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NERANTZI, Chrissi, MIDDLETON, Andrew and BECKINGHAM, Sue
<<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5660-125X>>

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Facilitators as co-learners in a collaborative open course for teachers and students in higher education

Authors

Chrissi Nerantzi

c.nerantzi@mmu.ac.uk

Principal Lecturer Academic CPD, Manchester Metropolitan University United Kingdom

Andrew Middleton

a.j.middleton@shu.ac.uk

Head of Innovation and Professional Development

Sue Beckingham

s.beckingham@shu.ac.uk

Educational Developer

Sheffield Hallam University United Kingdom

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This paper describes Bring Your Own Device for Learning (BYOD4L), an open learning initiative exploring the use of smart devices for learning and teaching in higher education. BYOD4L was developed by educational developers in the UK using freely available social media able to run on personal smart devices. BYOD4L was offered by the Media-Enhanced Learning Special Interest Group (MELSIG) in collaboration with volunteer facilitators. The paper focuses on the open facilitator experience as lived during the first iteration of BYOD4 in January 2014. A phenomenological approach has been used and data has been collected via a qualitative survey instrument which was completed by all facilitators. Findings are shared and discussed that provide an insight into the facilitator experience that might be of value for other similar open collaborative learning events and other open educational interventions.

Context

Interest in the professional development of teachers, evident opportunities for transforming teaching through the proliferation of digital and social media, forays into open and informal learning spaces all indicate it is time to learn about innovative personal teaching and learning spaces designed around the learner, wherever they may be.

The professionalisation of teaching is an important agenda in United Kingdom higher education (HE), especially since the revision of the UK Professional Standards Framework and a Code of Practice for Teaching by the Higher Education Academy (HEA, 2013). Initial and continuous teacher development in HE, together with teaching qualifications and professional recognition, have been shown to have a positive and lasting impact on practices (Parsons et al., 2012).

The European Commission (2013) calls for collaboration among institutions to explore more open approaches to education for the benefit of students and staff across the European Union. It also encourages institutions to model such practices in the professional development of their academic staff. Ryan & Tilbury (2013) concur and discuss the need for more flexible pedagogies.

The impact of new and emerging digital technologies on the way we live and, by extension, on the way we can teach and learn across formal and informal contexts, needs to be understood. Redecker (2014), for example, refers to the social and open nature of learning and the informalisation of learning that she believes will become a reality for higher

education. Boundaries between formal and informal learning are blurring (Conole, 2013) and interest is increasing in more open and lifewide curricula in which all learners can benefit (Jackson, 2014).

The Digital Age is typified by both staff and students being continuously connected through social media and, given the functionality of personal smart technology and its ease of use, by the ability of each of us to make and consume content. Due to the connectivity afforded us through smart technologies we are able to do this together (Gauntlett, 2011; Hatch, 2014).

Social media are increasingly used to complement or even replace institutional learning technologies being valued as offering more immediate, connected and collaborative learning opportunities irrespective of actual co-location, potentially mobilising learning and teaching on a massive scale and bringing educational conversations into the open (Johnson et al., 2014); that is, involving others living, learning and working beyond the formally understood boundaries of traditional modes of delivery who add richness to the experience of learning.

It seems education in the Digital Age may become distinguished by learning through rich communication, collaboration and creativity. As no permission is required to create something on the web individuals experiment with new ways of learning and teaching. Some of these include open educational practices (Zourou, 2013). BYOD4L, the intervention discussed within this paper, fits such a description well. Veletsianos (2013) notes that there is still limited research into the student experience in open online courses, insights into the open facilitator experience might be even more limited as stated in Ross et al (2014) linked to facilitation in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Within this paper the authors focus on the facilitation aspect of an open mobile development initiative for teachers and students. The authors aim to provide an insight into the facilitator experiences linked to an open educational offer that sits outside a MOOC typology. However, the findings shared might also be of relevance not only to other Do-It-Yourself (DIY) course designers but also MOOC initiatives.

A bite-size open learning event for students and teachers in Higher Education

BYOD4L is a grass root open pedagogical intervention developed by two educational developers in the UK (authors of this paper) and offered under the MELSIG umbrella as an open course to teachers and students. It was developed using freely available social media technologies such as Wordpress, Google+ community, Facebook, Twitter and others. The pedagogical rationale had its foundations in Problem-Based Learning (PBL).

The concept of BYOD4L can be understood more usefully as a learning ecology than a course. Jackson (2013) defines a learning ecology as “a process(es) created in a particular context for a particular purpose that provides opportunities, relationships and resources for learning, development and achievement.” This reflects the organisers aspirations which was articulated before the start using the metaphor of “our magical open box” (Nerantzi & Beckingham, 2014).

BYOD4L was offered for the first time in January 2014 over five (5) days with 10 volunteer facilitators from different institutions at the end of January 2014. Nine (9) out of 10 facilitators participated fully and consistently during BYOD4L. Nine (9) facilitators were located in the United Kingdom while one (1) of them was located in Australia. BYOD4L aimed to help teachers and students to develop their understanding, confidence and competence around using their own smart devices for learning and teaching. It also aimed to inspire them to experiment and make new discoveries with others. The pedagogical design developed was loosely based on Problem-Based Learning (Barrows & Tamblyn, 1980). Short authentic video scenarios linked to specific themes were used to trigger individual or collaborative inquiry: connecting, communicating, curating, collaborating and creating. One set of thematic case studies provided the focus for each day, being used to trigger engagement with three activities for autonomous and collaborative learning through experimentation, reflection and sharing. The daily themes enabled learners to dip in and out as they wished with the pick ‘n’ mix themes and activities based on their needs and interests. Open badges for learners and facilitators were used as motivators to increase engagement, reward learning and effective facilitation (Glover & Latif, 2013).

Asynchronous conversations took place in BYOD4L community spaces (the course Wordpress site via comments, a Facebook group and Google+ community group) and were facilitated together with the daily tweetchats: live exchanges through Twitter. Further exchanges and learning conversations unfolded on Twitter, asynchronous and synchronously, as well as in personally defined learning spaces.

Building a team of facilitators with capability to support a diverse and unpredictable cohort of learners was a critical challenge to designing and running BYOD4L successfully; openness promotes inclusivity only if the course is able to reliably support each learner within parameters defined by their diverse expectations. The facilitators played a vital role in establishing a sense of community by creating, extending and modelling opportunities for conversation and exchange, showing interest and care through supporting learners as well as each other.

Facilitators' team profile and working practice

The BYOD4L facilitators hold a variety of roles within higher education including academic developers, learning technologists, lecturers and educational researchers. Nine of the ten facilitators worked at institutions in the United Kingdom; the other in Australia. Facilitators were selected by the two organisers who knew the individuals through other professional activities and networks. Most facilitators had not worked with each other before on such a project. The majority of them came with experience of learning online before joining BYOD4L and were experienced and professional users of social media and networks. Only two facilitators had experience of online facilitation or open learning courses. Whilst each facilitator had an online presence and experience using a variety of social media, some of the tools and platforms used during BYOD4L were new to some of them. With this in mind, the facilitators' roles became multifaceted: they were learners, teachers and, of paramount importance, supporters of the learners, there to make a transformative difference to learners (Nerantzi, 2011; Nerantzi and Withnell, accepted). The expectations and responsibilities of the facilitator role were discussed and agreed from the outset. A buddy system was used to ensure support for facilitators and to help manage the facilitation load.

The facilitator group was initially established in early January 2014 and continued to be expanded during this period leading up to the course delivery at the end of January. As it grew, the facilitator role description became clearer through asynchronous

discussion and guidelines which were put together and agreed with facilitators.

Key to the formation of the group was providing opportunities for the facilitators to get to know each other prior to the start of the course; albeit at a distance. Several of the facilitators had previously met others in person or knew each other from social networks, but mostly BYOD4L brought people together for the first time.

The two course leaders felt it important to engage all participants, learners and facilitators, in a variety of spaces beyond the main course presence, which was a multi-functional Wordpress site. This principle reflects the close correlation between smart media, social media and open learning; a set of interests common to most BYOD4L participants.

The facilitators brought with them a wide range of skills and experience; however, not all were confident users of all of the spaces used to host the course, its activities and conversations. This in itself provided them with new and largely welcomed challenges as they experienced and tested new learning environments first-hand. Professionally, the facilitators were attracted by being engaged in a genuinely authentic learning inquiry.

Google Drive was used to optimise the transparency of the planning by sharing documents with the whole team. Google Hangouts, the synchronous video conferencing environment, presented an effective alternative to meeting face-to-face, although participation was limited to ten people at a time. The Hangouts enabled each of the facilitators to put names to faces. The Facilitators' Facebook group was established to provide a private group communication channel and the group quickly coalesced around this space which provided information, support and discussion during planning, but also helped to establish a social identity and being to the group. The Facebook group acted as a course virtual 'staff room' in which the two course leaders in the group were able to preempt and invite questions, and to encourage early dialogue. During the course they reminded facilitators to signpost new information and establish imminent activities, necessary to help the orientation of learners and ensure the delivery ran smoothly and the facilitators were able to support their peers, especially as experience and confidence grew throughout the week.

Facilitators took part in a variety of daily activities. These included asynchronous discussions and synchronous tweetchats.

Most of the facilitators captured their BYOD4L reflections in their blogs throughout the week and shared them with the wider community. This reflective and formative writing often encapsulated the blurred boundaries between their teacher and learner personae.

It should be noted that all of the facilitators were volunteers and involvement was something they took on in their own time. Participation in this new role was typically expressed as a personal and professional development opportunity in the area of open educational practice as well as mobile learning. The course leaders, aware that time would be the key barrier for facilitator engagement, organised the week's activities so that they worked together in pairs responsible for leading one of the daily synchronous sessions. In addition they could join and engage with a social learning space of their own choice as and when time permitted. The size of the facilitation team meant there was greater flexibility and choice regarding facilitation.

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach to identify qualities and methods leading to effective facilitation in open learning spaces.

A short survey was designed and created using Google Forms. The survey was composed of three main questions and addressed the experience, successes and challenges of the BYOD4L facilitation. Using open questions, respondents were invited to reflect on their overall experience and provide answers based on what they selected as being significant.

Two of the facilitators were also course organisers and all three authors of this paper were part of the BYOD4L facilitation team. All individuals who completed the survey provided their consent for fully anonymised data to be used for research purposes.

The data were generated from a qualitative survey completed by all ten facilitators and resulted in findings organised using five categories representing the key dimensions of the facilitators' experience which emerged during the analysis of the survey data.

Findings

1. Enjoyment of facilitation

Without exception, the facilitators were positive about their experience and found the BYOD4L experience enjoyable and exciting. Some stated that they felt "on a high" and that they learnt a lot. For example one facilitator noted:

"FANTASTIC experience learnt a lot of new things and 'met' some great people."

They commented that, overall, they actively supported learners throughout. Some commented on how much they enjoyed the Tweetchats for example. One stated,

I loved the Tweetchats and the sustained engagement in these throughout the week. [...] I would say that the engagement wasn't superficial and that we had some really good and useful conversations there.

2. Professional development opportunities

Facilitators stated that they felt that BYOD4L was an opportunity for their own professional development. For example, one noted, "It has given me loads of good ideas for new things to try out in my own practice." Others commented on the opportunity, not just to facilitate, but also to learn from other facilitators and learners. It appears that they valued the opportunity to work together in a distributed team.

The course particularly provided the facilitators as an opportunity to learn new ways of using some of the social media to enhance their professional practice and how it worked really well giving them ideas to implement in their own practice. One said,

In the Google + community [...] there was great interaction. This opened my eyes to the benefits of G+ communities which I have not previously used much - I will be using this in the future I am sure.

Another facilitator commented on the freedom to experiment while learning and developing. They wrote,

I had never done a Tweet chat before and was looking forward to doing it my way. I was pleased that my Tweetchat partner went with the idea. It was mad but in an exciting way.

3. Community of facilitators

The professional relationships that developed during BYOD4L are highlighted in the survey responses by the facilitators as important indicators of what worked well. The facilitators expressed a strong affinity to feeling part of a team capable of supporting each other. One facilitator noted for example, “We worked really well together, the organisers and facilitators. We were honest and supported each other.” The facilitators developed a collective identity and were proud to be associated with BYOD4L. For example, seven noted their intention to claim an open badge. The comments demonstrated how the facilitators perceived themselves to be more than a team defined by the timeframe of the course. Several expressed their desire to do more, outside of the initial objectives of delivering the course, indicating the group’s evolutionary characteristic often found in a community of practice (Wenger et al., 2002). This was captured by one of the facilitators:

“A fantastic experience. One that needs to be sustained. This need for sustaining the learning community is further evidence of BYOD4L not simply being understood as a course.”

Some facilitators expressed sadness when it was all over after Day 5:

“There was a silence (possibly too dramatic to say emptiness) when the Twitter chat finished on the Friday. These connections, I think, will continue beyond the end of the course.”

One of the facilitators, who was the only one facilitator outside the UK, felt perhaps less part of the team. In their own words:

“Being on the other part of the world, I felt disengaged with the live events and especially the Twitter, which I did not follow and where a great deal of interaction took place.”

This indicates that despite the affordances of asynchronous communication, the facilitator felt that not being present in real-time this could lead to a sense of detachment from the rest of the community.

4. The time factor

Responses showed that facilitators found the experience intense as all facilitators were in full-time employment and their normal day-to-day job was their first priority. The BYOD4L facilitation was taken on voluntarily and added further daily tasks to an

already busy work schedule. The majority of activities were asynchronously and engagement in these could continue beyond the normal work time. This added flexibility to facilitator engagement while also ‘eating’ into personal life and made it challenging for others, especially as the only synchronous activity was offered in the evening (UK time).

The survey results confirmed that the biggest challenge for facilitators was finding time to engage consistently during BYOD4L. One facilitator, reflecting a commonly articulated concern, commented:

“...finding time within a busy week to look at all the sites and comment on blogs etc.” While another facilitator noted that “Time!!! Being a family man time is very limited.”

5. Social media

Facilitators felt that the social space for their communication as a group was really valuable to them and helped them connect as individuals and as a team to support each other:

“The team approach and the way we knitted together was wonderful. Having informal social spaces to communicate just for the team was important.”

The Facebook group set up for the facilitators was seen as an effective communication and socialisation tool. One commented:

“The FB community, for the facilitators team, which was private, was a vibrant space and enabled a rich exchange, reminded each other of specific tasks and support each other.” While another facilitator noted regarding Facebook: “It made us feel a bit more relaxed and share more personal stuff, which I think we wouldn’t in other settings?”

The suitability of the social media used as course spaces was questioned. One facilitator commented on the relatively low use and interaction with the learners’ Facebook group:

“Facebook is not the most appealing tool for such open courses mostly due to its private nature...you are using [it] with your ‘real’ friends and for particular reasons that are not directly relevant to connecting and creating!”

This facilitator suggested LinkedIn as a potentially more effective space for professional conversations.

Discussion

1. Facilitators as co-learners

BYOD4L was seen as a great opportunity not only to support learning, but to engage as professional learners, both experiencing social media-enhanced open learning and developing understanding and skills in the course's focus area of learning with smart devices. This aligns with Debowski's (2014) thoughts about developers as co-learners and fits well with how the facilitators saw themselves, acted and experienced facilitation naturally. The facilitation model of co-learners was powerful and created a more 'horizontal' and diverse learning ecology (Jackson, 2013) which seemed to benefit everyone, bringing participants together in a wide and loosely united learning community. Support, communication and collaboration was fluid, quick and effective. This contributed to a strong sense of belonging: everybody who participated visibly mattered equally.

2. The social glue creating a community of facilitators

The social aspect of the facilitator team and its role in creating a close, functional team, became evident. The bond created through the use of social media increased the facilitator commitment and motivation. Veletsianos (2014, online) talks about "social media as places where some academics express and experience care." This was something that was observed through facilitators' behaviour and comments.

Attending a Google Hangout as a team meeting was seen as a valued part of the initial bonding process and socialisation. One Facilitator who was unable to join the hangout due to a technical issue expressed a feeling of being left out.

Using Facebook as a professional space was new for many and for some felt to be 'foreign to their existing learning culture' (Tyree 2014, 6). The general familiarity of the space itself, however, minimised the technical challenges and also seemed to speed up the process of socialisation with individuals being more relaxed. In their study, Coughlan & Perryman (2013, 9) noted that the use of Facebook assists the development of community and provides a "low-cost way of nurturing groups." When putting a facilitators' team together special attention should be paid to ensuring it is inclusive and that it enables active participation in scheduled team and learning activities, taking into account geographical locations and timezones.

3. TweetChats

Acosta (2014, 16) notes "Twitter can build community and engage people in conversations they may not have traditionally participated in." For many BYOD4L participants, especially the facilitators group, the course was synonymous with the TweetChats which were run each evening for an hour. These synchronous structured discussions were well attended and the facilitators' reflections highlighted them as being important opportunities for enabling rich communication, exchange of ideas and community building; something that is also observed by Satterfield (2014) who has discussed how well Twitter chats can support focused interaction. The same technique was used by the facilitators in planning the course and it was observed how this enabled them to contribute to the shape and style of BYOD4L; an approach that can be used to make any course team planning activity more inclusive.

The Facebook group helped to establish the facilitator buddy system which was used to organise the co-facilitated TweetChats. The use of a buddying system made use of the diverse and complementary strengths of the facilitator group. Learning from and with each other was valued and the open sharing of this gave confidence to those with less experience. Each brought different skills to the group and therefore created an opportunity to contribute to this social learning experience in a different way (Seely Brown and Adler 2008).

The early evening schedule for the TweetChats seemed to be convenient; at least for learners from the UK and similar time zones. They consistently attracted a good number of learners who looked forward to and who engaged in the discussions with a passion. Facilitators also noted how they enjoyed the TweetChats and how they brought learners and facilitators together. As an open learning event, potentially attracting learners from around the world, further cases are needed to learn more about effectively managing engagement across time zones. In BYOD4L one of the facilitators was based in Australia and he reported how the synchronous activity could not easily fit with his early morning commitments.

Solutions to this are dependent upon how sub-communities can be formed globally and the relation of these sub-groups to each other and the opportunities for designing in inter-group interactivity as they work through activities. Offering at least 2 tweetchats in a day is something that could be considered in the future.

4. Global open educational offer and the challenge of timezones: BYOD4L involved facilitators and learners from around the world. We found that it is not enough to invite participation in open education where it operates across time zones. Participants need to feel part of what is happening and must not feel excluded from events. Selecting facilitators from different geographical locations could promote inclusion. In BYOD4L the majority of the facilitator team was based in the UK and this might have made the challenge more acute. Sub-groups within the learning community could provide time-zoned conversations and materials, including additional problem-based scenarios, so as to reflect the diversity of participants.

5. Time to fully participate was a challenge for all facilitators. Facilitators engaged in BYOD4L in a voluntary capacity. This was a challenging additional commitment to the day job and caused some additional pressure to individuals. It is hoped that, building on the success of BYOD4L, future iterations of the course will garner more institutional support. This becomes more feasible as more learners from each institution take part in the open offering.

Facilitators have noted that the success of BYOD4L has reflected well on associated institutions and so more consideration should be given to the indirect benefits of being involved in such an open course including the development opportunity it offers facilitators as learners and the access it provides to knowledge and resources which can be used in other situations.

Galley et al. (2010) developed the Community indicators Framework (CiF) for observing and supporting community development which consists of four indicators: identity,

participation, cohesion and creative capacity. They suggested these indicators develop in sequence within a community and that the presence of specific indicators reveals the strength of a community (Figure 1). There are parallels between the CiF and Tuckman's (1965) forming, storming, norming, performing team-development model.

Using the CiF framework to reflect on the development of the BYOD4L facilitation team it becomes evident that a strong sense of identity was formed by using the online social media spaces selected by the group. This formation is likely to have been enhanced by the innovative nature of the approach and the need for all to work collectively and rapidly. The explicit flat hierarchy and overt distributed expertise across the group helped to clarify the nature of facilitator participation. Facilitators were reminded by each other in Facebook group conversations that they were members of the core group and this message was reinforced in the Google Hangout pre-course meeting. Because of BYOD4L's rapid development, this engagement was not an outcome of sustained interaction - the group became fully functional quickly. Our findings question the necessity of this attribute of CiF therefore. The group did demonstrate all of the attributes of cohesion, however, being supportive and tolerant, open to turn-taking, and operating within a convivial, playful and often humorous context. The creative capacity of the group was one of its strongest identities, with peers being very receptive to doing things 'differently'. Facilitators were aware, as innovators, that any assumption associated with the BYOD4L experiment was open to be challenged. This commitment to active innovation provided the group with the energy it needed.

Figure 1. The Community indicator Framework (CiF) Galley et al (2010)

Conclusions

The five day course was intense, even so it was considered manageable. Attending courses, workshops or conferences in person, with the benefits of working across institutions, requires an individual to take time away from their normal working space and this adversely affects engagement with professional development. For many this is compounded by cuts in funding. This provided a driver for BYOD4L to examine whether open CPD courses can remove the associated constraints of time and cost.

Grassroots open learning initiatives, such as BYOD4L, born out of the interests, curiosity, need and commitment of a small distributed group of professionals can alter the landscape and nature of professional development. It has the potential to bring learners and educators as co-learners closer together into a community, where openness, sharing and caring is practised and provides the social glue. This is what happened in BYOD4L when a group of distributed facilitators came together to learn about professional open practice through co-development, application and immersion.

Evidence from BYOD4L suggests that open learning facilitators, acting as member of a facilitation community, will be motivated to invest more in their role and see this as a valued professional development opportunity while supporting others in their learning; the notion of learning with the learners characterised the BYOD4L course facilitation role. Their positive relationships with each other also influenced the way they engaged with the learners and set the tone for how learners interacted with each other. One of the facilitator's noted, "We can achieve so much more when we work with others and this project is a testimony for this." Could this communal and caring approach to professional development provide a useful model for others?

"There was a silence (possibly too dramatic to say emptiness) when the Twitter chat finished on the Friday. These connections, I think, will continue beyond the end of the course." BYOD4L facilitator

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