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My role as a facilitator: The value of reflection from multiple personal perspectives

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Sue Beckingham is an Educational Developer, taking a Faculty lead role for technology enhanced learning (TEL) at Sheffield Hallam University. She is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and also a Fellow of the Staff and Educational Development Association (where she is a member of the Executive Board).

Her teaching portfolio includes Professionalism and Communication; Digital Marketing; Web 2.0 in Business; Social Media Use in Organisations; and Information Design. She is also a course designer and facilitator of the cross institution open online course 'Bring Your Own Devices for Learning' and co-lead of the weekly Learning and Teaching in Higher Education online chat #LTHechat.

Sue's research interests alongside TEL include digital identity and connectedness, and the use of social media in higher education and business. As a lifelong learner she has recently completed a second Master's degree, an MSc in Technology Enhanced Learning, Innovation and Change.

Introduction

I am an Educational Developer and Senior Lecturer at Sheffield Hallam University where I have taken a Faculty lead for technology enhanced learning (TEL). My teaching portfolio includes professionalism and communication, digital marketing, Web 2.0 for business, social media use in organisations, and information design. My research interests include the use of social media in higher education, online presence, digital literacies and TEL. As a lifelong learner I have recently completed a second Master's degree at Sheffield Hallam in Technology Enhanced Learning Innovation and Change. My thesis considers the impact of Twitter on my own self-

development - an ethnographic-self review of how I have built a rich and valued personal learning network. Indeed it is through this very network that I became involved initially as a participant in open online courses and then as a guest presenter for Chrissi Nerantzi's Flexible, Distance and Online Learning course (FDOL131). It was late Autumn 2013 when Chrissi and I met up at the SEDA conference, where she shared an idea she had about a new open course and asked if I would like to be involved. With no hesitation I said yes and our conversation continued during the conference, whilst waiting for our separate trains home, and during the journey via Twitter direct messages. By the end of the same evening we had both a framework and the course site set up. We called it [Bring Your Own Devices for Learning](#) (BYOD4L).

I will come back to BYOD4L as the focus of this paper, but also wanted to mention that no sooner had the course finished I was invited by Chrissi to contribute to [Flexible, Distance and Online Learning](#) (FDOL141) co-leading with David Hopkins a weekly tweetchat and then a month later as a facilitator for the [Openness in Education](#) course. Since then I have continued to work with Chrissi and we have led BYOD4L for a further two iterations in July 2014 and January 2015.

What I hope to share here is an insight into my roles as a new facilitator within open online courses and the experience as a student taking online courses; and what influence this had going forward on my role as an online facilitator. As a lifelong learner I find the ability to step into the shoes of a student incredibly useful for my teaching practice, bringing empathy for the student which in turn then helps me consider my approaches as a facilitator of learning.

Reflecting on my experience as a Student

I'd like to first of all share some memories of my own experience as a student as these have helped to shape the way I have approached my role as a facilitator, looking specifically at my own online learning experience. About nine years ago I took my first online course which used Moodle as the VLE. There was limited interaction that was reliant solely on what seemed at the time a 'clunky' discussion board with infrequent discussions taking place. This left me with quite negative feelings of distance learning. At the time there were fewer opportunities to develop a social presence or indeed socialise in

online learning spaces. Reflecting on my more recent experience as a student taking a 'learning at a distance' online course has made me look again at online learning in a different and very positive light. Starting with multimedia 'about me' videos/screencasts to introduce ourselves, the fortnightly webinars and the autonomy and access to organise our own digital spaces to meet as peers; we got to know each other really quickly. Granted technology has advanced but so has the pedagogy. By buddying us up to work together in pairs and small groups for different activities it really helped us to gel together as peers. We became comfortable in the places we shared our learning. White and LeCornu (2011) propose that 'place is primarily a sense of being present with others...a sense of social presence.' Within these new spaces we each felt this and indeed often talked about it. We liked that we had developed our own supportive community of practice and had become facilitators of our own informal learning. This was an empowering feeling!

Both of these experiences have been useful and have helped to inform my role as a facilitator of learning. The socialising aspect is an important part of any learning experience and an aspect that needs to be built in. The bonding time with peers, building trust and getting to know each other makes for a more honest and rewarding partnership. Drawing upon what worked well and what didn't in my own learning has helped me to reflect about how, when and why I should take a new approach, what support might be required, and the value of feedback and interaction.

Bring your own devices for learning

To give some context BYOD4L is a 5 day open online course. We described it as follows:

BYOD4Learning is a truly open course, or an 'open magical box' for those who don't like the term 'course' very much, for students and teachers (nothing is locked away or private and you won't even need to register) who would like to develop their understanding, knowledge and skills linked to using smart devices for learning and teaching and use these more effectively, inclusively and creatively.

The hub of the course was the WordPress site and the learning spaces included a Facebook Group, a Google+ Community Group and Twitter using the course hashtag #BYOD4L. In addition we also held daily tweetchats where participants contributed to a themed

conversation using #BYOD4Lchat. This hour long chat was held at 8-9pm GMT. The themes chosen replicated the daily topics found on the course site. These were connecting, communicating, curating, collaborating and creating. Participants in the course seemed to be mostly a mix of Academics, Educational Developers and Learning Technologists; although we also had some students contribute to the tweetchats. Learners could choose to engage with any of the activities on the course site, interact in any of the social spaces, and if desired collect badges by evidencing their learning within a personal blog. The autonomy and permission to develop their own learning paths with support and guidance from the nine facilitators was the message we wanted to be heard.

Learning in open social spaces

Miller (2009) identified four key constructs when researching adaptable spaces and their impact on learning. These are basic human needs, teaching, learning and engagement. (See Figure 1) Whilst Miller was looking at physical spaces, these areas are equally important for online learning, as are the sub-headers in the diagram.

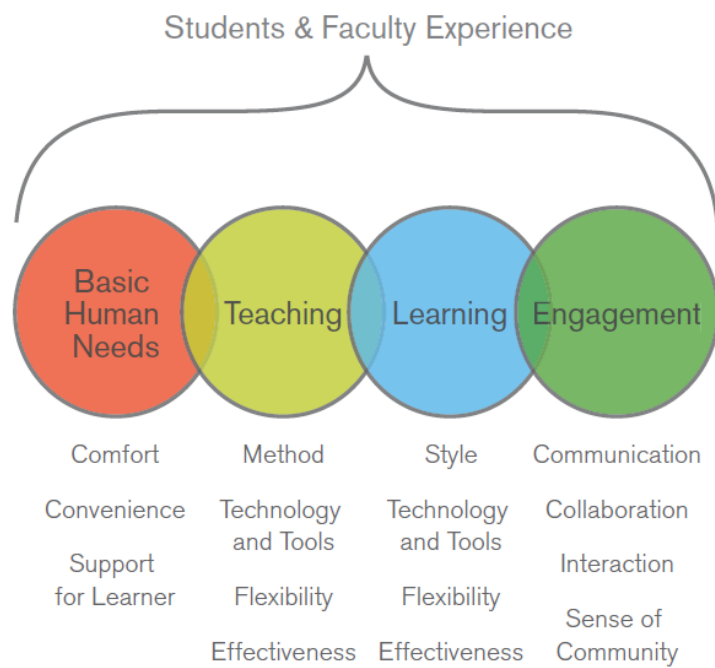


Figure 1 Miller 2009

Building on this model I will use it as a lens to consider my role as both one of the Course Leaders for Bring Your Own Devices for Learning (BYODF4L) and as a Facilitator. The dual perspectives will

allow me to reflect upon the responsibility I had for the learners taking the course but also for the team of volunteer supporters I worked alongside who helped to make BYOD4L happen.

Basic Human Needs: comfort, convenience, support for the learner

As a starting point it is important to consider how we can support learners orientate themselves within a new learning environment. Key to this as a facilitator was keeping a watch early on to answer any questions raised by participants via the course channels. These included the comments section in the course blog, Google+ community page, Facebook page, or as tweets using the course hashtag #BYOD4L in Twitter. (We also had a #BYOD4LHELP hashtag but this was never used.) What was interesting was that irrespective of where the questions were raised, they were often answered by a learner, particularly on Twitter. Peer bonding was evident as such interactions then led on to a short discussion and sometimes the suggestion to 'DM me your email and I will send you [insert article or other form of information]'.

As a relatively new online facilitator I was both a learner and responsible for learners. I learnt a lot from observing Chrissi Nerantzi. I used this and my experience as a student to consider how to best support learners. I was conscious that it was equally important to make the volunteer facilitators on BYOD4L feel comfortable and supported too. Holding a Google Hangout with Chrissi for our facilitator team went down well. Participants said it had helped them to feel connected with each other bearing in mind that they had never met before. One facilitator who was unable to make the hangout said his non presence had left him initially feeling 'out of it' and a little disorientated. Fortunately there was engagement by all in the facilitators Facebook group which was set up with a good lead time prior to the course starting, giving everyone the opportunity to chat, socialise and raise questions.

Regular tweets to signpost where to find information were made by the facilitators. Interacting with tweets made by the learners was very important prior to the start of the course and throughout the week. For many this was a very different learning experience they were embarking on.

Teaching: Method; Technology and Tools; Flexibility; Effectiveness

Introducing the daily tweetchats required consideration of both the learners and the facilitator team in terms of explaining what it was, how to take part and the preparation prior to consider the format. Guidance was written for both the learners and the facilitators (for whom this was also a new experience). We used a shared Google Doc for facilitators to contribute to and collaboratively worked together to plan the daily chats. Pairs were allocated as 'Chat Leads' for each day. Questions raised by facilitators were asked using the comments box in the page, but we also discussed the forthcoming chats in our closed facilitators' Facebook group and during the Google hangout. This method was very effective as it provided the flexibility for asynchronous conversations to take place at a time that was convenient. These spaces are very important considering that we were physically located in different places across the globe. Taking an open shared approach to plan was also a positive aspect and one that helped us work together as well as we did.

Thinking about the technology used within the course, we provided [guidance](#) on the course site for students. Our role as facilitators included signposting these multimedia resources to the learners. As tools were identified as part of the learning journey we added these to Edshelf which is a website where users can curate and share themed collections of apps for learning and teaching. Our curated collections are organised under the themes of connecting, communicating, curating, collaborating and creating. For example: <https://edshelf.com/profile/suebecks/connecting>. As learner conversations developed it was helpful to draw upon examples of use, of which many were shared by the facilitators and learners themselves. We were all learning!

Learning: Style; Technology and Tools; Flexibility; Effectiveness

Providing a variety of learning spaces allowed learners to choose where they felt most comfortable, but also gave them the opportunity to listen in other spaces and join those as a new experience if they wished to. As facilitators with full-time jobs and life outside, we were concerned we would not be able to be everywhere all of the time. In anticipation of international participants in different time zones where contributions were bound to include both asynchronous and

synchronous conversations; we decided between the team to share the focus across the different areas. So a couple took the lead in the Google+ community, another the Facebook group and the rest Twitter, with Chrissi and me monitoring the WordPress course site for comments. That said I still felt a responsibility to both look at and interact with all the spaces. At this stage I couldn't anticipate what questions might arise, what support our learners might need and if I am honest what interesting interactions I might miss if I didn't!

As mentioned earlier many of our learners bonded quite quickly, but particularly during the tweetchats, however it was evident that some needed to be drawn in to the conversations. One described the interactions as 'madly chaotic', and another raised concerns that as a dyslexic it was initially quite difficult to keep up. The role of the facilitator is therefore key to provide support, guidance and feedback. Laurillard (2002:55) argues that 'action without feedback is completely unproductive for a learner'. Providing feedback using comments in learners' blog posts and acknowledging tweets by replying or even re-tweeting, I feel made an important contribution.

Engagement: Communication; Collaboration; Interaction; Sense of Community

Garnett (2010) talks about learner generated contexts as a co-creation model, requiring learners who develop new collaborative and personal literacies for learning and teachers who develop learners' abilities to create and manage their own learning. As facilitators of this new learning experience, we all became co-learners and co-creators. For many of us these were new ways of learning. We as facilitators learnt from each other and with our students. This in itself and the many shared interactions was the essence of what made this learning community so special. Open communication where so many shared their ideas, their questions, and sometimes their concerns, was for me what made the experience so engaging. This was applicable to both my role as a facilitator and as a learner.

Conclusion

Taking the opportunity to reflect upon my experiences as both a learner, facilitator and course leader has been a valuable experience.

Having empathy as a learner and how it felt myself as a new facilitator has without doubt encouraged me to consider the way I engage with participants of BYOD4L. Enabling an open, supportive and interactive environment where we learn together is an essential part of what makes a positive co-learning experience.

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