process, content analysis and social network analysis. Although the findings showed a balance of power between the tutor and the students in the first high e-moderated activity, a better pattern of group interaction and community feeling was found in the low e-moderated activity. The paper will discuss the findings in terms of the implications for learning design and the role of the tutor.

Keywords: power dynamics, online discussions, learning design, online tutors, social network analysis

Introduction

Student-directed learning has been featured in research within the expanding field of online learning (e.g. Boud, 2006; Comeaux, 2002; Harasim, 1990; Hiltz, 1994; Jonassen, et al., 1995; Wheeler, 2002) for a number of years now. Central to the discussions about student-directed learning is the issue of 'power and student-centeredness' in an online environment, where students and tutors interact online within a fixed curriculum (Boud, 2006). Boud discussed the evolution of the concept of student-directed learning and concluded that 'power is not a zero sum game to be shifted from teacher to student; the goal of this type of learning was not to move the power from teachers to students but to recognise ways in which it was exercised within different teaching and learning practices' (2006: 31). Self-directed learning has at its core the study of how adult learners exercise power and control over their own educational activities (Brookfield, 2005). The issue of power, however, was not found to be of significant importance in the literature of online learning to date, with a few exceptions. For example, Jones (1995:20) was very clear about the importance of considering the issue of power in online discussions. He wrote that 'just because the spaces with which we are now concerned are electronic there is no guarantee that they are democratic, egalitarian or accessible and it is not the case that we can forgo asking in particular about substance and dominance' (20). More recently, Anderson (2006), who conducted a study on writing power in online discussions, found that students are more concerned in 'satisfying' their tutors than with shaping their own learning in their replies. He called for more focused research in the area of power dynamics online with a particular focus on how learning design can create the conditions for student-directed learning. This paper attempts to offer a better insight in an area of studies that it is still very much fuzzy, that of power relationships in online learning settings. It starts with a short overview of the role of the tutor in facilitating asynchronous online learning. It then introduces two learning design approaches which required different levels of online facilitation. It finally reports the results of the learning design approaches in terms of their impact on the establishment of power relationships between tutor and students and students with fellow students.

The role of the tutor in developing sustainable learning communities

The facilitation or e-moderation of discussions in e-learning had early attention (Berge, 1995). This led within a few years to rather deeper and more informed publications. Guides offering advice to tutors about their online teaching are certainly available (Bender, 2003; Ko and Rossen, 2004; MacDonald, 2006). The literature certainly also offers some generalizations about what is held to constitute desirable approaches to e-moderation that facilitates student-centered learning. These comprise conceptual frameworks and models, as given by Garrison and Anderson (2003).

At the core of a tutor's role in adult learning is the manner in which he or she creates a community feeling among learners by developing social relationships and by intervening in the affective, as well as in the cognitive, domain of the online discussions (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). It was argued that by so doing tutors may better

assist students to sustain their work on the learning task (Goodyear, et al., 2001). Rourke, et al. (2001) placed an emphasis on the need for online socialization and community building. They developed a conceptual framework for 'social presence' online and argued that a high social presence on the part of the tutor may motivate learners to better engage with the online discussions. Drawing on Rourke, et al.'s model, Stacey (2002) then conducted two studies in a search for effective social presence online. She found that tutors' social interventions, such as humour, expression of emotions and openness, were acknowledged and welcomed by the students. She also claimed that online social behaviour initiated by the tutor was quickly emulated by many students. With this in mind, Bender (2003: see 88-90) also suggested some strategies for effective online communication on the part of the tutors. Drawing on her experiences as a student and as a teacher online, she focused on some techniques of online communication for the tutors, such as appearing to be listening and caring. In the centre of her online socialization she placed the responsibility to create an online environment where 'students feel safe to express themselves …and they feel listened to by the tutors' (89).

 MacDonald (2006) argued for a facilitator who works online to 'engender confidence, and to build a working relationship with individual students' (24). McConnell (2006) further embraced the need for online facilitation, but he warned that facilitating a networked learning community is hard work. According to McConnell (2006), facilitation requires constant attention to what is going on in the community, and a willingness to make it possible for those participating to "own" the ways in which the community develops. However, he argued that this passing over of the power relationship (from tutor to a community in which the tutor is a member) is full of contradictions. It forces tutors to be open about their educational intentions and to reflect long and hard on their own practice as it becomes manifest in the community. He concluded that there is much still to be understood about what is involved in the process of becoming a facilitator and how this influences the way that students interact. A more specific breakdown of the facilitative options online is given in Vlachopoulos and Cowan (2010a). They analytically distinguish modes of interaction under the colloquial, and somewhat enigmatic, headings of: "one track mind, top of the list, going the second mile, critical friend, balancing priorities and rescuing." These are explained, amplified and critically compared in their paper. Recently, Laurillard (2012) re-emphasised the importance of having carefully conceptualised roles for teachers supporting learners in different formal learning contexts, including learning through online discussions.

Overall, there is a fair amount of "folk wisdom" available, regarding best practice in facilitation. But there is very little researched evidence to justify the effectiveness of these assertions in the way that learners are learning as part of a community that is 'free' to learn. This was the focus of a research project conducted by Vlachopoulos & Cowan (2010b). After analyzing ineffective examples of e-moderation, they introduced the significance of "ring-fencing of facilitative interactions". They postulated that problems arise for students and their tutors when the facilitative role of a tutor or moderator in learner-centred learning is confused with an educational administrative activity such as planning, arranging, assessing and evaluating student learning. They summed up the need to distinguish between these areas of activity as the desirability of "ring-fencing" facilitation within the area involving learner activity. The paper puts the 'ring fence' learning framework to further testing by trying to explore what happens in terms of power dynamics and patterns of interaction between students and tutor when they work within and out of the notional 'ring-fenced' arena of learning development.

The context of the study

The author of the paper taught for a full academic year a distance learning postgraduate course offered fully online in a School of Education in New Zealand. The course was designed for people with specific interest in the use of new educational technologies to support the learning and teaching process. It offered a unique blend of theory, research and practice. Seventeen students from a range of backgrounds from early childhood through to tertiary education and to e-learning professionals in the industry took the module. Most of the students were New Zealand based (n=12) with a few others participating from overseas (Malta, India and United Arabic Emirates). The age of the participants ranged between 22 and 40 years old. The module was taught entirely online using a Virtual Learning Environment, a Synchronous Conferencing System and an e-Portfolio System. Students had to participate in a number of online activities in order to successfully complete the module and evidence their learning progress in an e-portfolio. Participation in the online discussions was compulsory and directly assessed following clear assessment criteria which were given to the students at the start of the course. The student had an online induction, which introduced them to the tools and allowed them time to familiarize themselves with both the technical and pedagogical requirements for studying this particular module at a distance.

As part of their online activities students were introduced to the idea of ' Guided Thought Discussions', which

was developed as a core activity as part of a fully online MSc in Blended and Online Education at Edinburgh Napier University, in which the tutor was also a guest online lecturer. The main focus of the 'Thought Discussion' is around guided content explorations when students read from a selection of articles prescreened by the tutor and with particular questions raised by the tutor. The tutor's role is to facilitate the discussion and intervene as appropriate to take the discussion further. This activity, although student-centered, cannot be considered student-directed as a number of decisions about the content, the questions and the process has been decided at the outset for the students. For the purposes of this research, this setting was perceived to be operating outside the notional 'ring-fenced' learning area described in the previous section. The students worked for three weeks on such a 'Guided Thought Discussion'.

A second type of online discussion activity was introduced to them two weeks after the 'Guided Thought Discussion'. This time the students selected the articles or other materials they wanted to discuss based on their own personal and professional interests and agreed a set of discussion rules between them, including the key questions to be asked: how often they should be contributing; the length of the messages posted; etc. The role of the tutor in such arrangement was that of a critical friend. The 'Discovery Thought Discussion', which also ran for three weeks, provided a context which for the purpose of this research fits within the notional 'ring-fenced' learning arena, as many of the decisions to be made in working online has to be made by the students themselves.

The important question to ask is whether there were observed differences in both the power dynamics between tutor and students and students and fellow students and if there were differences in the pattern of the interactions between the participants in the two learning designs. This answer, in turn, would help future online facilitators to design appropriate activities that help the creation of a learning community and, most importantly, to be aware of their roles within the communities they aim to set up.

Methods

All online discussion messages from both settings were archived and extracted from the Virtual Learning Environment, in the form of text, after all students had completed their study of the particular module. They were then entered in NVivo 7, a specialized software for qualitative data analysis, and were analysed using a revised version of a coding system developed by the author as part of his doctorate studies following principles of grounded theory. The revised coding system comprised five codes and it is presented in Table 1 below with explicit criteria and indicators from the raw data. The unit of analysis was the whole message. A Kappa reliability check was conducted with one independent coder. A result of agreement of 62% was achieved, which according to Robson (2002), can be considered as satisfactory.

A total number of 311 messages were coded from the first learning activity whereas 334 were coded from the second learning activity. The results from this first part of the analysis provided a useful insight in the intended or unintended purpose of the message posted. It was noticed, for example, that particular students will never initiate a discussion and appear to only be reactive to the tutors' messages. Or that other students will prefer to be proactive but then will never come back to reply to fellow learners' messages or ask follow up questions.

This first part of analysis did not show whether there was any difference in the way that patterns of interaction changed as a result of either a lower e-moderation on the part of the tutor or as a result of the different learning setting. The author revisited, therefore, the data and applied a basic social network analysis (Everret & Borgatti, 1999).The social network perspective suggests that the power of individual actors (e.g a tutor or a learner) is not an individual attribute, but arises from their relations with others. Using the specialized software UCINET the author added all participants (S1 to S17) and the tutor (T1) in a matrix and recorded the interactions between them in the two different settings. For more details about entering data in UCINET see Borgatti et al., (2002). This allowed a closer examination of the group of students and the tutor as a network. Of particular interest to this research were the measures of 'Degree Centrality' and 'Core/Periphery Class Membership'. Degree Centrality is a measure that shows how central a particular actor in a network of people is. Core/Periphery Class Membership seeks to identify a set of actors who have high density of ties among themselves (the core) by sharing many events in common, and another set of actors who have very low density of ties among themselves (the periphery) by having few events in common.

Table 1: The Purpose of Interaction Coding Scheme

Code	Criteria	Indicators
GPI Group Proactive Interactive Message	Student or tutor looks for a response from someone in the group – anyone	Hi all, I've not added messages to this group as I felt you were all having some very interesting discussions without me! Please share your messages/ thoughts with others in the class in the summary section.
GRI Group Reactive Interactive Message	Student or tutor responds to one of the above, or some other message, playing reply back to group	Two rich contributions here, from student 1 and student 2. Thanks for all the work which has gone into these. Student 1writes to a great extent about distance education, which is OK by me.
PI Proactive Interactive Message	Student or tutor looks for a response from a specific contributor, and even asks for it	Student 1 , You said "I also think that information overload can make people… Can you explain a little further for me? Why is it so? Thank you!
RI Reactive Interactive Message	Student or tutor responds to one of the above, or some other message, from and then to a specific contributor	Dear student, thank you for your reply! I am really happy to "communicate" with you here. It was interesting to read your comment….
M Monologue	A new thread. No evidence of interaction with any other participant	The form of E-learning brought me new feeling, which was just like some fresh air! It's really special experience. I tried to control and hide my excitement and made myself involved with the online discussion...

Findings & Discussion

As it can be seen from Table 2, the two most frequent types of postings in relation to the purpose of interaction were the Individual Proactive (PI) and Individual Reactive (RI) Messages with an average number of postings of 7.53 and 4.00 respectively falling into each category. This was not surprising given that the task was set up by the tutor and the majority of the students were asking (proactively) for individual clarifications from the tutor and then were offering replies to the tutor or to particular individuals. They avoided being proactive themselves in terms of motivating each other as a group to take ownership of the activity or by suggesting ways to move on with the discussion or being involved in more than one-to-one interaction with other fellow learners. This was the case despite the fact that the activity itself was clear in the expectations that students should post their own views and also comment on other participants' messages. It is possible that the students felt that it was the tutor's job to prompt further questions and bring the group to together. However, the tutor's presence in this setting was mostly associated with interventions related to assessment and feedback on the process of the activity.

Table 2: The Purpose of Interaction in Activity 1

Participant No	No of GPI	No of GRI	No of PI	No of RI	No of M	Total No of Messages
Student 1	6	4	12	4	3	29
Student 2	3	4	6	3	0	16
Student 3	3	2	9	5	2	21
Student 4	2	1	6	3	1	13
Student 5	2	1	4	2	0	9
Student 6	6	2	9	5	3	25
Student 7	2	2	8	4	2	18
Student 8	3	2	7	3	0	15
Student 9	3	3	8	5	2	21
Student 10	1	4	9	4	1	19
Student 11	1	2	3	4	1	11
Student 12	3	1	7	4	3	18
Student 13	3	4	9	6	2	24
Student 14	1	1	8	4	1	15
Student 15	3	3	7	4	2	19
Student 16	4	3	12	5	3	27
Student 17	0	2	4	3	2	11
Total	46	41	128	68	28	311
Average	2.71	2.41	7.53	4.00	1.65	

The social network analysis results for Activity 1 added extra trustworthiness to the claims made above that the majority of the students were proactively interacting with the tutor and that overall the group appeared to be more on the passive/reactive end of the spectrum of the types of interaction. Of particular importance is the In-Degree value (the number of messages received) for the tutor (T1) in Table 3. The theory of social network analysis would argue that the greater the Out-Degree of an actor in a network, the more influential this actor is. In this case, though, influential appears to be the actor who attracts the most messages, and this is surely T1 with a value of In-Degree of 76. However, it should be noted that T1 also had a comparatively high Out-Degree of 53. It is also worth reporting that the overall Network Centralization values show a higher In-Degree value (Outdegree = 30.147%, versus Indegree = 36.765%). This means that on average, as a community of learners, the students were receiving more messages than they were sending. Many of the approaches to understanding the structure of a network emphasize how dense connections are built-up from simpler dyads and triads to more extended dense clusters such as 'cliques'. The 'clique' analysis in the community of learners in the first activity revealed two major cliques with a strong core and a weak periphery. This means that a small number of students, together with the tutor dominated the discussion, whereas the majority of them were only partially intervening to add to the interactions. It became apparent that in activity one, the students were not interacting as a group of participants who were empowered to take responsibility for their learning, but were mostly working towards satisfying the tutor's and assessment requests. This has implications for learning design in distance learning, where one of the desired expectations is that students will find their intrinsic motivation to set their own goals and learn as a community of learners from and with each other.

Table 3: Freeman's degree centrality measures for activity 1

		1 OutDegree	2 InDegree	3 NrmOutDeg	4 NrmInDeg
6	S6	12.000	8.000	70.588	47.059
1	S1	10.000	10.000	58.824	58.824
5	S5	10.000	9.000	58.824	52.941
4	S4	10.000	9.000	58.824	52.941
5	S15	9.000	8.000	52.941	47.059
8	S8	9.000	6.000	52.941	35.294
8	T1	9.000	13.000	52.941	76.471
3	S3	8.000	7.000	47.059	41.176
3	S13	8.000	7.000	47.059	41.176
2	S2	7.000	10.000	41.176	58.824
7	S17	7.000	9.000	41.176	52.941
0	S10	6.000	3.000	35.294	17.647
2	S12	6.000	4.000	35.294	23.529
9	S9	6.000	7.000	35.294	41.176
6	S16	6.000	8.000	35.294	47.059
1	S11	6.000	6.000	35.294	35.294
7	S7	3.000	5.000	17.647	29.412
4	S14	2.000	5.000	11.765	29.412

In Activity 2 the students were offered the flexibility by design to arrange their own reading lists, questions, and rules of their discussion. Not surprisingly perhaps the highest number of contributions appeared to be Group Proactive Interactive (mean = 7.43), followed by an almost equal numbers of Group Reactive (mean = 3.12) and Individual Reactive (mean = 3.06) as shown in Table 4. To some extent this proactive attitude to the interactions was the result of the need for the students to move fast as a group to arrange the rules of the discussion in the absence of a high tutor presence. This resulted in a number of replies which were more open to the whole group. These replies were follow up suggestions and prompts for further discussion as opposed to closed answers. Interestingly, this pattern appeared to continue in the main part of the actual discussion activity.

Table 4: The Purpose of Interaction in Activity 2

Participant No	No of GPI	No of GRI	No of PI	No of RI	No of M	Total No of Messages
Student 1	10	7	7	8	4	36
Student 2	7	5	3	1	1	17
Student 3	7	3	2	3	0	15
Student 4	9	2	4	2	1	18
Student 5	9	1	3	1	1	15
Student 6	7	3	4	2	3	19
Student 7	9	3	6	1	1	20
Student 8	6	4	4	3	3	21
Student 9	6	4	4	3	0	17
Student 10	6	3	1	5	1	16
Student 11	7	2	4	2	0	15
Student 12	5	3	6	1	0	15
Student 13	14	2	10	4	1	31
Student 14	8	2	4	2	0	16
Student 15	4	2	10	5	0	21
Student 16	9	4	6	5	1	25
Student 17	5	3	6	4	0	17
Total	128	53	84	52	17	334
	7.53	3.12	4.94	3.06	1.00	

Looking now into the social network analysis data, as presented in Table 5, it can be observed that the occasions in which the tutor (T1) was asked to intervene was significantly lower when compared with Activity 1. This is reflected in the lower In-Degree value of 41.17. The tutors Out-Degree value was pretty much the same as in

Activity 1, but the messages sent were more in relation to the content of the actual discussion and not so much in relation to helping students to sort out the rules of the discussion. This is a very encouraging finding as continuous findings in the area of online distance education show that students without the explicit guidance of a tutor online can lose their motivation to interact or that students can be in a constant need of confirmation by the tutor (De Wever et al., 2010). The overall centralization values of the network in Activity 2 showed a highly balanced communication pattern: Outdegree = 25.735% and Indegree = 25.735%. Finally, it was interesting to notice that in Activity 2 there were nine 'cliques' (or small groups) formed , which means that the network appeared to have a strong periphery.

Table 5: Freeman's degree centrality measures for activity 2

		1 OutDegree	2 InDegree	3 NrmOutDeg	4 NrmInDeg
3	S3	12.000	12.000	70.588	70.588
5	S5	11.000	9.000	64.706	52.941
9	S9	11.000	9.000	64.706	52.941
1	S11	10.000	6.000	58.824	35.294
8	S8	10.000	10.000	58.824	58.824
8	T1	10.000	7.000	58.824	41.176
7	S7	10.000	9.000	58.824	52.941
5	S15	8.000	8.000	47.059	47.059
0	S10	8.000	12.000	47.059	70.588
2	S12	7.000	10.000	41.176	58.824
6	S6	7.000	7.000	41.176	41.176
6	S16	7.000	9.000	41.176	52.941
7	S17	7.000	6.000	41.176	35.294
4	S14	7.000	6.000	41.176	35.294
3	S13	6.000	7.000	35.294	41.176
1	S1	6.000	7.000	35.294	41.176
4	S4	5.000	7.000	29.412	41.176
2	S2	4.000	5.000	23.529	29.412

Conclusion

Much use is currently made of virtual learning environment, such as Moodle and Blackboard, to enable "discussion" amongst students. These learners may be in widely separated locations, and so can only interact virtually. There seems to be no agreement amongst tutors and researchers regarding the similarity or otherwise of online discussions with those occurring face-to-face. Most importantly there is little research done into looking how different learning design changes the dynamics of the interactions. A major difficulty when researching interactions, whether between students in groups or between students and a facilitative tutor, is to capture for analysis the fine detail of what was said, or is communicated by written text and especially the pattern of interaction at different times in the online experience. This paper tried to show how a mixed used of methodologies can provide a better overview of what is happening online with students in terms of interactions. More common approaches, like content analysis and coding of messages, can provide a good first understanding of the quality or the depth of the discussion, but methodologies like social network analysis can take us a step further into the domain of networked learning, which in turn provides us with useful information about the extent to which our online learners are working towards a community development or not.

The key message from this study for learning designers and tutors who teach online in fully distance or blended courses is that students who are empowered from the outset through a carefully designed activity that allows them more 'freedom to learn' (Rogers, 1969) will find their way of interacting without always needing the strict monitoring of a tutor. This is particularly important if we consider the future of online education to be about flexibility and sustainability of resources, including human resources. . However, it should be noted that in formal learning design enforced participation and authority assessment are usually expected as measures for quality assurance purposes. Therefore, the main exercise of power and authority seems to always take place outwith the ring-fence, even when authority is fully delegated. It became clear that the important thing was not to have a balance of power between the tutor and the students but rather to have a community of empowered learners who are willing to exercise their power to benefit the community After all, if learning is to be truly student -directed there should be a period of learning activity during which the activity, the decisions which matter, the interpretations placed on sourced material and experiences, should be the sole responsibility of the learners, free at that time from pro-active inputs by people who set out to teach, however they define that word, and with whatever benevolent intent.

The research reported here does very little to identify and compare learning outcomes and effectiveness of the learning experience. It only reports findings about the establishment of a community feeling among distance learners. It does not recommend that one type of activity works better than the other in terms of academic performance. In an ongoing course of one year, the researcher could only take snapshots for analysis, and information could not arrange a full and rigorous research enquiry on learning outcomes as a result of the different activities. This is an important limitation which the readers should take into account when interpreting the findings.

Future research will analyse the social network data in terms of the attributes of individual students to explore if there are particular patterns of interactions among students based on attributes such as gender or years of experience.

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