

Development of Individual Agency within a Collaborative, Creative Learning Community



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INTRODUCTION

By the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, conflicting interests have emerged in higher education learning environments. On the one hand is an increasing call for ubiquitous, personalised learning. On the other, there has been a growing societal understanding that successful and creative innovation and entrepreneurialism are embedded in collaborative and networked activity. Whilst successive international New Media Consortium Horizon reports have identified emerging technologies that promise to support and transform higher education, only those associated with societal change have been adopted, which include predominantly mobile and cloud computing, open content, and personal learning environments. These technological advancements have sponsored primarily the development of personalised learning. In distance education, this focus has often been at the expense of collaborative and networked learning. It is proposed in this chapter that the development of individual agency within a collaborative, creative learning community is able to develop an active society that is capable of responding to contemporary and emerging work demands. This requires interrogation of issues related to self-regulation of learning, the creative development of the individual within a collaborative learning environment, and a fore-fronted learning design.

BACKGROUND

The nature of Higher Education is shifting, and strategies to plan for immediate and future rapid change are becoming critical. The change is being energised by advances in technology, which has the capacity to change the way education is offered and assessed. However, it will be advocated in this chapter that the real driver of change is societal, including economic, social and cultural forces. As an example, changes in approaches to education have already been influenced by the rapid proliferation of technologically mediated social activity which has led to personal choice and interactive networks of contacts (Araya, 2010). Social change, and changing lifestyles have also led to the demand by students for ubiquitous, mobile learning that is mediated by technology and therefore independent of time and place. This individual empowerment has challenged the traditional, hierarchical role of the university, together with the way that learning is designed and supported. On the economic front, pressure has been exerted by the demands for a more creative approach to art, cultural works, science technology and innovation in the global economy (UNCTAD, 2010). This has placed increasing pressure on Universities to produce graduates with new attributes associated with collaboration, creativity and entrepreneurialism in a competitive climate. These social and economic pressures have served to redefine the role of the university, the academic and the student in the learning transaction.

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Societal Change and Learning

From a period of mass customisation and broad appeal of higher education in the late 20th Century, students have assumed in the first decade of the 21st Century the role of consumers (Hartley, 2008). These changes in consumer demand have been stimulated by rapid changes in technology, particularly Web 2.0, and the democratic contribution and access to knowledge. The traditional, privatised access to resources and materials under the control of the University has been reinforced with the introduction of the Learning Management System (LMS). At the same time, the advent of the read/write web has democratised access to knowledge, and knowledge creation. Whilst this access and participation is still generally embedded in informal learning, it is also taking the place of interactions in formal education, workplaces and society in general (Bell, 2011).

Social change pressures have been brought to bear by the changing characteristics of students. Universities are experiencing a shift from the 'traditional' student as school leaver to mature age participation, with diversification and differentiation central to retaining non-traditional students (David, 2007). This increase in non-traditional students has led to questioning the traditions of the university and the privileged position of those who participate in higher education (Maher & Tretault, 2007). There is evidence of an increasing demand for increased personalisation and co-production of education, which calls for a reconfiguration, and differentiation of the way individuals collaborate through technology (Hartley, 2008). A personalised approach to collaboration involves learners owning and managing their learning themselves. Pedagogical approaches to this personalisation of learning have been shown to promote retention and success where they are embedded in socially constructivist, community-based and collaborative environments through which they shape their own experiences (Stanley, Fraser, & Spiller, 2011). The role of the individual becomes one of blending and combining culturally influenced flows of information in the development of individual creativity, as (s)he selects the technologies perceived to be most suitable for this purpose (Araya, 2010). Tensions emerge, as these calls for increasing individualisation are balanced with governance in a locally accountable system. Tensions also emerge as participatory knowledge-building that is mediated by technology without appropriately

personalised design poses a threat of divisiveness in a highly diverse student community (Hughes, 2009).

The advent of social media has resulted in social activity which is increasingly technologically mediated, peer to peer and networked (Araya, 2010). This in turn is changing the nature of communication for formal and informal learning as individuals use their own networks to source and provide solutions. For instance, politicians have been quick to take up social media for their respective purposes as they engage in "cross-promotion between traditional media and social media ... to connect with voters on previously un-seen levels, with almost immediate feedback." (Miston, 2012, par. 7).

The activity of the masses in Web 2.0 environments such as YouTube has set up the notion of "crowd accelerated innovation" (Anderson, 2010) in which the collective drives the uptake and dissemination of new ideas (Carter & Arroyo, 2011). The influence of individual and collective pressure on consumer choice is also evident in the suite of technologies that have emerged for learning. The New Media Consortium Horizon reports have identified emerging technologies that are proposed to support and transform higher education. Each annual report identifies technologies with a timeline of implementation (Table 1).

Whilst emerging technologies such as context aware computing, augmented reality, and gesture-based computing have been flagged by experts in the longer term, they have not been widely implemented. The technologies that have been adopted have been those associated with highly functional learning purposes, and based on pragmatism and convenience, associated with user choice. These include digital text books, tablet and mobile computing, social networking, cloud computing and open content. Open content was flagged as being less than one year to adoption in 2010, with Massive Online Courses (MOOCs) flagged in 2012 as being in the longer term for development in the next 4 to 5 years. MOOCs will be discussed later, but will be shown to be the exception, with an accelerated uptake already occurring in 2012. What is evident from Table 1 is that whilst technology is important, the real driver for change is consumer choice, and in this case, solutions for enhanced networking, mobility, and ubiquitous access to networks. The learning principles underlying these selected technologies may be identified as supporting reading, writing, connecting

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