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‘Partly self-made niches’? Student-only spaces in an LMS

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Eighty-nine students were provided with a student-only live-voice space in a Learning Management System (LMS). Would they use it and, if so, would they feel sufficient ownership to create what Havnes (2008) described as “partly self-made niches”? In this study, a substantial proportion of respondents reported that they used the space not only for social support but also for key aspects of peer-learning. They reported that these student-only sessions gave them freedom to explore module-topics in new ways, and to share professional practice. Some disliked the lack of structure, but many valued the freedom to vary the focus and pace of their sessions. Several interviewees reported setting up sessions at short notice – for example, via *Twitter* – to meet their immediate concerns and requirements. A number of respondents valued these sessions as distinctive from, and complementary to, their tutorials in the same live-voice environment. The paper links these findings to debates about whether peer-learning should be explicitly organised, and about how education can disrupt itself as advocated by Bass (2012).

Introduction: ‘The students own education’

When making this claim in 2006, Downes argued that the newly arrived social networks and other social media would be game-changers, enabling students to own and share learning with their peers in ways that were qualitatively different from anything seen before. Students would create and publish their own artefacts, and harvest content from within and beyond educational institutions, thus managing their own learning. The corollary – that universities and colleges would *lose* some of their ownership – was underlined by Heppell in that same year. He argued that, in the past, the relationship between students and institutions had been weighted in favour of institutions; now, because of students’ increasing skills in exploiting social media, that relationship would become “symmetrical” (Heppell, 2006).

How far did this happen? By 2007 the large-scale ECAR study was reporting that the use of social networking among young US undergraduates had “risen dramatically just in the past year” (Caruso & Salaway, 2007, p. 7). And although older students were barely participating at that point, this was to change. By the time of the 2010 ECAR study, more than two-thirds of respondents aged 40–49, for example, reported they had used social networking websites (Smith & Caruso, 2010, p. 63).

Clearly Downes (2006), among others, was right to call attention to the phenomenon of social networking among students. But would students use these networks for their learning? A 2012 publication suggests that, on the face of it, the answer is yes: Johnson, Adams and Cummins (2012) state that students “spend much of their free time on the Internet, learning and exchanging new information – *often via their social networks*” (p. 5; emphasis added). One facet of such learning and exchange was illuminated some time ago by Greenhow and Robelia (2009), when they investigated the social-networking practices of older high-school students in the Midwestern USA. These students spoke about how they worked to obtain kudos in *MySpace* by producing creative multimodal profiles, and how they learned to adjust the subject-matter, vocabulary and tone of their posts in order to engage their peer-audience (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009, pp. 1150–52).

The fact that they were learning these skills without teachers, gives weight to the title of one of Downes’ more recent keynotes (2011), in a close echo of Pink Floyd – “We don’t need no educator”. Yet Greenhow and Robelia also reported (*ibid.*, p. 1153) that few of the high-school students made a connection between (a) their sophisticated understanding and practice of written genres in their social networks and (b) the writing they were required to do for their schoolwork.

That disconnection was consistent with a number of reports from higher education. Corrin, Lockyer and Bennett (2010), for example, in a study of first-year Australian undergraduates, found that 81 per cent reported using social networking sites daily or weekly for “everyday life” but only 33 per cent used them for academic study (pp. 393, 394). Gray, Annabell and Kennedy (2010), reporting on the use of *Facebook*

for study purposes among medical students at Melbourne University, concluded that “using *Facebook* as part of learning and teaching is as much of a challenge for most students as it may be for educators” (p. 976).

The data for those studies was gathered in 2008, but a more recent US study by ECAR has reported a similar picture. Dahlstrom, de Boor, Grunwald and Vockley (2011), using data gathered in mid-2011, described students’ use of social networks as “complicated”. Ninety per cent of the 3,000 respondents reported using *Facebook* – many of them more than ten times a day. But more than half felt that *Facebook*’s academic value was “limited or non-existent” (Dahlstrom et al., 2011, pp. 14, 26), and a broadly similar picture was reported in the 2012 ECAR study (Dahlstrom, 2012, p. 25).

These are striking findings: many students are not making (and perhaps do not wish to make) a connection between their social networking and their formal learning. And although many teachers might wish to harness students’ existing online skills (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 5), there is a paradox in teachers trying to draw on social networks that are in essence student-led and student-controlled (Pettit and Kukulska-Hulme, 2011, p. 193). Smailes and Gannon-Leary (2011, p. 139) illustrated this point, in their research at a UK university, by warning that institutions need to tread carefully – or risk students’ resentment – if, for example, they encourage peer-mentoring in *Facebook*.

Nevertheless that and other research highlights possible uses for social networks in tertiary education. Bateman and Willems (2012), for example, reported some of *Facebook*’s benefits (including its potential for peer-learning and resource-sharing) while also highlighting such pitfalls as cyberbullying and impersonation. Irwin, Ball, Desbrow and Leveritt (2012, p. 1227) reported that students gave “[a] mixed response” (but with some positives in relation to future potential) when teachers created *Facebook* pages to encourage student–student interaction and to deliver course-information.

The current study came at this issue from a different direction. Rather than the teachers going into *Facebook* (with the attendant risks reported above), the students were encouraged to come into the student-only space in the Learning Management System (LMS) – and use it for their own purposes. The aim was to determine whether there can be a hybrid space that combines the excitement of social networks with the learning-orientation of an LMS. Students in this study were encouraged to interact with each other in a live web-conferencing space that had some of the characteristics of social networks yet was located within an LMS. Would that location have a chilling effect on the students’ interactions? Or would it provide a space where students could recreate the vitality of social networking and channel this into their formal learning?

Those questions link to debates about whether teachers should organise peer-learning, or whether such organisation should be left up to students. Boud (2001), for example, has argued that peer-learning – enabling students to develop skills in team-working, in critical inquiry, in communicating their knowledge to each other, and so on – should be included “explicitly as part of the formal academic programme” (pp. 8–10). In the current study, in contrast, students were provided with a live-voice space within the LMS, but its use was largely up to them. If the study found they did not use the space for peer-learning, this would tend to confirm Boud’s argument that such activity needs to be organised.

The study would also relate to more theoretical concerns about the purposes of peer-learning, and about where, structurally, it should be located. Havnes (2008), for example, while not overtly disagreeing with Boud, put more emphasis on “peer-mediated learning” where students – rather than focusing on mastering the curriculum – extend their learning beyond the curriculum. Drawing on activity theory, Havnes argued that students can better develop this if they are working in “partly self-made niches” in a space that is “outside of the institutional didactic structure” (2008; p. 197, p. 196).

The current study examined that question of structural positioning, by gathering data on participants’ attitudes to a student-only space whose location was ambiguous: it was in the LMS but yet was set aside exclusively for their use. Would it become their “niche”, and would they use it to go beyond the formal curriculum? The answers to those questions, while valuable in relation to the debates set out above, would also be of direct interest to practitioners in terms of whether (and, if so, how) to design such spaces in their LMS-based teaching.

Context of the study

The study was carried out with students on an entirely online Master's module. The module's subject-matter was technology-enabled learning, and participants in the study were likely to have a professional interest in innovative practice. Throughout their thirty-two weeks of part-time studying, the students had access to a range of online activities, tools and services, including asynchronous forums moderated by their tutor (instructor) in groups of 12–15 students. Each tutor also led their group in four tutorials in a real-time online environment, *Elluminate*, using live voice, text-chat and whiteboards. This same *Elluminate* environment also had a student-only section that students were free to use for their own sessions, and it is these sessions that are the focus of the current study.

The sessions were in some ways similar to those in social networks: students were largely free to choose whether to meet others in the space, whom to meet, when, and for what purposes. Tutors did not use this section of the environment, and did not evaluate students' use of it. At the same time, as already stated, the student-only space was "institutional" in that it was provided within the LMS.

The space was just one of the tools that students were encouraged to use. Through the assessment tasks, and through the learning outcomes underpinning the module's design, students were encouraged to explore a range of other tools including *Twitter*, RSS feeds and *Delicious*, in addition to tools they had found for themselves such as *Skype*. Thus although the student-only space was well aligned with the design of the module, students had several alternatives that they were free to explore instead.

The research questions

From the issues outlined in the *Introduction*, four related questions were derived:

1. How much, if at all, would the study-participants use the student-only space, given that they were largely free to ignore it?
2. If they used it, would they see their student-only sessions as academically distinctive from their tutorials in the same environment?
3. Would they also see the student-only space as providing support and, if so, how would this overlap/dovetail with support from their social media such as *Skype* and *Twitter*?
4. Finally, would participants feel a sense of ownership, given that the space was located in the LMS?

Methodology

As Laurillard (2009) among others has argued, different approaches – instructionism, constructionism, a sociocultural paradigm and so on – can each make valuable contributions to our understanding of learning, and "none denies the importance of the others" (p. 8). For the current study, a broadly sociocultural paradigm was used, leading to a focus on (a) student–student online interactions as places where learning might take place, and (b) students' own accounts of the value (if any) of those interactions. Within that paradigm, it was reasonable to believe that the participants could provide interesting and analytical accounts, particularly given that they were Master's students taking a module in the domain of technology-enabled learning.

The study reported in this paper was relatively small (with a sample of 89) and was confined to just one module. Ertl and Wright (2008) have argued that such research "may be highly useful for course development purposes" (p. 207), though they also call for an increased emphasis on large-scale, longitudinal research.

The student-only space at the heart of the study was designed on the principle of "do no harm". It was not intended to facilitate events that would replace the formal tutorials, but was provided for students if they wanted it. And although students were encouraged to use it, and some activities were suggested, crucially their participation was not monitored. This design enabled the study specifically to engage with the debate about peer-learning set out in the *Introduction*, and to test whether and how far peer-learning should be organised.

After due ethical clearance, the study was implemented as set out in the next two subsections.

Online questionnaire

The questionnaire was administered in 2009, a few weeks before the end of the module-presentation. It was designed by the researcher specifically for this module, to gather students' responses about their experience of key aspects of the module – asynchronous forums, *Elluminate* tutorials, the student-only space, blogging, quizzes and workload.

The invitation to complete the questionnaire did not refer to the student-only space, and thus there is no reason to think it attracted a disproportionate number of participants with a special interest in the student-only sessions. The invitation was sent to 89 students, i.e. all those registered on the module apart from about 10 per cent who had to be excluded for administrative reasons.

Respondents were assured of anonymity. The questionnaire, though designed by the researcher, was administered by a department separate from him, and all responses were then aggregated and anonymised before being sent to him.

Phone/email follow-up

Although the questionnaire was anonymous, respondents were free to indicate whether, when they had completed the module, they would be willing to be interviewed. Of those who volunteered, five were chosen for follow-up.

The rationale for targeting them was that, of all the many technologies that students could choose to write about for their final major assignment, these five had chosen the live-voice conferencing environment and had also taken part in student-only sessions. It seemed likely, therefore, that they had a particular interest in this technology, had used it to a considerable extent, and – in the process of writing their assignment – would have already spent time reflecting on their experience. They could be expected to draw on this reflection during the interview.

Clearly these interviewees were not intended to be representative of the cohort; rather they might provide valuable insights into their own (possibly innovative) practice. By combining the in-depth probing of the interview, with the broader-based questionnaire, the research-design drew on the complementary strengths of each method as highlighted by, for example, Cohen and Manion (1985, p. 292). This was also in line with the point made by Wilson (1996), that structured data-collection methods such as questionnaires, and relatively unstructured methods (such as interviews of the kind used here), have differing strengths and weaknesses: “in no sense is it true to say that one...is more objective than the other” (p. 96).

In the case of three of the five volunteers, semi-structured one-to-one interviews were carried out by phone, and recorded. The same schedule of questions was sent via email to the two remaining volunteers.

This phone/email follow-up was carried out by the module leader (the researcher), but this did not happen until the students had received their final results. Interviewees could therefore be confident that their grades would not be affected by what they said in interview.

Limitations of the study

Holstein and Gubrium (2004) have argued that interviewees “are not so much repositories of knowledge – treasuries of information awaiting excavation – as they are constructors of knowledge in association with interviewers. Interviews are collaborative accomplishments...” (p. 141).

Such collaboration may have applied particularly to the interviews here, given that the interviewer/researcher was the leader of the module that the interviewees had been studying. That limitation was at least partially offset, however, in two ways. First, these common points of reference would enable interviewer and interviewee to explore topics in greater depth, and to understand each other

more immediately, in the limited timespan of an interview. Second, because of the design of this distance-learning module, the researcher had had little or no personal contact with the participants until he carried out the interviews after the module had ended. All the direct teaching during the module had been carried out by tutors.

A specific limitation of the study is that, although the questionnaire data provided a relatively broad base for the study, the number of interviews was low (i.e. five) because of resource-constraints. With more resources in future, it would be valuable to carry out more interviews, including with those who had decided not to participate much or at all in student-only sessions.

Findings

After a brief outline of the characteristics of the respondents, this section focuses on respondents' feedback on their student-only sessions, and then on interviewees' reports.

The questionnaire respondents

Fifty students responded to the questionnaire (56% response rate). Three-quarters were based in the UK, with most of the remainder in the European Union. In age they were distributed fairly evenly between 21 and 60 years (Table 1); and there were exactly equal numbers of females and males.

Table 1
Age of questionnaire respondents

Age-range	Number of respondents
21–30	8
31–40	13
41–50	16
51–60	13

Participation rates in live-voice tutorials

As stated earlier, each tutor led four live online tutorials. More than four out of five respondents reported taking part in Tutorial 1, and more than two-thirds in Tutorial 2 (Table 2).

Table 2
Reported participation in live-voice tutorials

	Number (%) of respondents participating in each tutorial
Tutorial 1	42 (84%)
Tutorial 2	34 (68%)
Tutorial 3	18 (36%)
Tutorial 4	16 (32%)
none of the above	3 (6%)

Participation rates in live-voice student-only sessions

Table 3 shows that well over half the respondents (29) reported taking part in one or more student-only sessions. One-third reported taking part in two or more sessions, with one of them taking part in more than six. To summarise, more respondents reported taking part in student-only sessions (Table 3) than in either Tutorial 3 or Tutorial 4 (Table 2).

Table 3
Reported participation in live-voice student-only sessions

Participation rate	Number (%) of respondents
Participated in 1 session	12 (26%)
Participated in 2–3 sessions	12 (26%)
Participated in 4–6 sessions	4 (9%)
Participated in >6 sessions	1 (2%)
Participated in 0 sessions	18 (38%)

Participants' comparisons of tutorials and student-only sessions

The twenty-nine respondents who participated in one or more student-only sessions were asked to respond to the following:

“Please tell us how far you agree or disagree with each of the following statements comparing your experience of tutor-led and student-led *Illuminate* events”

The statements, and respondents' levels of agreement on a Likert-type response scale, are shown in Table 4. Note that in the questionnaire, student-only sessions were described as “student-led”.

Table 4
Participants' comparisons of tutorials and student-only sessions

“Compared with tutor-led <i>Illuminate</i> tutorials...	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Agree strongly
a) ...our student-led <i>Illuminate</i> event(s) were more playful”	–	14%	34%	45%	7%
b) ...our student-led <i>Illuminate</i> event(s) enabled me to share ideas more easily”	–	17%	34%	34%	14%
c) ...our student-led <i>Illuminate</i> event(s) enabled me to ask questions more easily about things I did not understand”	4%	14%	36%	32%	14%
d) ...our student-led <i>Illuminate</i> event(s) were more intellectually stimulating”	3%	31%	48%	14%	3%
e) ...our student-led <i>Illuminate</i> event(s) were more clearly structured”	7%	66%	28%	–	–

Table 4 indicates that the majority of respondents tended to regard their student-only sessions as:

- more playful than the tutorials (a)
- easier spaces in which to share ideas (b) and to ask questions about things they did not understand (c).

Student-only sessions were not seen as more intellectually stimulating than tutorials; about half the respondents (48%) were neutral on this dimension (d).

In relation to clarity of structure, nearly three-quarters of respondents disagreed that the student-only sessions were more clearly structured (e). Although that finding does not in itself allow us to say that they saw the student-only sessions as *less* clearly structured, there is confirmation on this issue in other findings from the questionnaire, as reported in the next subsection.

Less clearly structured?

Respondents were asked:

“What, if anything, was distinctive about the student-led *Illuminate* events compared with the *Illuminate* tutorials led by your tutor?”

Since this question was open-ended, respondents were free to nominate any characteristic(s). Yet of the 23 who chose to respond, nearly half (11) referred implicitly or explicitly to the relative absence of structure. Three respondents were critical:

1. “Less structure [in student-only sessions] meant we went on too long without saying much. I think there needs to be a designated leader, even if that [...] changes on a rotation basis”
2. “When led by our tutor, [it] was more organized – giving participation for all”
3. “I found the student-led events extremely hard work, as all the responsibility for making the session work fell on us as students”

In contrast, eight respondents – while often appreciative of the tutorials – stated various positives about the relative absence of structure in the student-only sessions:

4. “[Student-only sessions were] less formal, more spontaneous; however, no better or worse than the tutor-led version”
5. “The tutor-led sessions had to be more structured and didn’t have time for [...] support therapy!”
6. “I didn’t find [...] the structure of the tutor-led sessions very useful, so the student-led sessions were a place to relax [...]”
7. “Tutor-led too restrictive and prescribed [sic] [...] especially in early sessions. Student-led sessions were only bound by time when people had [had] enough!”
8. “[In student-only sessions the] flow of conversation [was] less constrained by structure. Discussions were more dynamic in that they flowed in a less controlled way”
9. “On the whole the student-led events were not led but rather valuable free-ranging discussions with a healthy and useful degree of lateral thinking [...] If anything, they complemented the more structured tutor-led sessions [...]”
10. “[The student-only sessions were] less structured, with students choosing the focus of the discussion to meet their needs”
11. “There was more room [in student-only sessions] for development of ideas, and going off on a relevant tangent”

In Statements 4–7, respondents pointed to a general sense of informality or freedom in the student-only sessions. Respondents 8–11 focused on how the relative lack of structure influenced patterns of “discussion”, “thinking”, “ideas” – the more academic aspects of learning. Here the picture is of student-only spaces where respondents felt free to choose which ideas to discuss, and could then pursue them as they wished, including “lateral thinking” and “going off on a relevant tangent”. One reason for this relative ease of communication was the low number of participants in some groups, according to two further respondents:

12. “In the student-led session [fewer] students [attended], and this made the communication easier”
13. “In student-led *Illuminate*, we were two participants and it became easier to have ample time to exchange on specific, focused issues”

The remaining ten respondents – on this question of what, if anything, was distinctive about the student-only sessions – gave replies that were broadly consistent with the findings in Statements 4–11 above. Nearly all referred to one or both of the following themes: (a) the greater social dimension of the student-only sessions, and (b) the greater freedom to initiate a broad range of topics including study tips, the assignment, and practice-related questions – but sometimes at the expense of the in-depth discussion that respondents valued in the tutorials.

The above reports should not be taken to imply that there was no structure in the student-only sessions: turn-taking is an important part of interactions, even where these are apparently informal. But the respondents were highlighting a contrast between tutor-led sessions (with structured learning-activities) and the sessions that they managed themselves.

The questionnaire data answered the first research question (as set out in *The research questions* above). It also provided valuable insights in relation to the second research question, and these insights then provided the springboard for interview-questions that would probe the perceived similarities and differences between tutorials and student-only sessions. The questionnaire also provided data on some of

the ways in which respondents felt supported during the student-only sessions (the third research question); again, this informed the questions that were subsequently explored during interview, including those about ownership.

The interviewees

The interview-findings are set out below, in the same sequence as aspects of research questions 2–4. To preserve anonymity, the gender-neutral “s/he” and “their” are used.

Distinctive discussion?

As we have seen, the questionnaire responses had already highlighted a number of distinctive features of the student-only sessions, including their relatively relaxed atmosphere. Interviewee E stated what this meant personally, thus illustrating the findings in Table 4 (b) and (c):

I'm much more anxious when I go into...a tutorial...when it's more formal, because there's an expectation from me to join in. It's always a bit of a disaster...I think [in student-only sessions] people get more relaxed, and some...are more likely to ask the questions or give input...Or even just throw in a thought or opinion of their own...It's not that tutors...intimidate, but some students just seem to hold back.

Another distinctive feature relates to aspects of time. One of the questionnaire respondents had highlighted the fact that, in student-only sessions, students could stay in session as long as they wanted. The interviews provided data on two other time-related aspects – spontaneity, and pace during a session. In relation to spontaneity, for example, Interviewee A reported that their group of three set up a session “on the fly” to meet an urgent need. Interviewee D reported that the arrangements for their student-only session were “quite last-minute”. By definition, this is not possible with scheduled tutorials. In relation to pace during the session, Interviewee B valued the fact that s/he and a fellow student could choose their own fast pace, which contributed to a “meeting of like minds” in a discussion that s/he described as “avant-garde”.

Help with academic learning?

Four of the five interviewees reported that the student-only sessions helped with assignments. For example, Interviewee A described getting together with two other students to discuss “in quite some detail” how they were approaching an assignment. Interviewee C reported that in one session “we were sort of interviewing each other” about an assignment.

This discussion of assignments appeared to be compatible with a sense of intellectual energy. Interviewee A described their assignment-related session as “very exciting”. Interviewee D reported that, in a session related to an assignment topic:

We had one brilliant [discussion] where one of the group...put [Engeström's concept of mycorrhizae] into this graph...I think most of us had a dictionary out [...] but actually we loved it, because I'd turned it into *The Little Shop of Horrors*...But it was how we got our head round it.

The topic of mycorrhizae had already been presented to students through a module-activity where they had read an Engeström paper and taken part in a tutor-led discussion. But, as demonstrated in that quotation, this small group now came at the topic in their own way – using a fresh approach.

Academic learning was not confined to discussions of assignments: Interviewee C reported that one student discussed their blog where they had been writing about a key aspect of the module's content – and about “their feelings about a paper”. Interviewee E reported that the less experienced students asked for study tips such as “What is expected of me?” and “Do I have to do all the activities?”, seeking advice on how to manage the workload, how to be a student on this module.

A source of support?

For Interviewee A it was “vitaly important” that the student-only space was available at all times for motivation and support, for the “steam release” of tensions, and for the sociability that “reduced the

distance to nothing”. Interviewee C reported that, in their sessions, they rarely if ever discussed personal matters, whereas E reported that they quite often discussed such matters, providing “really good support, a good connection”. For Interviewee D the sessions provided “moral support”.

Dovetailing with social media?

When Interviewee A and two other students were tweeting about a module-topic, they decided to move “right there and then” into the student-only *Elluminate* space in the LMS. Two other interviewees also reported that they used *Twitter* to set up their *Elluminate* sessions.

Interviewee C recounted how, for later sessions, the group switched from *Elluminate* (in the LMS) to *Skype* largely because they preferred certain features of that interface. S/he appeared to be agnostic about whether to hold student-only sessions inside or outside the LMS. The decision was not “ideological”, Interviewee C said: “I don’t think we went [to Skype] because we had some kind of political feeling about The Open University owning the [*Elluminate*] space”.

Interviewee D used *Facebook* for work, but preferred the rhythm and live-voice of *Elluminate* (“you hear accents”). For Interviewee E, the student-only space was “almost like a live chatroom”.

Ownership?

Interviewees were asked how far, if at all, they felt a sense of ownership of the student-only sessions.

Interviewee A commented, “we definitely felt an enhanced sense of ownership [compared with the tutorials], not just for the session itself, but for our learning and sense-making in the course as a whole, and in our cohesiveness as a group”. S/he attributed this to “my personal sense of engagement, control and reward”.

Interviewee B stated that “I feel like I ‘owned’ the student-led experience more [than the tutorials] because I got to choose what was discussed and manage the time in a way that felt comfortable to me”. However, B continued that “I think that in the end, the only part of the learning experience...that I feel I walk away owning is the [assignments]”.

For Interviewee C, the driver for the sessions could ultimately be traced back to the requirements of the module, and particularly the assessment. This interviewee gave a nuanced insight into the experience of being a student:

When you are a student, you are saying to an institution, ‘I am prepared to go through this period of submission to your framework...because I think doing that will...in the long run...make me more able to think *outside* your framework’. Isn’t that...the contract?

Interviewee D stated that the student-only sessions were “probably following the [module] agenda...we knew we’d got these targets...these deadlines to meet”.

For Interviewee E, the sessions were “done for our needs”; however, “I don’t know that we owned [them] but I think we possibly had more confidence and were more relaxed”.

Discussion

The extent to which participants used the student-only space

One-third (17) of questionnaire respondents returned for at least a second student-only session (and in some cases for several more), which suggests they found their first experience valuable. Even where they did not return, this may not have been because of a negative experience: for example, one of the five interviewees was enthusiastic about the pace and range of topics in their one and only session, which s/he described as “avant-garde”.

It seems likely that the study under-reported the frequency of participation in student-only sessions. For external reasons, the questionnaire was administered a few weeks before the end of the module. It could therefore not capture participation during those final few weeks, yet one of the interviewees stated that this was the period when s/he took part in several further sessions with two or three other students – as the

cut-off date for the final major assignment (with its obvious pressures) was approaching. This pattern may have been true of other students. Another interviewee had not initially realised the sessions were available, and said: “If I had my time again, I would have tried to initiate them a lot earlier”.

Nevertheless it is important to recognise that 38% of respondents reported they did not attend any student-only sessions, even though they participated in at least one tutorial in the same environment. This finding could be used to support Boud’s argument (2001, p. 10) that peer-learning should be organised rather than left up to students, on the grounds that such organisation could increase participation.

On the other hand, the study found much evidence that students relished their freedom to fix sessions when they wanted, with whom they chose, on topics that mattered to them. If we adopt Havnes’s analysis (2008), it is important that the students in this study had the freedom to use – or not use – the student-only space to create “partly self-made niches” (p. 197). He argues, drawing on activity theory, that there will always be an important difference between teacher-organised peer-learning on the one hand, and peer-mediated learning on the other. For Havnes (2008), it is crucial for students to experience learning at or just outside the boundary of the formal curriculum, if they are to become fully independent learners and adults.

He was focusing on academic and social rites of passage for first-year undergraduates at a conventional university, but we can develop his analysis and apply it to the participants in the current study. The findings suggest that, during their student-only sessions, some of the participants were learning to be Master’s students, learning to be online students, and learning to juggle the conflicting pressures often faced by part-time students. Although not within the formal curriculum, this learning may have been crucial for these students’ success.

Differences between student-only sessions and the tutorials

A number of differences have already been highlighted, and one such – timing – will be discussed here. As we have seen, the sessions could be set up speedily (“quite last-minute”, “on the fly”) by small groups of students with an urgent requirement that they had articulated with a few peers. Tutorials, on the other hand, while lacking this agility and spontaneity, have other strengths – including the presence of the teacher (by definition) and the potential for a different and more structured form of interaction. And in relation to scheduling, the relative inflexibility of tutorials may bring its own advantages: one interviewee, for example, highlighted the value of tutorials in providing fixed times across the study-year when s/he felt pressure to engage with key parts of the formal curriculum.

Another aspect of “time” relates to the pacing during a session. We have seen evidence that participants enjoyed being able to take their time to explore a topic. De Freitas and Neumann (2009) reported that the synchronous nature of web-conferencing “may not leave sufficient time for reflection, *especially in a tutor-paced scenario* that puts restraints on student control” (p. 988; emphasis added). The current study found that participants valued student-paced discussions – whether fast or slow – as part of their study-mix, while also valuing the tutorials for their own distinctive characteristics.

Academic benefits

One of the most important findings of the study was the enthusiasm with which a substantial number of questionnaire respondents, and most interviewees, described the academic dimension of the student-only sessions. This applied, whether students were discussing an assignment, or ranging expansively over territory of their choice, or finding a novel way to approach a prescribed topic (the mycorrhizae discussion, for example).

This contrasts with much of the literature in the *Introduction*. The studies reported there found that many of their respondents did not make a connection between their use of social networks and their formal learning. In the current study, in contrast, many respondents reported a strong connection between their use of student-only sessions – which provided some of the control and freedom of social networks – and their formal study.

But it is also worth reminding ourselves that lone learners, though currently unfashionable (and somewhat overlooked in the sociocultural paradigm), can also experience a kind of control and freedom. For example, when Gynnild, Holstad and Myrhaug (2008) wrote of the benefits for students of “the rewarding feelings of being in charge of their own learning” (p. 159), they were not necessarily advocating student–student interaction. On the contrary, they found that the students who achieved the highest grades did not often collaborate with peers (*ibid.*, p. 152), but instead were able to monitor their own progress and self-regulate their learning. Lone learners warrant further discussion at another time, but meanwhile the study by Gynnild et al. (*ibid.*) is a salutary warning against a mono-paradigmatic pedagogy.

Support, and participants’ use of social media

The questionnaire and interviews provided substantial evidence that participants valued the sessions for their moral/emotional support, including an opportunity for “steam release”. That phrase is very similar to a report from one of Greenhow and Robelia’s high-school informants (2009), who said that sharing feelings in *MySpace* about assignment-pressure was “kind of me venting” (p. 1141). There were other parallels between the student-only space and social media – for example, the interviewee who described the student-only space as “almost like a live chatroom”. The fact that interviewees used *Twitter* to set up student-only sessions in the LMS, and the fact that an interviewee indicated that their group’s migration from LMS-based *Elluminate* to *Skype* was purely pragmatic, suggests a relaxed dovetailing and overlapping between participants’ use of their own tools and their use of the student-only space.

Ownership

When Downes (2006) stated that “the students own education”, he appeared to predict that the teacher’s role would become less central as students increasingly created personal learning environments outside an institution. Five years later his conceptualisation seemed less polarised: the role of teachers was still significant, but in the looser clustering of a MOOC rather than an LMS. Teachers would have multi-faceted roles as designers, curators, coaches, evaluators and so on – working with learners who would use blogs and other tools to create as much learning as their teachers did (Downes, 2011). Ownership and creativity would be shared.

That earlier “PLE versus LMS” polarisation was, arguably, always an exaggeration. The evidence from the current study is that participants felt considerable control and ownership even though the student-only space was located inside the LMS. Moreover we have seen evidence of participants moving easily between their own tools/networks and the student-only space in the LMS, regarding them as overlapping or even interchangeable. The study provides substantial evidence that the *location* of a tool – is it inside or outside an LMS? – does not in itself determine how far students feel ownership.

The real determinant is not who owns the tool but who owns the accreditation. The interviewees understood this in a number of ways. Although they expressed their sense of control of “our learning and sense-making”, to quote one of them, it was also clear that the module’s assessment requirements – its “agenda”, in the words of another interviewee – provided the framework and ultimate driver for many of their student-only sessions. The shaping power of assessment and accreditation is not, of course, news (see Biggs, 2003, among others). But although this can sound leaden and instrumental, it can also have a liberationist inflection if we recall the words of a third interviewee: s/he was prepared to work within the framework of the module’s assessment “because I think doing that will... in the long run... make me more able to think *outside* your framework”.

For the institutions and teachers that provide such frameworks, the environment has changed fast in the past few years. Some commentators expected that PLEs, underpinned by students’ use of social software, would lessen the power of institutions and would radically extend educational opportunity; “credit” would be earned on the internet by accolade, by number of site-visits and by peer-approval. But in many cases, rather than making institutions weaker, these new sources of learning have encouraged teachers to make the boundaries of their courses more permeable. Teachers have been stimulated to incorporate “the participatory culture of the web and the informal learning that it cultivates” – as advocated by Bass (2012, p. 27), and as illustrated in the current study.

Practical implications for teachers

For practitioners wishing to include a student-only space in their LMS, the study delivers a number of pointers. One of these is the importance of ensuring that students know the space is there and is intended for them. This may require teachers to find more than one route for disseminating the information, given how easy it is for time-pressed students to miss something that is stated only once.

Second, if the tool is unfamiliar to students, it is important to provide guidance such as support-notes and/or demonstration-videos. In the current study, the tool for the student-only sessions was the same as for the tutorials, and therefore students' investment in learning to use it had an obvious double-benefit.

Third, it is worth explaining (early in the course) some of the potential rewards – not only the social support but also the academic benefits. Quotations from previous cohorts can be persuasive.

Fourth, given that some respondents disliked the lack of structure in the student-only sessions, it can be useful to (a) prepare students for the fact that they will need to manage the sessions and (b) reduce possible intimidation by pointing out that sessions with just two or three students, where the dynamics are likely to be relatively straightforward, can be very beneficial.

Beyond these practical pointers, practitioners may well find ways of aligning the student-only space with more fundamental aspects of their module's design. For example, in the current study, students' use and evaluation of a range of tools (including, if they wished, the student-only space) were closely related to the learning outcomes.

In deciding how to design a student-only space into their teaching, practitioners will come to their own judgements – based on their knowledge of their students and their pedagogical inclination – as to whether to organise their students' usage or, alternatively, to offer them the student-only space and allow them to use it or ignore it. This latter approach (broadly in line with Havnes, 2008) clearly informed the design at the centre of the current study.

Finally, although it was not an issue in this study, practitioners and institutions may need to consider whether and how their LMS can support such spaces, and how this relates to institutional policy on tools supplied by the institution and tools that students find for themselves. To provide an institution-wide approach, the paper by Bass (2012), quoted above, provides an admirable conceptual framework.

Further research

As stated earlier, over one-third of respondents reported that they did not use the student-only space (even though they participated in at least one tutorial). If a future study similarly discovered that a substantial proportion of students did not participate, it would be very valuable to explore their reasons. For example, were they reluctant to take "all the responsibility for making the session work", to echo the phrase of one of the current respondents? Were they unwilling to take part because the sessions were not assessed, and/or because the respondents felt no need to have further interaction with peers?

The current study also found that, for several interviewees, their use of their own tools dovetailed and overlapped with their use of the student-only space. A future study should explore this further to determine the distinctive and complementary roles of social networks and LMS-based spaces.

The answers to those questions would have much to say about how we design our teaching, and about the debates on peer-learning that have been highlighted in this paper.

Conclusion

A number of studies have shown that many students are not making (perhaps are unwilling to make) a connection between their social networking and their formal learning. This is a loss, given how much time and energy many of them readily devote to social networking and other social media, and given the communication-skills that they may develop by doing so. There have been a number of attempts to

remedy the disconnection – including examples of teachers using *Facebook* to engage students – with varying success.

The study reported in this paper was based on a different design, but with the similar aim of harnessing the energy of social media. Students were provided with a live-voice space, for their exclusive use, within an LMS. The space had some of the attributes of a social network: students were largely free to use it (or ignore it) as they wished, and they could interact with other students at times that suited them. One aim of the study, therefore, was to discover if they would use it, given that they had alternative tools – tools that they were perhaps already using – outside the LMS. And if they did use it, would they feel ownership of a space that – through its location in the LMS – was in some ways institutional?

These questions were linked to more theoretical debates about whether peer-learning needs to be organised (as Boud, 2001, has argued), or whether students should be left to create “partly self-made niches” (Havnes, 2008). The study found that a substantial proportion of the participants used and valued the LMS student-only space for its sociability, informality and sense of freedom – and because it supported their learning. Many of these reported that they used the student-only sessions to:

- find fresh ways of engaging with topics from the module
- provide each other with moral support
- share professional practice
- explore forthcoming assignments.

In relation to the debate about peer-learning, the findings are not clear-cut. In favour of Havnes’s (2008) position, we should note that many of the participants appeared to relish the freedom to choose the timing, the pacing, the (in)formality and the subject-matter of their own sessions. And those students (a little over one-third) who did not take part in student-only sessions were also, in their own way, exercising their freedom to choose.

Practitioners’ positions – on the question of whether and how to create student-only spaces in an LMS – will be at least partly rooted in their pedagogical inclinations. Nevertheless the findings provide powerful encouragement for them to consider including such spaces. This would also be consistent with Bass’s advocacy (2012, p. 32) that higher education must harness the “participatory culture” of the web if it is to disrupt itself – and, ultimately, if it is to survive and thrive.

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