Delivering What Students say They Want On-Line: Towards Academic Participation in the Enfranchisement of e-Learners?

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Abstract: Sustainable e-Learning holds the promise of enabling higher education to meet the needs of a large and diverse market. Central to this is the response of academic staff teams in meeting the needs of individual learners, in order to enfranchise them within an evolving, enabling learning context. Enfranchisement is underpinned by the management of learner-expectations in the value-added nature of the on-line learning experience. However, learner-enfranchisement demands that on-line interaction is both accepted by academic teams and educationally liberating. Liberation requires meaningful existence, and hence active participation, within a 'supercomplex' world, in which both individual identities and the ability to manage information are tested.

This paper assesses ways in which learner-enfranchisement can be encouraged by academic teams. It pivots around the outcomes from student evaluations of a strategic e-Learning implementation in one UK higher education institution. The conclusions that it draws focus upon strategies for adding pedagogic value, increasing academic participation and developing e-Learning sustainability in order to enfranchise e-learners. The argument highlights ways in which academic teams can move from a battery-intensive approach to e-Learning towards one that is more free-ranging. It highlights how academic staff can increase the sustainable, inclusive value of the learning experience at a minimised cost. From this basis, it is argued that any extant disenfranchisement in the delivery of e-Learning can begin to be addressed by increased team-work. A by-product for those teams is that in the very process of engaging their students, there is more hope that they will in-turn become empowered within their own use of e-Learning.

Keywords: Academic participation; Learner-enfranchisement; Teamwork; Sustainability

1. Introduction

Oliver and Trigwell (2005) argue that the project of embedding e-Learning within an overarching learning and teaching ethos should hinge upon variation theory (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005), where the constructed learning space affords 'the critical patterns of variation in topics… that lead to learning' (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005: 23). Crucially Oliver and Trigwell (2005: 24) argue for 'exploring change from the perspective of the learner', rather than through the focus on teaching as is the case with 'blended learning'.

However, the need to explore the learner's view of change pivots around the interventionist roles of academics and the epistemological spaces that they create. In turn, these spaces are being shaped by the corporate acceleration of new technologies and processes that promote sustainability. Littlejohn (2004: 91) defines sustainability as 'the design and development of on-line courses that could easily be updated or scaled up', and the Higher Education Funding Council for England's 'Strategy for eLearning' (HEFCE, 2005: 2) endorses institutional, strategic approaches that are sustainable.

The management of innovation is crucial for academic staff, who need to recognise the intrinsic value of any change to be embedded (Lines, 2004; Taylor 1999). However, in the move towards a sustainable, corporate dynamic, there is a risk that disengaged staff may become lost. Thus, a central thread for building pedagogic value through sustainable e-Learning developments is connecting academic participation to learner-engagement. Greener and Perriton (2005: 78) note that

> *If meaningful learning communities are to be built in e-Learning contexts of this type, then they will demand of their members more than functional, teleological behaviour, and must find ways of harnessing technology to foster greater interactivity. Improvements in technology mean there is great scope for the democratisation of learning.*

Taking variation theory's learner-centred focus, this paper evaluates the theme of academic participation in light of student perceptions of their engagement with e-Learning. The argument highlights the connections between the enfranchisement of e-learners and the development of academic teams, with respect to one UK University. From this basis, it is argued that the sustainability of e-Learning, driven by the creation of shared, enabling learning environments can begin to be addressed by enhanced team-work.

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2. Learner enfranchisement

2.1 Notions of enfranchisement

It has been argued that where learners feel enfranchised through their 'increasing influence… on learning provision' (EdExcel, 2004) they are more likely to engage in specific activities or scenarios. Freire (1972: 52) argued the same point when noting that 'Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it.' This theme of enfranchisement via increased freedom-of-action requires engagement with the social context in which it takes place, and therefore builds a sense of belonging. It stems from empowerment rather than coercion.

For Barnett (1997), empowerment is rooted in an individual's critical life, where a framework of rules or values enables a learner to act reflexively. However, in relation to e-Learning and variation theory, the generation of a reflexive approach also demands that individuals have personalised access to collaborative, epistemological spaces, where they feel able to discern and manage difference (Oliver and Trigwell, 2005). This is crucial for Bowden and Marton (2003: 129) who state that 'students need to experience variation precisely because you cannot predict in advance what they will have to deal with as professionals'.

Central to the management of variation is freedom-of-action within a context where all actors are incorporated with agreed rights and responsibilities. This connects into Sachs' view of engagement within a civil society (2000: 137).

> *A strong civil society protects liberty because it diffuses the centres of power. It creates fraternity because it encourages people to work together as neighbours and friends. It promotes equality because it tempers self-help with help to others, and because the help given to others is such as to encourage their participation and eventually independence.*

For learners, the mode of incorporation into these socials spaces enables them to make sense of the world and therefore become independent.

This ties into Barnett's discussion of 'supercomplexity' within university life (Barnett, 2000), where multiple critical frameworks for the analysis of information and discourse are in competition. The ability to forge innovative and secure approaches to the critique of both knowledge and the frameworks that help us to interpret it, is crucial for the development of learning. Thus, managing 'supercomplexity' and promoting enfranchisement requires contextual variation (McKnight, 1977) and the selfless support for each individual's management of their own learning on their own terms (Illich, 1971), through a process of incorporation into a self-regulating community. However, both learners and tutors have to want enfranchisement.

2.2 Enfranchising e-Learners: Battery-farmed or free ranging?

The UK Government's Department for Education and Skills presented a positivist view that e-Learning will be a socio-economic panacea for individuals and society through the deployment of radical new pedagogies (DfES, 2003a; DfES, 2003b). Zemsky and Massy critiqued this view and argued (2004: 52) that 'For the most part, faculty who make e-Learning a part of their teaching do so by having the electronics simplify tasks, not by fundamentally changing how the subject is taught.'

The students interviewed by Zemsky and Massey articulated three key components of e-Learning that they valued: 'They want to be connected, principally to one another. They want to be entertained, principally by games, music, and movies. And they want to present themselves and their work' (2004: 51). In light of this, the authors highlight successful e-Learning experiences that reflect these everyday, real-world practices. These include problem-based group-work within a 'physically intact learning community' (2004: 51), with the close involvement of the tutor acting as a facilitator. Hence, presenting, developing and evaluating a scenario, activity or product that reflects the students' assumptions and expectations is crucial.

Ip (2004a) agrees and argued that 'the real promise of e-Learning is not [as] an on-line textbook, but a simulator… My approach would be to build engaging scenarios at critical moments in a role play simulation.' This builds on the view (Ip, 2004b) that students require a 'free-ranging' approach to information-gathering, scenario-building and evaluation, within a structured and safe environment, rather than one that is battery-intensive. In the latter learners are housed within a minimally-engaging context, where structure, tasks and information are wholly defined and made accessible by the teaching team. This dependency culture requires minimal learner-input into the learning environment.

As in a battery-intensive environment, one that is free-ranging has clearly-defined parameters in terms of what it is, why the students are in it, and how they should use both it and their outputs from it. The difference lies in the level of active

participation and involvement by both the learners and tutors in shaping the boundaries of the environment and the available tasks and information. This is important for Ip (2004c): 'When all the learners (or trainees) are exchanging meaningful stories related to the theme of the training, I would say we have a [*sic*.] rich e-Learning experiences'. A free-ranging learner has more autonomy in acquiring, utilising and publishing learning materials. Moreover, the learner has a negotiated freedom-of-action over her/his approach to task-work, and, freed from an inflexible coinfinement, will tend to feel enfranchised.

This 'free-ranging' model has three implications for curriculum management. The first is that students still cannot escape or change the environmental boundaries directly. They can only alter it through the actions of their tutors, and only where the students' educational health is perceived to be adversely affected by the extant learning context. The second implication is that where a new type of environment holds the promise of increased productivity or achievement it may be deemed appropriate to migrate delivery towards it. The final implication is that students who are experiencing one approach to learning on a specific unit, may favour or fear different approaches on other units. It is equally possible for students to be happy and productive in free-ranging and battery-intensive arenas. Where the overall student experience involves a mixed economy in the delivery of e-Learning, academic teams need to explain the overall value.

This is important in light of the view that e-Learning, being the ability to 'make it possible for anyone to learn who wishes to learn, *at a time and place of their choosing*' (Bourne et al., 2004: 2), can be procedural rather than radical and still have worth. The ability of learners to access courses at cost and with an assured level of quality can promote enfranchisement. Pedagogically radical or not, 'the demand for on-line learning continues to grow - and not just for convenience but because it works and because working adults find it necessary' (Bourne *et al.*, 2004: 3). Where this necessity is not addressed, possibilities for disenfranchisement are multiplied. Thus, empowerment demands the development of an enabling social context, where students feel connected to their curriculum and understand why they are engaged in specific activities.

2.3 Enfranchising e-Learners: The role of team-work

Innovation and change tend to increase the overall levels of psychological, work-based stress, especially where individuals feel a lack of control (Bordia *et al.*, 2004; Kinman and Jones, 2003). One way of mitigating these effects is through clearly defined and inclusive team-work (Hertel *et al.*, 2004). Ingram and Desombre have defined teamwork as 'organised co-operation', pivoting around the cohesive achievement of a common goal (1999: 18). This accords with the outcomes of the UK Health Care Team Effectiveness Project (Department of Health, 2002), which also noted that the 'Quality of team working (having clear objectives, high levels of participation, commitment to quality, support for innovation and reflexivity) is positively related to team effectiveness.'

Ingram and Desombre's paper is important for academics because the authors focus upon the nature of teams in complex industries. Far from being the province of the lone academic, the shaping and delivering of the curriculum is now likely to be a shared experience, with a unit leader co-ordinating a team that may involve both full and part-time staff from multiple departments (Ramsden 1998), with multiple modes of delivery. The 25 modules involved in the evaluation below had 103 academic staff involved in their delivery. In one vocational, distance learning module that relied on mentoring, four academic staff and 133 external mentors had access to the on-line module.

Moreover, the make-up of these teams tends to shift over time, in terms of both personnel and their confidence with e-Learning. At the start of the implementation noted below, only 27 of the 103 academic staff had previously engaged in e-Learning. Therefore the learning curve for these staff was steep and this has complex management implications, not only because team approaches have to relate to educational design and delivery that is fit-for-purpose (Lomas, 2002, pp. 72 - 4), but also as teams are responsible to the wider organisation for meetings its goals (West *et al.*, 2004).

In building sustainable academic participation in e-Learning, staff teams need to focus upon organised co-operation, in order:

1. To understand how to use institutional e-Learning systems;
2. To see models of good practice for engaging with those systems in the curriculum; and
3. To recognise what students value from e-Learning, and thereby review their collective approach.

Through co-operative review, academic teams can build complexity into their use of e-Learning.

3. Evaluation

3.1 A note on context

The discussion below focuses upon the impact on the learning experience of deploying an integrated e-Learning system within one UK university, which supports approximately 20,000 students on its programmes, distributed across two centres and six faculties. Ahead of the 2003-04 academic session it moved towards a sustainable and interoperable e-Learning structure, which by the close of the 2004–05 sessions supported 905 academics and 13,254 students on 927 on-line modules. The complexity of the integration means that the overarching risk from staff and/or student non-engagement is increased.

The evaluation is based upon:

1. Snapshots of the implementation by means of evaluation questionnaires delivered to 968 students by 25 module teams at Levels 1 (n = 420), 2 (n = 153), 3 (n = 226), and post-graduate (n = 169); and
2. Analyses of interviews and focus groups with 61 students and 48 academic and support staff.

It was driven by the impact of the systematic implementation of e-Learning upon learning and teaching, rather than by specific theories. It utilises Zuber-Skerritt's CRASP model (1992, pp. 14 - 17), which aims for the critical, reflective, accountable, self-evaluative and participative improvement of practice, in order to provide staff teams with some pragmatic enhancement opportunities.

Unless otherwise stated, the percentages given in the sections, which follow, are for respondents to specific questions. Due to the nature of the nominal data in the questionnaires, chi-squared tests were carried out in order to analyse associations between factors. A p-value of .05 was selected in order to minimise the risk of Type 1 errors whilst reducing the likelihood of Type 2 errors.

3.2 The impact of e-Learning on the student learning experience

In all, 728 students (78.0 per cent) felt that e-Learning was helping them to achieve their module learning outcomes. The number of students who felt that this was not the case was especially high amongst post-graduates, where it was 40.4 per cent (n = 74). Here tutors were using the system simply, to provide additional resources like handbooks and lecture notes, with minimal interaction, little signposting and no co-ordinated deployment. Moreover, the IT literacy of the teams involved was low, with one academic in each demonstrating best practice with no team-based implementation plan.

Overall the questionnaire outcomes showed a highly significant association between the students' achievement of the unit learning outcomes, and their access to each of:

- Module information (x^2 (2) = .001, p<.01);
- Learning materials (x^2 (2) = .001, p<.01);
- Assessments (x^2 (2) = .001, p<.01); and
- Opportunities for personal interaction (x^2 (3) = .001, p<.01).

The associations suggest that the provision of these types of materials and experiences, some of which were procedural, underpinned the students' achievement of the module learning outcomes, at all levels-of-study and all ages.

There was also a highly significant association between the achievement of the learning outcomes and whether the system was felt to be dependable (x^2 (1) = .001, p<.01) or easy-to-use (x^2 (1) = .001, p<.01). For instance, 501 of the 713 students who claimed that e-Learning was helping them to achieve their learning outcomes also felt that the system was dependable. A postgraduate student felt that 'Access has been great. I am hard of hearing – this is great to be able to communicate without worry of them hearing me. I hadn't foreseen this.' However, 125 (62.8 per cent) of the 199 students who claimed that the system was not helping them to achieve their learning outcomes also felt that it was not dependable. This was particularly the case for those learners who were older than 30, for whom there was a significant association between dependability and the achievement of the learning outcomes (x^2 (3) = .29, p<.05).

It can be inferred that those student's whose on-line experience was comfortable with few problems felt that it added value to their learning. This highlights the need for staff to negotiate and then articulate clear, agreed structures for student support, especially in terms of part-time and mature students, and those working at a distance. For instance, one student argued that 'the tutor was unclear about the set-up – he was learning and it was a new course for him with a new e-Learning system'. A second stated that 'it was a worry when the system went down close to a deadline – I did not know who to call. I would like clearer technical advice as my tutor doesn't really understand.' A lack of academic engagement with issues and opportunities that arise frustrates and ultimately disconnects learners.

3.3 Managing expectations: Towards cohesive rules of engagement

One six-strong teaching team, who focused their provision on distance learners, noted their overarching vision for on-line engagement.

> *As we cannot see them reading and using materials, we have to try to engage in the process of the conversation, to move the students forward. We try hard not to interrupt the flow of their conversations – they need to know that we are there and listening but those we will not interfere.*

This team had run on-line distance learning for three years and believed that clarity was crucial because student expectations vary. Elsewhere, a level one student reported that 'I had never used e-Learning before and so I used it as it comes. I had no expectations, but these are now rising, especially in use for research on this course and using the Internet.' This heightened expectation was reiterated by a level three learner who argued that 'it needs more integration into other modules. All tutors should encourage more use'.

Twenty-seven student interviewees saw a need for the explicit clarification of the teaching team's expectations for them and their work, whilst 28 highlighted their own expectations of the tutor and the system. One student working at a distance noted that 'Tutors all use it in different ways and some not at all, and therefore there is not much support.' This was more important for 23 of the 61 student interviewees who stressed the need for more feedback on their work. One stated that 'I anticipate more guidance and contact – especially feedback'. The key here is building a consistent on-line student learning experience.

In generating consistency, socialisation and the creation of shared operational norms are crucial and need to be planned. One student felt that this element was poorly handled: 'I was left confused from induction – there was too much and too many people were involved.' A second felt that there was 'poor training and a lot of assumptions were made about people's learning'. Clarity of introduction and on-going, cohesive support are central themes that connect into time-management. A dyslexic student indicated that time was a huge issue for students with specific, diagnosed impairments who may need extra support, or more careful planning of the delivery of on-line task-work or assessments. As the stress of managing multiple new environments can affect individual engagement, students rely on the ways in which staff teams are supportive of them.

A final expectation is the demand for more on-line contact. Of the 894 students who responded, 84.6 per cent (n = 756) felt that they would like e-Learning to be used to support their other modules. A further 14 mentioned this issue in their interviews, with one Level 2 student stating: 'In order to spend time [on-line], it would be beneficial for all modules to use it. It is, in my opinion, [an issue for me] to spend time using it for only one module and still have to manually research and interact with all other modules'. This view was reinforced by a focus group of Level 1 and 2 tutors who noted that the variation in use of the system within programme teams was a disadvantage to embedding it within learning and teaching. However, it can be argued that rather than variation in use, it is consistent communication about that variation which matters. A more interactive, free-ranging approach requires organised co-operation.

3.4 The value of currency and interactivity

Interaction is fundamental in enhancing the role of e-Learning in the curriculum, and 25 student interviewees specifically talked about its impact on their learning experience. Overall the student questionnaires revealed a highly significant association between having both enough interaction and enough learner support and feedback ((x^2 (3) = .001, p<. 01). However, for Level 3 students (x^2 (2) = .620, p>.05), and students over 30 (x^2 (1) = .984, p>.05) the data infer that these students had not found interaction very useful and felt that they had not had enough learner support and feedback. Of these groups, 43.4 per cent (n = 72) felt that interaction on their module was not very useful for them and 47.3 per cent (n = 78) felt that there was not enough tutor feedback. The stage that these learners were at in their learning cycle would suggest that they expected less battery-intensive, i.e. information-heavy, discussion-light, on-line experiences. Students at different levels of study may need differential e-Learning contexts in order to feel enfranchised.

The connection between the achievement of the learning outcomes and the level of learning support and feedback also shows a highly significant association for students at Levels 1, 2 and 3 (x^2 (1) = .001, p<.01), and those students under 30 (x^2 (1) = .001, p<.01). From the data, students who felt that e-Learning was helping them to achieve their learning outcomes also felt that they were receiving enough learner support and feedback. However, analysis showed that this was not the case for postgraduate students (x^2 (1) = .599, p>.05), or those students who were older than 30 (x^2 (1) = .205, p>.05). In all, 40.0 per cent

(n = 379) of the students surveyed felt that there was not enough interaction and learning support.

In part, short-term demand for interaction can be achieved by maintaining the currency of the on-line experience. Of the student questionnaire respondents, 15.8 per cent (n = 222) valued the fact that announcements and the regular, structured upload of content during the module kept them up-to-date with developments. The interview analysis highlighted the value of appropriately timed, clearly identifiable materials (n = 28), feedback (n = 25), and consistency of types of resources between and within modules (n = 12). Despite this, academic teams need to engage with the process of development from short-term innovation into long-term demand-management, if their students are to be enfranchised.

3.5 Towards academic engagement?

In all, 23 staff that were interviewed focused upon the pioneering role of others, who are able to share good practice with the later settlers. This is crucial because so many were relatively naïve settlers. One member of staff 'selected one module [for on-line use] and decided not to overcomplicate things… [Because] my awareness was a bit of a barrier', and highlighted that 'I also pinched other people's ideas – I had a browse around and saw what they were up to. This allowed me to see how what I do fits in with other's work – I could fill-in some gaps.' Pioneers have the potential to empower others.

One senior manager who articulated that 'threshold expectations are being demanded by students and need to be met by academic teams' focused upon this pioneering-settling model. His faculty's end-of-year report picked up this issue in its recommendation for enhanced 'pedagogic development as programme teams discuss the potential of the system.' This was pivotal for another academic who argued that 'unless all staff in a team use it evenly then there is little point. There is some overlap across modules and it is useful for all staff to use [the system].' Again, empowerment is seen to stem from inclusive teamwork.

One member of staff in a different faculty noted that:

> *The team's modules are all on [the e-Learning system] – student pressure has increased this and this has put pressure on our workloads and staff IT ability. At the moment this is okay across the team as there is informal support and our IT skills are okay.*

Here negotiation between learners and teaching team changed the environmental boundaries of the learning context, and this local innovation was connected to the overall confidence and openness of the team. As learner expectations rise, the demand for, and foci of, professional development needs to be assessed in-line with a team's overall vision, experience and improvement agenda, and the need to retain and recruit more learners. One staff interviewee noted that:

> *[The e-Learning system] allows us to focus upon the links between modules in a programme. We can begin to make connections and give an overview of all of the modules… we can then show the links between learning outcomes and assessment, and students can be made aware of the other avenues that are open to them conceptually.*

Again the focus is on environmental change in order to increase student achievement, and the team recognised that a cohesive, planned approach would reap benefits.

4. Conclusions

These descriptive analyses indicate that even procedural, battery-intensive e-Learning engagements can have a positive impact on the learning experience where they are managed through organised co-operation. Developing this approach is more pressing for academic staff because when students were asked to nominate two factors that they disliked about the overall system, 401 (44.6 per cent) of the returns singled out learning and teaching elements. This illustrates the expectations of students for clarity of delivery across all levels of study. Amongst those students with greater experience of higher education there was an expectation that there would be more analytical and interactive work and less emphasis on battery-intensive e-Learning. Whilst some staff sees system reliability as a barrier to student usage, students see the improvements in their learning environment as more enfranchising.

The students identified two; quick wins for academic teams that are not only low cost in terms of time and resource overheads but also likely to increase participation. The first is the use of available communication tools to maintain currency and join-up various curriculum elements. Crucially, this factor would sharpen the students' sense of on-line engagement and enfranchisement, and demonstrate a shared vision for use across a team. The second is for academic teams to plan and structure the e-Learning experience both in terms of what is presented on-line and by whom, and how that

maps onto other curriculum delivery mechanisms. This is crucial because students highlighted the disparity of experience where there was differential staff use. As staffs align their delivery of e-Learning activities with the time, locations and ways in which they interact with their learners, they are better able to pragmatically deliver what students say they want on-line.

This matters because where team approaches are articulated, students commented on:

- a more integrated and sophisticated use of e-learning;
- more feedback on progress;
- more task-based, student-controlled content; and
- a use of specific systems to reflect and enhance the learning and teaching architecture.

Where curriculum objectives are agreed and development is then centred on the sustainable integration of e-Learning by the team, academic participation will address the three implications for curriculum management that arise from Ip's model of free-ranging (2004b): namely enabling students to change the boundaries of their learning environment; enhancing student achievement; and ensuring cohesion across a programme. A by-product for academic teams is that in the very process of engaging their students, there is more hope that they will in-turn become enfranchised within their own use of e-Learning.

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