

MEETING STUDENT EXPECTATIONS: ARE THEY ALREADY IN CONTROL?

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ABSTRACT

There has been a considerable amount of interest by many stakeholders in the ways in which new generations of learners increasingly view technology as central to everyday life, leading to speculation about what this expectation might mean for formal education. Such speculation has often been based on anecdotal, rather than empirical, evidence. To counteract this, recent studies have set out to investigate more closely learners' attitudes towards, and use of, technology for learning. This paper describes one such study, the Learner Experience of e-Learning (LEX), which aimed to explore how learners in further, higher, and adult and community learning contexts use technology effectively to support their learning. The findings indicate that learners are adopting various strategies to ensure they retain a degree of control and choice over how, why and when they engage with technology for learning.

INTRODUCTION

Encouraged by government strategy, technological advances and changing student and employer expectations, universities and colleges now invest considerable portions of their budgets in implementing technology to support learning. A significant part of this spend goes towards institutional virtual learning environments which provide a secure and homogeneous online space for course information, digital resources, communication and e-assessment (Browne et al, 2008). Meanwhile, outside the formal learning environment, the socio-technical landscape is experiencing rapid change and new generations of students are growing up with technology as a central feature of their everyday lives (Seely Brown, 2000).

Many commentators have speculated on what this might mean for formal education, predicting that the learning and teaching environment will need to change dramatically if it is to address the expectations of these digitally literate learners (e.g. Prensky, 2001, 2006; Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Others are less convinced, pointing to the unnecessary 'moral panic' that such conjectures promote (Bennett et al, 2008). Despite the relatively short history of technology enhanced learning, speculation on its potentially revolutionary impact is not a new phenomenon. It was captured effectively by Mayes (1995) who likened it to the film Groundhog Day in which the main protagonist had to re-live one day in his life several times over in an unsuccessful attempt to change its outcome. Mayes asserts that,

"We are frequently excited by the promise of a revolution in education, through the implementation of technology. ... yet curiously, tomorrow never comes." (1995: 21)

Nevertheless from an institutional perspective, the advent of Web 2.0 technology, 3D virtual worlds, the widespread use of mobile devices and the ever increasing number of freely available social software tools have opened up

a huge range of options for students, and as such, can be viewed as major challenges to institutional control (Anderson, 2007). In order to provide the optimal learning environment for students, it is vital for both institutions and teachers to be better informed about learners' experiences and expectations of technology for learning.

Recognising this, the UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) began a new research focus by commissioning a scoping study of the relevant literature (Sharpe, Benfield, Lessner & De Cicco, 2005). This revealed that the great majority of technology enhanced learning studies presented a tutor or institutional perspective, with very few adopting a completely learner-centred viewpoint. It also highlighted that most of the research had been carried out in a higher education context, with other post-16 sectors poorly represented.

"There is a dearth of studies into how learners in mainstream post-compulsory learning experience the increasingly ubiquitous use of e-learning technologies and approaches within a generally campus-based learning context." (Sharpe et al, 2005: p3)

In acknowledgement of the fact that technology for learning is only one aspect of usage, the scoping study recommended a holistic approach to researching the learner experience which would look beyond the confines of individual programmes of study or specific technologies to encompass the full impact of the digital age on the lives of post-16 learners. The Learner Experience of e-Learning (LEX) study was the first to take up the challenge (Creanor et al, 2006, 2008).

This paper will begin by outlining the innovative research methodology which underpinned the study before going on to provide a flavour of some of the key themes which emerged from learners' accounts of their lived experiences. Finally, it will reflect on how an appreciation of the learner perspective may help us to move towards a more collaborative approach to the co-creation of knowledge and educational resources through the effective use of technology.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The four members of the research team brought complementary perspectives to the study, representing both higher education (Glasgow Caledonian University) and the further education and adult and community learning sectors (The Open Learning Partnership, London). Further valuable insight and guidance was provided by the original scoping study team and the experienced LEX project consultant. Given the holistic nature of the study and the clear focus on personal experience, it was agreed that a grounded theoretical approach was required. A decision was taken to adopt an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) methodology which had previously been used in the psychology and health disciplines (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). IPA depends on a very open interview method, and to ensure that learning technology remained central to the discussion we also implemented a new technique in the form of 'Interview Plus'¹ whereby a digital learning artefact such as a blog, discussion board or web

¹ The term Interview Plus was first coined by Helen Beetham, consultant to the JISC e-pedagogy strand

resource was introduced towards the end of an interview to re-focus discussion around the participant's current learning experience.

IPA seeks to explore lived experience by eliciting detailed personal stories. It is based on the premise that individuals are expert in their own experience, and as such, will provide valid accounts. Its interpretive nature means that evidence should emerge from an interpretation of the participant's account rather than from previously established hypotheses. We did not begin the LEX study with any pre-conceived assumptions therefore, but rather allowed the participants to bring to the fore aspects of their experience which held particular significance for them. (Smith & Osborne, 2003).

The 55 participants (55% female and 44% male) represented 3 universities, 4 further education colleges and 2 adult and community learning providers from Scotland, England and Northern Ireland. They ranged in age from 17 to over 60, with the majority (89%) rating themselves as confident or partly confident computer users.

Through a robust process of analysis, the extensive data was gradually refined to a series of high level categories which captured key emerging themes under the headings of life, formal learning, technology, people, and time. Below these were a further five sub-categories of control, identity, feelings, relationships and abilities. Table 1 shows an extract from the conceptual framework which illustrates the intersections between the categories, each of which is evidenced by learner quotes.

	Control	Identity	Feelings	Relationships	Abilities
GYTECHNOLO	It's the same way with learning to use computers and software packages... It tends to be very hands-on and people like to just touch it and feel it and experience it. A friend of mine bought a new phone last week and she spent the entire day ... just exploring it, do you know, working out how everything works and what way you want it to work for you. It's very much an interactive touchy-feely thing.	I'm beginning to rely less and less on other people showing me what to do. Instead of being afraid of technology on the computer, I'm beginning to learn, well its not as bad as it seems, take your time, if you make a mistake it doesn't matter, just do it again.	Because to me a ... design is a creation like a painting or you know, drawing and if I did it on the computer it would sort of lose, I think it would look too clinical.	...so my [group] we always text each other and say, oh are you coming in at this time or we'll meet at this time and so it looks on the face of it from the university website that we haven't been communicating all year but we have, it's just outside of that board...	You get a wee boost the first time you do something, you get a 'oh right, I've done that myself' and then you get that wee confidence boost and you'll go to the next step, you know. The first time you kind of hit a brick wall ... you go 'aargh' but when you do it the first time you think 'I did that' and then move onto the next thing. It's definitely worth it.

Table 1: Extract from the conceptual framework

The remainder of the paper will focus on a just a few of these key themes with a particular focus on issues relating to learner control and choice. A more extensive description and critique of the methodology can be found in the LEX Methodology Report (Mayes, 2006).

LEARNERS' VIEWS

Generations

Our sample reflected the fact that the student population is not as homogeneous as some commentators might lead us to believe. Yet despite the diversity in educational contexts and demographic profiles, the data analysis revealed several commonly recurring themes. Unsurprisingly perhaps, generational differences were expressed in a way which indicated that the participants were highly aware of their contrasting attitudes towards, and experiences of, technology.

"... you take it for granted because our generation has grown up with it ... it's always been there and we'll just use it." Lynsey, young undergraduate student

The variation in levels of familiarity appeared less marked in the formal learning context however and did not appear to be viewed as a major barrier. Indeed several learners reported that, while they may have lacked confidence with technology at the start of their course, they believed they were now using it as effectively as their peers.

"I'm beginning to rely less and less on other people showing me what to do. Instead of being afraid of technology on the computer, I'm beginning to learn, well it's not as bad as it seems, take your time, if you make a mistake it doesn't matter, just do it again." Michele, mature trade union online learner

"It's actually helping me with my kids as well because ... now we can discuss things and look at things together, without it going right over my head."
Paul, mature undergraduate

This sense of achievement was reported by learners as beneficial, not only to their learning, but also to their sense of self-esteem. The fact that a by-product was often the creation of closer connections with peers, friends and family was seen as an added bonus.

Ownership Issues

The use of personal mobile devices, particularly phones and laptops, was widespread amongst participants, with 86% describing themselves as frequent mobile phone users. This in itself was not unexpected, however what was striking was the depth of attachment and ownership expressed by the learners.

"I couldn't live without my mobile phone ..."

"Mobile phones are another way of communicating because everyone has a mobile phone on them ..."

"I use my laptop, I take it away, it's attached to me, I couldn't survive without it ..."

"I always have my phone and iPod with me ..."

Nevertheless, beyond contacting fellow learners to arrange meetings or to seek some course-related information, there was little evidence that participants were using their mobile phones, PDAs or iPods to support learning. Indeed very mixed views were expressed at the idea of downloading learning-related podcasts or receiving text messages from tutors, with several suggesting that they would see this as an infringement of their personal devices which they had carefully customised to suit their own needs. Others recognised the potential benefits and welcomed the opportunity to access learning resources more flexibly. Where participants did choose to take advantage of their personal devices to support learning, they often did so in unexpected ways, which, from a lecturer's perspective, could even be viewed as subversive.

"We've made a promise that if one of us isn't there, we'll record the lecture for them and send them it later." (Lynsey, first year undergraduate)

Overall, participants displayed very strong preferences. These attitudes may be partially due to the fact that only 4 of the 55 learners interviewed had actually experienced learning on a mobile device, and therefore had a limited understanding of how it might be applied. Nevertheless, the strong feelings expressed suggest that we should not take for granted learners' acceptance of their personal devices being exploited for formal learning purposes.

Finding and Sharing Resources

The participants made it clear that the internet was their first port of call for all types of information, including academic resources. At the same time however, they recognised that the validity of these resources could be questionable.

"You never know if the knowledge is actually good or not, so I'm always worried that I'm handing something in which is completely just one guy's opinion, but it looks really professional, but maybe he's a complete liar...."

Laura, young first year undergraduate

Participants recognised that they needed support from their tutors to make such judgements. There was also a perception that although younger learners might be more adept at using online resources, the mature learners adopted a more balanced approach and were prepared to use a wider range of resources.

"...with the generation nowadays there's more tendency to rely on the computer, whereas with me, I will use a computer but I realise it's a tool, not the be all and end all, and I also go and get books. I think that's where the big difference lies with my reports." Paul, mature undergraduate

It was evident that for many of the participants, creating and sharing resources with peers, friends and family was also commonplace.

"I would take thirty, forty photos in one evening and before I even go to bed that night I upload them onto my Messenger page and everyone I know, all my friends, at night, they just go straight onto my Messenger"

page and all my photos are online then." Emma, young undergraduate student

There was little supporting evidence to suggest that this type of activity was being transferred to the formal learning context. What was reported however was a strong sense of commitment to sharing information with fellow learners within the framework of collaborative learning activities.

"On the discussion board ... it's sharing information with others. As the data builds up on it each year the students come along and they can ... share that same bank of information." Undergraduate focus group member

The creation of multimedia materials such as video and audio files was less widespread among participants but when it was reported, it was often with the specific purpose of sharing with friends and family. This type of activity generally took place outside their institutional learning environments and was not acknowledged or recognised by tutors, suggesting that there may be scope for building on such skills by promoting more effectively the co-creation of shared resources for learning.

Learner choices

Where learners were less convinced of either the value of online activities or the technology used, they often chose to opt out.

"You can also if you want, have a discussion over [the VLE] but I tend not to use it because, well, the teachers take a while to get back and it's not very personal 'cos everyone can read what you write." Alan, third year undergraduate

Neither was this solely the preserve of younger learners. Mature learners also expressed strong views about their engagement with learning activities and were prepared to undermine their tutor's expectations by making personal choices about how much or how little they would contribute.

"You can choose I find, you can interact as much as you like or you can do the minimum, particularly if its activity based, so if you've got to prove that you've been in the discussion forums you just keep that to a minimum to prove you've done it." Rebecca, mature ACL learner

Participants frequently reported by-passing the institutional systems which tutors expected them to use, and instead switched to other preferred modes of communication such as instant messaging, texting, or social software sites such as Facebook or Bebo.

There was strong evidence that where learning was deliberately designed to encourage autonomy, learners reported that their engagement was more intense and that their learning was significantly enhanced. The learning log or e-portfolio approach provided one such example.

"[The learning log] is probably the most enjoyable bit I've done. It's your own learning, it's all what you write which is ... more interesting to you."

You can relate it to your own experiences and ... you've got a free role, you can write whatever you want ... there's no wrong answer 'cos it's how you interpret it." Nick, undergraduate student

There was also evidence that this sense of engagement and ownership had a wider, positive, influence on learners' self-directed learning strategies.

"the learning [log] obviously was for one course but I found myself applying it to all my other disciplines and courses and bringing everything together into it." Undergraduate focus group member

In direct contrast, other more prescriptive learning tasks often engendered frustration with the structure and pace of online activities, and once again the learners made it clear that they had a sophisticated awareness of the balance of power.

"... it just depends on how the course provider lays out the course and how they allow you to access the course because of course they still control how you learn and at what pace you learn, even though access tends to be controlled by me. Obviously, they don't dictate you must be there every Tuesday between 9 and 11 for instance. That's the part that you can control, the rest of it is up to the course provider." Rebecca, mature trade union learner

The impact of effective course design in affording student control and developing learner autonomy is a central issue for both learners and tutors. Achieving the right balance is challenging, but participants were unambiguous in their view that face-to-face and technology-enhanced learning activities should go "hand-in-hand" and that the tutor remained central to their e-learning experience.

"This kind of technology is only as good as the tutor that's behind it." Kirsten, postgraduate student

CONCLUSION

As a limited one year study LEX cannot claim to speak for all learners, but by taking a deep approach to researching individual experiences it has achieved its aim of providing a platform for learners to describe their feelings, attitudes and approaches towards technology for learning. It has provided valuable evidence to inform our growing understanding of how a wide range of post-16 learners are exploiting both institutional and personal technologies in support of learning and established that the effective use of technology is not solely the preserve of younger generation. Given the disproportionate increase in mature learners in higher education (Mayes, 2007) this is an important issue. The LEX Final Report also underlines the significance of control and choice in the learner experience, stating that,

"Heightened enthusiasm was evident in their voices as they described how they made decisions over technologies, learning environments and approaches to study. Indeed, where these opportunities were not available, learners took delight in describing the strategies they had adopted to circumvent recommended guidelines. There was clear

evidence of the impact on motivation which such a strong sense of ownership provides.” (Creanor et al, 2006: 27)

Overall the findings indicate that despite variations in background and experience, learners display the following common characteristics when using technology effectively for learning:

- they are highly motivated and are prepared to make significant efforts to overcome technical barriers
- they learn to deal with strong emotional reactions towards technology
- they are highly skilled networkers, knowing who to contact as well as where and how to find information and support
- they are prepared to make their own decisions about which technologies to use, and how and when to use them
- they are creators of a new ‘underworld’ of digital communication which is mainly invisible to tutors, and which often blurs the boundaries between life, leisure and learning.

Increasing evidence points to the fact that empowering learners can enhance learning through deepening engagement and encouraging self-directed learning (Rust et al, 2003; Nicol, 2006). By **acknowledging** learner use of personal technologies, **involving** learners more in the design of learning activities & assessments, and **integrating** learner-created resources, we can build on and learn from the wide-ranging technological skills and strategies which learners increasingly display. This, of course, presupposes a high degree of trust and mutual understanding among learners, tutors and peers.

“For me, I would just expect people who'd committed to the course to do the course, and to speak up if they've got problems. It's just the basics of life: be nice to one another, don't condemn anyone because they did something differently or they asked a dumb question. I wouldn't expect [the tutor] to have to monitor the forum, I would expect it almost to be self-monitoring ...” (Jenny, ACL learner)

Evidence from LEX suggests that our learners may be prepared, but it seems that we have some way to go before we are in a position to fully meet their evolving expectations.

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