Learners' Experiences with Learner Support in Networked Learning Communities

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Abstract

This paper reports on key findings of an exploratory study into the relationship between online social presence and learner support in networked learning. The aims of the paper are, first, to promote understanding of learners' experiences with learner support in networked learning and, second, to inform the ongoing development of learner support system in that context. The findings focus on learners' experiences with learner support in the forms of (a) interpersonal interaction and (b) supportive infrastructure which facilitates learning activity. The discussion highlights three issues which inform the provision of learner support in networked learning environments: (1) the identification of support mechanisms valued by learners; (2) the disconnect between learners expectations for support and the practicalities of learning activity in networked environments; and (3) the conceptual problem of imaging learner support within networked community structures.

Keywords

Networked learning, learner experience, learner support, interpersonal interaction

Introduction

Historically associated with distance education, learner support is gaining currency in a variety of educational contexts, including networked learning. Increasing interest in lifelong learning has resulted in changed demographics in higher and further education (Ryan, 2001). Constructivist pedagogical approaches and the related learner centeredness have refocused the delivery of educational programmes on the learner experience (Mayes, 2004). The marketisation of education has changed the dynamics of the institution--student relationship and necessitated a consideration of learners as consumers (Tait, 2000). Together, these forces have emphasised the role of learner support in increasing the satisfaction, retention and success of learners. Learner support addresses learners' needs and empowers them to create learning experiences which are more personally meaningful, more relevant and more productive. Education has become a service industry and learner support is a key component of that service.

Learner support in networked learning merits particular attention because it introduces potentially unfamiliar learning conditions. These unfamiliar conditions include pedagogical approaches which emphasize collaborative process over individual ones, promote learner centeredness with implied role changes for learners and highlight concerns over learning skills and equitable social practice. They also include the need to overcome physical distance between learners in distributed groups; the use of new, novel or unfamiliar technology tools; and the social distance between learners introduced by mediating technologies.

This paper addresses the issue of learner support in networked learning communities by drawing out key findings of an exploratory study into the relationship between online social presence and learner support in networked learning. The aims of the paper are, first, to promote understanding of learners' experiences with learner support in networked learning and, second, to inform the ongoing development of learner support systems in that context. Findings highlight the supportive nature of two types of support mechanisms: (1) responsive, dynamic in-person support provided via interpersonal interaction and (2) supportive infrastructure of networked learning communities.

Background

The notion of support is not new to education. McLoughlin (2002) points out that teaching has always had a supportive dimension. It is clear that not all learners are willing or able to successfully complete activities that lead to learning. They need support (Laurillard, 2002).

Definition

Broadly, learner support includes "all those elements capable of responding to a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process" (Thorpe, 2002, p. 108, emphasis in the original). Learner support in this paper refers to the process of "meeting the needs that all learners have because they are central to high quality learning" (Thorpe, 2002, p. 107). It includes not only the activities undertaken by individuals and groups, but also the structures which organise and facilitate that activity.

History

Learner support has a historical basis in open and distance learning. It arose from a need to help learners overcome isolation in distance learning situations and personalise their learning experiences (Tait, 2000). In place-based higher education, particularly undergraduate education, most learning is mediated by the teacher (Laurillard, 2002). Furthermore, most of the learner support in face-to-face situations is tacit, and carried out informally in the activities of the teacher (Ryan, 2001). In traditional distance education (i.e., a correspondence model), physical distance removes the learner from direct contact with the teacher and the rest of the learner cohort. This distance precludes much of the interaction that is taken for granted in face-to-face contexts. In this situation, tacit learner support mechanisms provided in the person of the teacher are not present. Therefore formal learner support systems are needed to help learners succeed.

Learner Support in Networked Learning

Networked learning creates opportunities for support in the workings of networked learning communities and the infrastructure which sustains them. With emphasis on community, connection, and interaction, learner support in networked learning has shifted away from a discrete systems-based model of support to an integrated, holistic learner-centred view which is consistent with the constructivist and other socially situated pedagogies that feature prominently in networked learning (Ryan, 2001). Thorpe (2002) highlights the fundamentals of support in networked (online) learning: "Learner support is essentially about roles, structures and environments: support roles and supportive people, together with support structures and supportive environments" (p. 110).

Dynamic, Responsive Support

The most obvious opportunities for learner support in networked learning are in the creation of conditions which promote interpersonal interaction. Networked communications technologies connect members of the learning community and allow for timely, convenient interaction. Networked learning systems cater not only to educational activities which promote organized formal learning but also to natural (non-educational) learning which occurs informally and incidentally whenever people interact (Fox, 2002). Learning occurs both as a result of direct participation in learning activity and also through legitimate peripheral participation in communities (Lave & Wenger, 1997) in which knowledge is 'stolen' from the community (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Therefore networked learning provides the capacity for a broader range of learner supports which are potentially much richer than traditional distance education.

Infrastructural Support

Supportive infrastructure is one of the key features of vibrant and sustaining communities (Hung & Chen, 2001). In this context, the term *infrastructure* refers not only to the technological infrastructure of networked environments, but also the social infrastructure which supports and organises the operation of networked communities. Such infrastructure facilitates the operation of the community because it promotes participants' understanding of the processes they are engaged in. Infrastructure has a particular significance for online communities in both (a) the need to manage and regulate the activity of distributed groups; and (b) the opportunity to re-imagine activity freed from the constraints of place-based, face-to-

face modes of work. The technology allows learner support to be integrated, seamless and user driven in networked learning.

Hung and Chen (2001) identify three dimensions of infrastructure which support activity within communities: *rules and processes*; *facilitating structures;* and *accountability mechanisms*. First, rules and processes organise activity within communities. They structure the practice of the community and help define its ways of working, ways of seeing the world and ways solving problems (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Rules and processes guide and support practice by defining the roles of participants, promoting the use of particular tools (e.g. frameworks, organisers, other conceptual tools) and structuring collaborative activity within the community. Second, facilitating structures such as particular communications tools or the information architecture of networked communities assist the operation of communities. Third, accountability mechanisms help communities regulate themselves and ensure effective practice. Networked computer technologies create robust accountability mechanisms in networked learning communities by allowing all members to monitor activity within the community (Hung & Chen, 2001).

Research Focus

This paper is drawn from a wider exploratory study into the relationship between social presence and learner support in text-based online learning environments. It focuses on learners' experiences with learner support in networked learning environments with the aim of informing understanding of the operation of networked learning environments.

The general question addressed within the paper is: *How do learners in online courses experience learner support within a course, particularly in the (a) the human--human interaction within the course and (b) infrastructure of the course?* The collection of information was structured around a number of related questions including*: Do participants value human--human interaction? Why? (e.g., do they find it supportive?) What types? What supportive infrastructure exists (is experienced by learners) in particular courses? Do participants recognize this as supportive? Do they value it?*

The study included four networked learning courses as part of a collective case study design. Information on learner experiences was collected using a dialogical process consisting of five phases: questionnaire, initial interview, group discussion, second interview and summary group discussion. This process acted as an extended conversation which allowed respondents to identify, explicate and reflect on their experiences as networked learners, then work collaboratively to construct shared understandings of the phenomena in question. Information was analysed using an iterative thematic analysis at three points in the information collection process: between phases of the dialogical process, at the conclusion of each dialogical process and at the conclusion of all information collection for the study. The quality of findings was enhanced through a combination of multiple forms of triangulation and extensive respondent validation (see Kehrwald, 2007 for a full description of the research design).

Findings Summary

Following the research questions, findings regarding networked learners' experiences with learner support are organised according to (a) dynamic *responsive supports* which are provided via interpersonal interaction using CMC tools and (b) relatively static *supportive infrastructure* (e.g., course materials, clear and intuitive interfaces, role expectations).

How do learners in online courses experience learner support in the human--human interaction within the course? Do participants find interaction supportive?

Respondents clearly affirmed the supportive nature of interpersonal interaction. Interaction and the related development of relations between individuals were highly valued. This value was associated with a combination of academic, affective and administrative supports derived from interaction with others in the online environment.

Facilitator activity and learner-facilitator interaction
Facilitator activity was seen as an essential form of learner support. Respondents indicated high expectations of timely, responsive support from course facilitators.

Some suggested that responsive support was the single most important function of online teaching staff. They associated a lack of support with a lack of timely response from the facilitator and the negative impact this had on both peer interaction and perceptions of the facilitator's presence. Expectations of supportive facilitator activities included: (a) responding to questions; (b) providing feedback on ideas in discussions; (c) providing encouragement; (d) facilitating connections between learners: and (e) moderating discussions, including enforcing norms of behaviour.

Responses revealed underpinning expectations that teaching staff in networked learning courses have traditional roles as authority figures in the online learning environments. While respondents conceded that teaching staff may defer their roles as subject matter experts to other parties, they indicated expectations of being led by an active teacher figure. Despite working within pedagogical approaches which espouse learner centeredness, collaboration and communal activity, respondents indicated a strong preference for a highly visible, active teacher who assumes authority for managing and facilitating the learning process. Furthermore, respondents explicitly refused to accept the notion that they or their peers could take responsibility for such activities. Respondents suggested that as clients, learner support was what they were paying for in formal education. They were unwilling to assume leadership and management of the processes which constituted the services in question.

Taken together, these points foreshadow a potential disconnect between learner expectations of teacher roles and the roles suggested by social constructivist pedagogies.

Peer support
Findings related to learner experiences with peer support were mixed. Throughout ongoing discussions about interaction and learner support, respondents indicated a value on peer support provided through interpersonal interaction. Peer interaction was seen to be an important source of affective support in the form of motivation and overcoming a sense of isolation within distributed cohorts. Respondents also noted that they frequently benchmarked themselves against their peers when discussing particular aspects of the study program. This was seen as an important form of feedback. Respondents referred to successful collaborative activities in which they experienced a wide variety of supports that included: (a) other affective benefits such as a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with the learning experience; and (b) academic benefits from working interdependently in a diverse group.

By contrast, relatively few participants indicated high expectations with regard to peer support or high levels of commitment to collaborative processes. Following from the points in the previous section regarding support from the facilitator, a majority of respondents indicated that they expected support from the teaching staff, but had little expectation of support from peer learners. Furthermore, comments suggested that, despite being engaged with a learner-centric process and realizing the benefits of successful collaborative activity, they had limited expectation of peer support and little commitment to collaborative processes. However, participants also noted that their views on collaboration were changing as they gained experience.

Do participants recognize infrastructure as supportive? Value it?

Although they did not refer explicitly to the term "infrastructure", respondents clearly identified supportive structure within online courses. They cited course design, task design, assessment structures, clear and explicit course processes, orientation activities, group and community structures, explicit participant roles and 'rules of engagement' as supportive insofar as they met learners' needs within the courses. Responses indicated a high value on clear, coherent processes within courses which were supported by responsive facilitation.

What supportive infrastructure is experienced by learners in particular courses?

Using the Hung and Chen (2001) framework for supportive infrastructure (*rules and processes*, *facilitating structures,* and *accountability mechanisms*) as an analytical tool, rules and processes and accountability mechanisms emerged as prevalent in learner experiences with learner support within particular courses.

Rules and Processes.

Course Design/Instructional Design- The overall design of the course was seen as an important component of supportive infrastructure. Respondents noted the importance of alignment between the constructivist underpinnings of course designs and the related values of learner-centeredness and active/interactive constructive learning processes. The identification of processes which promote and facilitate interaction was seen as an important part of course design. In particular, respondents also noted the importance of alignment between constructivist pedagogical foundations and the intended outcomes, learning tasks and assessment scheme. This was viewed as a supportive mechanism to reinforce the expectation of interpersonal interaction as a key aspect of such activity. Some participants noted that this alignment could and should be extended further within their respective courses to include the assessment of collaborative activity such as assessed participation or the assessment of collaborative products. Moreover, responses suggest that poorly designed courses create greater needs for learner support rather than being a source of support.

Participant Roles – Roles for both learners and facilitators were identified as essential infrastructure in networked courses. In particular, comments focused on role expectations, the establishment of shared understandings of roles and the implied activity for both learners and facilitators. Given that collaborative activity is a departure from the norm in many formal education contexts, the identification of collaborative roles was seen as essential to support interaction and collaborative activity.

Important participant roles identified include: challenging the viewpoints of peer learners sharing ideas, providing alternative views, contributing to discussions early and often, maintaining a positive social atmosphere/tone, making personal introductions and personal disclosure, and providing confirmation not only of ideas, but also of rates of progress and approaches to tasks. This list implies a high degree of interaction and commitment to reading of and response to the dynamic content of the course. Examples of this commitment cited by respondents include being the first to post messages, recognizing the contributions of other participants, recognizing group achievements and being explicit about commitment to collaborative work and accountability to the group.

The facilitator was seen to play a key role in creating and maintaining the infrastructure of the course as well as providing support. As mentioned above, respondents in all groups indicated particularly high expectations for responsive support from facilitators. Some of the facilitator roles identified included: creating an inviting social climate, prompting learner responses, structuring discussion topics, creating spaces for work groups, maintaining flexibility with timelines, aiding in the selection of content and responding to emergent issues. The notion of 'responsiveness' was seen to include timely responses to student queries and feedback on progress in the course. In courses which were seen as (relatively) less supportive, there was a clear indication of a need to re-assess facilitator roles and the implications for facilitator activity.

Orientation Activities - Respondents noted that meaningful orientation activities which not only contributed to learning but also initiated a sense of community within the course were supportive. Some respondents went further to suggest that these activities need to be followed up to promote the ongoing development and community within courses. These findings suggest the importance of orientation activities which: (a) explicate norms for behaviour; (b) provide opportunities to begin interactive relational processes early in a course; and (c) promote an understanding of group roles, rules and process. Given recent research findings regarding the need for novice online learners to learn skills necessary to cultivate online social presence, interact with one another effectively and collaborate (Kehrwald, 2008, in press), orientation activities represent an important area for further consideration and study in creating supportive infrastructure.

Rules which support interaction - A number of respondents in one case noted the negative tone of discussions early in the course as learners struggled to adjust to the new online environment. For some, the negativity was very off-putting and seemed to undermine efforts to establish the course community or create an inviting course environment. Some suggested that clearer rules for participation would help address this issue, including the establishment of norms for behaviour. Other suggestions included the need for accountability mechanism to support these rules.

Facilitating Structures.
Group and Community Structure – Structuring was identified as an important supportive function. Respondents commented on numerous aspects of the organization and structure of the courses, identifying some as very supportive and suggesting changes in others.

In particular, the size of the course cohort was discussed. Some groups were deemed too large for the development of meaningful relationships and the use of smaller work groups was identified as supportive structuring technique. Although no ideal group sizes were suggested, some participants commented very favourably on their experiences in the small group of 10-15 members while others had mixed comments about very small groups of 3-4 members: some liked the intimacy of small groups; others felt that this technique segmented the whole class into too many subgroups.

Of interest was the basis for group creation. In one case, the whole group was divided based on professional contexts into school teachers, tertiary educators and corporate trainers. This basis was seen as providing an important source of commonality for participants which helped them identify shared attitudes, beliefs and experience as a basis for relationship building. The grouping also helped them establish commonality of purpose in their learning activities and focus their efforts on shared objectives. Small groups were seen as a means of promoting the development of community within the course, albeit in 'groups within the group'. However, respondents also noted some need for progression in the creation and use of groups. It was suggested that groups should be periodically re-formed in order to expose different individuals to one another and thereby introduce new ideas and fresh perspectives to group activities.

Community structures were seen as an important source of support. As part of the development of small communities within the larger course cohort, participants identified: (a) an enhanced sense of the identity of group members with whom they were interacting and a related greater sense of accountability to those individuals; and (b) a greater commitment to group activities and the shared goals that emerged. Critical discourse within these community structures was identified as a very important aspect of learning in text-based online environments. Some participants were vocal in their identification of the supportive nature of these workgroups and identified it as a highlight of their postgraduate program. Others indicated that the experience had positively affected their views of social support and collaborative activity. In particular, this was seen to influence the roles of participants and imply a set of rules for activity which include timely response/contribution and maintenance of a positive social climate through the use of netiquette.

Content - Respondents identified an important supportive role in the selection, management and use of course content, including the participant generated dynamic content. The content structure is important because learners take meaning from such structure (Laurillard, 2002). In some courses, the quantity of content was seen to be excessive, even burdensome. As a result, participants highlighted the need for informed content selection in order to focus their efforts on the most important tasks and information. The selection of content was aided by advice from peer learners and the facilitator.

Flexibility – Respondents noted the need to balance structure and flexibility. In particular, participants in courses during the shortened summer term commented that a lack of flexibility in the shortened term undermined the general notion of a course as 'supportive'. Conversely, participants in other terms commented favourably on the flexibility afforded in those courses. This suggests some need for attention to the alignment of course processes with institutional timelines and the need for supportive flexibility.

Discussion and Implications

The findings highlight three key issues which inform the provision of learner support in networked learning environments: (1) identifying valued learner support mechanisms; (2) dealing with learner expectations; and (3) reconceptualising support in the context of networked learning communities.

Identifying Valued Learner Support Mechanisms

In-person support delivered via interpersonal interaction is highly valued by networked learners. Interaction with the teaching staff was most highly valued and this was related to high expectations of

specific, timely in-person support from course teaching staff. Respondents' experiences imply particular supportive activities for teaching staff including timely response to learner queries, cultivation of a visible online presence, promoting a productive social climate within the course, and thoughtful structuring of learner activity. While this list of facilitator activities is not exhaustive, it is consistent with a growing body knowledge around good online teaching practice (e.g. Gunawardena & Zittle, 1996; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001; Salmon, 2000). Further work is needed to elaborate these roles and explicitly link them to learner support practices.

Peer interaction was also valued, though not expected. Findings indicated a need for further study into learner experiences with peer interaction as a support mechanism, particular with respect to (a) transference of support expectations from face-to-face to situations and the potential interference with support in networked learning environments; (b) the relationship between increasing skill with technology mediated learning and changes in learners' support expectations and (c) further identification of supportive aspects of peer interaction.

Supportive structures (i.e. 'infrastructure') were not only identifiable by learners, but were highly valued. These include various aspects of course design, explicit role assignments, orientation activities within the networked community, and explicit rules which organise activity. In particular, these structures were seen as most supportive when placed in the context of a cohesive whole such as a community structure which includes a combination of roles, rules and tools to facilitate activity. Further work is needed to understand the operation of community structures as a form of learner support and the development of community within networked environments.

Dealing with Learner Expectations

Despite the value on interpersonal interaction identified above, the findings highlight discontinuity between ideals of community participation, learner expectations of activity in networked learning communities and actual learner activity learning environments which are based on community learning models. At the heart of these issues is the question: *What does is mean to be a learner participant in text-based online learning communities?* Likewise, *what does it mean to be a teacher in these contexts or to be some other member of the community?* The answer is not straightforward. Because community models may be more democratic and egalitarian than other structures, roles must be carefully considered for all stakeholders. Learners must be prepared to assume more control not only for their own personal learning, but also for the functioning of the community as a whole. They are asked to play roles and follow rules which, while not directly related to learning activity, are part of larger interconnected systems of activity within community structures. Tutors, facilitators, e-moderators or other agents of the education provider are asked to assume roles of community membership which require them to distribute responsibility and power within the community. Decision making and leadership are shared processes.

Findings from this study highlight the need for the development of understanding around roles within the learning environments. Notably, respondents indicated that, in most cases, they were unwilling to assume more responsibility for the operation and management of the learning community. Whilst they were happy to have input into decision making, they were unwilling to invest time or energy in roles that they associated with traditional teaching, including structuring, support and creating accountability within the learning environment. In other words, online learners who participated in this study rejected the roles they might be asked to play in 'ideal' online learning communities. These findings underscore the need for further research and development related to roles within learning communities, particularly as they relate to expectations of various stakeholders with regard to activity, participation, responsibility and the distribution of power in online learning communities.

Reconsidering Learner Support in Text-based Online Learning Communities

Further to the suggestions above about the creation of supportive community structures, the discussion of values in online learning communities and the roles of participants in these environments, there is a need to reconsider learner support with regard to the questions of (a) learner needs vs. learner wants; and (b) responsibility for the provision of high quality learner support.

With regard to the creation of highly responsive learner support systems, there is danger of creating systems which are *too* responsive. The point of learner support is not to cater to every whim of individual learners, but rather to provide adequate support to allow learners to realize success in their respective learning endeavours. The focus must remain squarely on *learning* as a measure of success and support must be linked to learner *needs* with regard to learning as opposed to focusing on *program completion* and learner *wants* with regard to their learning. While we must not discount learner preferences, the point is to create and support pedagogically sound learning programs which account for a diversity of learner interests and seek to meet learners' needs within the program. Ideally, learner support will cater to a variety of member (learner) preferences whilst emphasizing learning as part of a productive community system.

These issues relate to questions of responsibility and control within online learning communities. Further to the points above regarding roles, this issue highlights a particular area for further research: working out the balance of shared responsibilities for learner support in online learning communities. How much responsibility do learners assume for their own learning? How much responsibility do learners assume for the learning of their peers? What responsibilities are assumed by the education provider and its agents (facilitators, tutors, subject matter experts, etc.)?

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