The Quality of Innovative Academic Lives: Influences Past, Present – and Future?

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Abstract: The second writer entered academia four years before the revolts of 1968. The aftermath of these events had direct impact on his academic goals and his lifelong efforts to achieve them. The first writer matured in an environment wherein these events were only remembered as past history. The concept of student-centred learning was simply for her an important and well-established academic aspiration yet to be comprehensively fulfilled in technology-rich learning environments. The writers reflectively review their contrasting academic experiences in pursuit of academic enhancement. Each in turn identifies anecdotally the major influences on the quality of their academic lives which have been devoted to student-centred learning. They speculatively discuss the impact of innovating, of balancing ever more stringent and diverse demands, of taking risks, of collaborating with valued colleagues, and of pursuing rigour by evaluating whilst ever engaging with learners facilitatively and in trusting relationships. They close by summarising the factors that have contributed to enhancing the quality of their academic lives, and applying these to current challenges with learning and technologies.

Keywords: academia, student-centred learning, 1968 revolts, online learning, academic quality of life

Introduction

The *Call for Papers 2016* from *Spark*, with its powerful reminder of the disturbances of 1968, reached Susi with apt timing. We had recently had occasion to discuss the radically different impact of these events on the quality of our academic lives.

In late 2015 we had compiled a paper suggesting enhancements to the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison 2011), a well-known approach to the design, maintenance and evaluation of online learning. We received a provisional acceptance, subject to making acceptable responses to the reviewers' comments. John undertook this task, which proved straightforward except in one instance. A reviewer had required further justification of our suggestion to replace the core concept of "Teaching Presence" (Garrison 2011) with "Tutoring Presence". In his response to the editor, John dwelt characteristically and passionately on what he described as the catalytic impact of the 1968 revolts on the inception in northern Europe of Student-Centred Learning (SCL) in higher education. He ventured to regret forcefully that this approach had not always been embraced, noting that many academic authors still write in terms of authoritative teachers who advise and decide for their learners – rather than of facilitative tutors. Susi delicately suggested some rewording; happily, the revised version proved acceptable to the editor.

Nevertheless, both writers were left mulling over their discovery that the events of 1968, which had been so significant for John in his academic career, were but historical incidents for Susi, who is currently immersed in her struggles to encourage tutors to examine the potential of technologies to support, and nurture, SCL. John questioned whether the riots were not the unrecognised heritage upon which Susi's longstanding commitment to student-centred learning was founded. So when the Stirling call for papers arrived, we felt that we were positioned to compile and offer two interestingly contrasting viewpoints regarding the impact of 1968 on the quality of innovatory academic lives in the United Kingdom.

We first look to past and present to identify factors which have significantly influenced the quality of our individual academic lives. We commence with John's account of the attraction for him of concentrating on creating effective learning experiences based on SCL; this has never waned throughout his academic career. Susi provides a contrasting account; she discusses how her academic life has been influenced by opportunities to bring about change by embracing the opportunities and scrutinising the challenges that technologies offer as supportive tools in essentially SCL environments. We finish by summarising the factors that enhanced our academic lives through these activities, and apply these to the sector's current challenges with learning and technologies.

John's Account

My academic starting point

In 1964, I moved from industry to become a university lecturer. I aspired to be a more effective teacher of structural engineering than those who had taught me.

I found myself in a well-established world of classrooms equipped with blackboards and chalk, where my students were addressed by their surnames. My modest attempts to innovate, attracted derision. My introduction of structural modelling competitions, featuring towers or bridges made from balsawood or spaghetti, led to a scathing public criticism from a leading UK professor of structural engineering of the introduction of 'methods suited to a kindergarten'. Fifty years later this modelling is a common learning experience in engineering courses.

By 1969, the reverberations from the events in mainland Europe in the previous year were trundling across the Channel to a Britain which had experienced no revolts. Yet it housed a few academics who were acutely critical of the antediluvian nature of our higher education, and yearned, as did the radical continentals, to bring about fundamental reforms and to concentrate on promoting student-centred learning. That year I attended a visionary two-week course for university teachers. On my return home, I tore up all my lecture notes. I was determined to concentrate on my students' learning rather than on the instruction favoured in my traditional setting. At much the same time, Carl Rogers had published his seminal book entitled *Freedom to Learn* (1969), with its optimistic sub-title: *A view of what education might become.* That vision thrilled and inspired me – as it still does, after nearly half a century.

Consequently 1969 was a watershed year for me – as it was, I believe with hindsight, for higher education in the UK and in northern mainland Europe. It marked the birth of overt student-centred learning in European higher education, entailing not only student autonomy regarding the pace, method and assessment of their learning, but also extending to individual freedom in the choice of course content (Cowan 1978). In some project-orientated universities in Scandinavia, groups of students handled their own resources, and hired lecturers and other support staff in accordance with the students' chosen priorities (Cowan 1982). Amidst a turmoil of initiatives, higher education was on the move from a long-established authoritarian pattern to a rapidly developing situation in which each succeeding decade featured different factors for change, and different changes.

Isolated enthusiasts

In the 1970s, I visited and was inspired by the radical and well-established developments that were already in place in centres of project-orientation such as Aalborg, Roskilde, Bremen, Lund and Luleå (Cowan 1982). Departmental centres for resource-based learning began to appear in British universities such as Glasgow, Aston and my own Heriot-Watt. Modest external support for innovation was forthcoming from such as the Nuffield Foundation. There was as yet little *institutional* support for innovators, who often had to struggle to establish respectability. However, a patchwork of informal networks began to develop, linking together enthusiasts who exchanged accounts of their experiences in conferences devoted to innovation, then known as "educational technology." Few could report extensive evaluative data; but all were encouraged by the positive feedback they received from their students, once they had acclimatised to the move from passive listening to active learning.

In 1979 a group of prominent personalities launched the *Education for Capability Manifesto* in the UK national press (Harris et al. 1981). This outspoken document deplored the inadequacy of current educational provision, at all levels. It argued for a reconsideration of educational fundamentals, rationale and methodology, to concentrate on the effective development of relevant capabilities. Seemingly the tide had turned, with welcome signs of a grudging admission within the sector that perhaps SCL had something to offer.

This was an exciting period for the still somewhat isolated enthusiasts. We were engaged in creating new ways of promoting learning. We had formed connections and partnerships with kindred spirits, colleagues with whom we shared the conception and the delivery of our new ventures. Our students were enthusiastically, if subjectively, supportive about what we – and they – were achieving. Being at the forefront of these changes was highly motivating for us. However, some of us were troubled by the absence, in most innovations, of any systematic attempt to gather data which would inform the making of reliable judgements of the effectiveness of what we were doing. This issue moved onto the agenda for myself and fellow specialist advisers on teaching, learning and assessment for the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA).

Academic auditing

On routine validation visits to polytechnics offering CNAA degrees, specialist advisors began to inquire about the collection of useful data and its use in programme evaluations. Gradually, we began to encounter examples of sound evaluative practice, in a trend which seemed to us to move the polytechnics ahead of the established universities in terms of quality assurance.

Policy makers in the traditional university sector were soon prompted to follow suit. For, by the end of the 1980s, some in the traditional universities foresaw problems arising from the inevitably comparisons of the quality assurance systems in CNAA institutions and their virtual absence in universities. The Academic Audit Units (AAU) was established with a remit to assure quality and standards in chartered universities. It was my good fortune to be invited to become one of the first auditors. I immediately encountered university situations featuring assorted and generally deficient procedures for quality assurance. Teams often found grave lack of alignment in much of the provision which we audited. There was often little compatibility between the declared learning outcomes, what the assessment scrutinised and rewarded, and the learning activity which should prepare learners to satisfy the intended learning outcomes. Moreover, many universities were blandly unaware of these discrepancies or of their importance. So audit teams were particularly encouraged by the AAU Directorate to probe alignment and other quality matters rigorously; to report objectively; and above all to constructively suggest in specific terms the remedial action which should be taken to promote adequate standards for learning.

Serving on audit was a highlight of my entire academic career. I was teamed with academics of the highest calibre. We worked to specific and creative remits, which demanded our best constructive responses in regard to challenges involving assuring academic quality, in a range of disciplines and settings. Together we discussed issues which emerged for our immediate audit, and for more general cases. Our actions and findings were scrutinised by the Directorate before our honed recommendations emerged in the audit reports, of which I believe we could be justifiably proud. The quality of my academic life in terms of the level of my creative and evaluative academic thinking, both on audit and in my own university, was literally transformed. The close professional relationship with high quality colleagues working together to constructively suggest need for, and means of enhancement, was a powerful influence for me at that time, and thereafter. The reported recommendations were a powerful influence in the sector, for they went into the public domain as publications.

Innovating at the grass roots

In every academic year in my career I have taught learners on certificated courses; and there has only been one year in which I have not launched a significant initiative. Most of these have involved me in working alongside tutors and learners to improve the effectiveness of learning experiences. Most have called on me to find and work with tutors who had already identified scope for enhancement. They were willing to take risks with me and to devote creative effort to bringing about the outcomes to which we aspired. Most of our initiatives therefore featured schemes in which a group of tutors together collected data to inform our processes of formative and summative evaluation. These (usually small) teams were often multi-disciplinary and multi-institutional, devoted to the development of higher-level cognitive and interpersonal abilities. Some were formed in developing countries which had sought my concentrated short-term input to improve the quality of their higher education.

In such joint innovative activity at the grass roots, we were always and deliberately researching into the learning of *our* students, in *our* discipline areas, facilitated by *our* efforts – and always seeking to identify scope for enhancement of what *they* were learning. These teams developed tight collegial relationships, which endured long after a team's activities and its task were mere memories. They inspired tutors who had never envisaged themselves as researchers to report their evaluated efforts to international conferences and in academic journals. I joyed in the fellowship, the creative discussions, the successes and the relationships with students which were a natural feature of our student-centred innovations. I took particular pleasure when these colleagues, who might earlier have classed themselves as ordinary teachers or tutors, had clear cause to feel modestly proud of what they had created and achieved, and did not really need me anymore.

John's overview

It was my great good fortune to begin my academic career at the time when the revolts of 1968, the writings of Carl Rogers, and the zealous efforts of local agents for change, all combined to spark an educational revolution in my country. Student-centred learning, educational research, educational development, and evidence-based evaluations and

judgements all feature strongly nowadays in the expectations of the sector. Those who lectured to me in 1950, or who were my first colleagues when I was appointed in 1964 to lecture, could probably never have imagined such changes.

My journey has been one in which the quality of my academic life has been at a consistently high level, for a variety of reasons. It has been a journey through a period when Student-Centred Learning grew in strength and influence in the sector. It has taken me into an era when the creative planning of learning and teaching has become more and more professional, and when evidence-based evaluations have become the norm. I was fortunate to live through a period of quality enhancement and of innovation, when the high quality of my academic life and attendant relationships were to serve as motivating factors which constantly drove me to go beyond the calls of duty, and to strive for further enhancement of Student-Centred Learning.

Susi's account

My long-standing aim, over the last two decades, has been to empower learners, tutors, team-members, co-workers/researchers, members of cross-institutional working groups, and, of course, myself, to develop and flourish in their professional and personal lives, fulfilling their potential in our technology-rich worlds. Innovation, risk-taking and collaboration are at the heart of all my activities.

Underpinning my vision is my belief that learning is both a social and individual activity, which builds upon learners' previous experiences and knowledge. I always hope that learning may lead to new or radically revised understandings involving a permanent change for the individual, and often leading to a modification of perspective, ethics, and/or values (Rogers 1969; Vygotsky (Nicholl 1998)). I envisage learning as taking place at a pace and by a method suited to and mainly chosen by learners, accepting that my learners have different learning styles, approaches, abilities and skills (TEAL 2010).

The quality of academic life is dependent upon the opportunities that I have in my working environment to progress, and to nurture my vision. I have sought to bring about change by embracing the opportunities and scrutinising the challenges that technologies offer as supportive tools in our learning environments, and by encouraging others to do so as well.

The potential of online learning

I believe that the online learning environment can now provide an innovative, dynamic space for my learners, impacting on the quality of their academic lives. Most specifically, it can allow them access to educational opportunities, particularly for continuing professional development, whilst retaining employment and fulfilling their familial responsibilities (O'Shea et al. 2015). Many studies have documented learners' joy at gaining unhoped for access to learning opportunities. As one of the students in the study by Zembylas et al. (2008) noted:

> For the first time I am able to study in my own country, without having to leave my family, abandon my work and suffer the consequences, especially the psychological effects of abandoning my children and my wife. (p.112)

Technologies now provide us with exciting opportunities to arrange for learners to work and learn together a/synchronously, regardless of where they, and their tutors, are physically located. It is often only our imagination, courage and resources that limit the spaces which we as tutors provide for our learners.

Nevertheless, I am an increasingly aware that the online environment can be alien, even threatening, for many learners, negatively impacting on the quality of their academic lives whilst studying. To address this, I aspire to develop and maintain with my learners an inclusive, trusting online collaborative community. I have found that such a grouping is dependent upon the nurturing of social presence (Kehrwald 2008). Kehrwald's insightful work demonstrates how students link social presence with a sense of being with other sentient beings who are actively 'listening' and prepared to respond meaningfully. The sense of 'other' is conveyed through visible contributions such as online postings which identify the sender as a 'real' human with emotions and personal history, and also signal that the other is 'present' – available to engage in dialogue. As Kehrwald (2008) notes, social presence can enhance '[...] learners' experiences of online learning by allowing them to cultivate and maintain productive relations with others in the online environment [...]' (p.98), thus impacting on the quality of their academic lives.

Eight years ago, an innovative and risk-taking programme team supported me in taking my core module in our MSc in Professional and Higher Education online. My proposal to innovate was fortunate in attracting constructive suggestions to improve the learning environment for all. Group work, to develop and sustain our learning community, has been

central to my module, "*An introduction to technology enhanced learning*". Online group work is often problematic even in face-to-face learning; negative learner reaction to online group work is well-documented (Capdeferro and Romero 2012; Goold et al. 2008). My colleagues provided pointed guidance on how to generate positive experiences of online group work. Consequently, learners in my module self-select groups and within them critique articles about theories of online learning. These critiques are shared with the whole community, and peer review is offered, thus nurturing our learning community. During such activities, learners are often challenged, frequently frustrated, and sometimes annoyed. Much guidance is provided by me as the tutor about how to provide creative feedback using assessment criteria to structure this learner journey (Nichol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006). Many learners have afterwards remarked about the power of this activity, giving them confidence and ability to proffer relevant feedback in their professional lives. For the final assessment, learners develop an online group resource in their preferred technology. Submissions are created in a variety of technologies including Prezi, Pinterest, and Padlet, and are often used in my learners' professional lives to support innovative initiatives therein. Learner feedback has sustained me and impacted on the quality of my academic life:

> as the module progressed, I was truly experiencing the benefits of such approaches to teaching and learning and will utilise this in my own practices. A transformational learning experience! (PGCert student).

Engaging in old challenges in new ways, or engaging in new challenges in new ways

Over the last twenty years, I have worked alongside tutors and learners, always hoping to improve the quality of their academic lives. Often tutors have identified a specific challenge that they seek to address in a different way, which may result in the use of technologies as supportive tools. Many new challenges emerge, especially in the design of new programmes, when tutors are keen to embrace innovations and emergent technologies.

A typical example of this work was our institutional implementation of a commercially-available ePortfolio system. I believed this tool had potential for many of our professional programmes, which then embodied reflective learning using paper-based portfolios. Institutional and programme-level workshops provided exemplars of good practice focusing upon Personal Development Planning, whilst also raising awareness of the ePortfolio as an alternative mechanism for formative/summative assessments. Tutors readily grasped the

opportunity to move paper-based portfolios online, reducing the need for heavy, cumbersome paper submissions. Learners, too, relished a central system for the creation, collection and collation of the evidence required to support their reflective submissions (Peacock et al. 2012). However, the implementation of this tool often led to heated debates about reflection.

For example, in the core module, *"Education in Action"* in our MSc in Professional and Higher Education, our discussions about ePortfolio provoked lively debate about reflection. We ultimately decided to take a pragmatic approach, viewing reflection as an activity that is purposeful, focused, and deliberate, associated with a sophisticated form of thinking and learning involving an evaluation of frames of references, the nature of knowledge and the process of learning (Cowan 1998; Moon 1999; Dewey 1933; Schön 1987). Thus our learners create an online folio for their assessment which includes a reflective, critical commentary, linked evidence, and selected personal blog entries. This linking of evidence to commentary allows learners to make their thinking, decision-making, design and actions transparent to themselves, and to their tutors. Critically the freedom to select what to focus upon in the webfolio, explaining rationale, and critiquing theory to practice, empowers these learners to personalise the assessment to support their future role as educators.

The quality of my academic life as a staff developer is thus dependent upon the opportunities that I have to work alongside tutors, to scrutinise new technologies, evaluating their potential to support learning.

Collaborating and risk-taking with technologies

To bring about my vision, and directly influencing the quality of my academic life, are the diverse opportunities that I have for collaborative working. These range from cross-institutional groups to small select groupings. A highly satisfying aspect of my role has been participating in working groups comprising staff from professional services and the faculties, and learners who meet to seek workable solutions to identified issues and to share experiences in so doing.

An example was a small working group that tussled with our institutional vision for the plagiarism checking software, Turnitin. We had been influenced by the work of Carroll and Appleton (2001) who warned against using this tool solely as a policing mechanism. Instead they suggested a more 'balanced institutional approach'. Our proposal, now incorporated into our institutional regulations, was for the use of Turnitin to be *primarily* regarded as an

empowering learning tool. Students can submit draft assessments and use the resulting Originality Report to assist them in reviewing their paraphrasing and referencing and in general improve their academic scholarship. *Subsequently*, after a final assessment has been submitted, tutors may use Turnitin to check for plagiarism.

Throughout my academic career, I have been privileged to undertake many joint innovative activities with tutors who are prepared to take risks, exploring how emergent technologies can be implemented for the benefit of all. I have also been fortunate to secure funding to evaluate such initiatives, identifying possibilities for further enhancement. Such action research has resulted in long-standing collegial relationships. One such example was when a group of drama tutors, a researcher and myself undertook action research on the early versions of what would become known as webinar software. In 2009, these technologies were truly emergent. Nevertheless, these tutors wanted to explore if they could be used to supporting learners who were often removed from our physical campus on extensive work-related placements, often as a requirement for professional bodies. The situation was further complicated since, due to life-work commitments, the tutors were also infrequently at our campus. Three programmes trialled the software for dissertation supervision, for the provision of feedback on rehearsals, and for pastoral support. Learners and tutors were interviewed about their use of the software. Our findings indicated significant learner benefits including convenience, immediacy of communication and empowerment, even for our rehearsal-based case study (Peacock et al. 2012). Academics reported the software requiring them to re-think the design of the learning environment, re-visiting how they facilitated discourse, and re-examining their communication skills especially with regard to feedback on student performance. Reports, conferences and publications emerged from our collegial work. Today such synchronous sessions are commonplace; but their establishment has been informed by such innovative and risk-taking initiatives.

Susi's overview

I have been lucky to work during a period when technologies have become ubiquitous in UK higher education, and when their use has been promoted politically and by institutional management. The opportunities that these offer to tutors supporting learning, now and in the

future, are diverse and exciting, and provide me with numerous ways in which I can progress my vision of learning and my belief in a form of student-centred learning transformed by the affordances of emerging technologies. We can now realistically design interactive learning spaces for fully online learning in which collaborative, trusting communities can be developed and nurtured. Such endeavours will always be "work-in-progress"; but by taking risks, innovating and working collaboratively, we can continue to develop online learning environments that foster deep learning.

A summary of factors influencing the quality of our academic lives

We have presented two highly personal accounts which have featured our frequently changing personal circumstances. From these we now extract for readers' consideration our suggestions regarding the aspects which have contributed to enhancing the quality of our academic lives as innovators in pursuit of Student-Centred Learning, during times of academic, political and technological changes:

1. Collaborating: We find fulfilment in collaborating educationally with enthusiasts who share our aims and are motivated for the reasons we have listed here.

2. Innovating: We derive satisfaction from engaging with an old challenge in a new way, and even more so, when engaging with a new challenge in a new way.

3. Facilitating: We value activities with learners through which we can enable them to develop abilities which we and they value.

4. Taking risks: Some of our most effective and satisfying work has taken place in situations where we and our collaborators knowingly took risks, and managed to almost surprise ourselves by delivering achievements which we and our learners valued.

5. Being rigorous: The pursuit of rigour in course design, monitoring, management and evaluation has brought us great satisfaction through its constructive influence.

6. Engaging with learners: We find it rewarding to engage with learners during their learning, to promote their development, to share with them in planning how best to bring about that development, and generally to learn *from* them as well as *with* them.

7. Action researching: Discovering how our students learn, as a basis for contributing to the enhancement of learning, makes research worthwhile for us.

8. Trusting: In our most highly valued relationships with colleagues and learners, strong trust in both directions has been implicit. It has been a catalyst for the assurance of endearing high quality in what we do together.

Future Challenges

We often exhort our students to conclude project or research reports by addressing the "So what?" question. On this occasion, we feel strongly obliged to ask this of ourselves: What should we, the writers, and you, the reader, take forward from the challenges raised in this highly anecdotal article?

As in the 1970s, we live in an academic era in which rapid and radical change is the norm. Those working in the sector are balancing ever more stringent and diverse demands against a backdrop of league tables, institutional monitoring, and audit reviews. Technologies permeate the higher education landscape, accelerating the move to blended and online learning with every passing month, requiring many tutors to review their deeply held beliefs about learning and teaching (O'Shea et al. 2015). Many of our colleagues have relished the opportunity to respond to such "disturbances," often undertaking action-research seeking to discover how their students learn best in this new land. However, others have not – frequently due to competing demands on their time. This, alongside lack of institutional commitment, has resulted in less than ideal implementation of Student-Centred Learning environments incorporating technologies.

We now examine three on-going challenges, trusting that the factors we have identified should feature in our suggestions for action, whilst harnessing the potential of technologies in learning in each case. It is also our hope that the application of our list of factors will support others currently immersed in addressing similar issues and endeavouring, like us, to find sustainable solutions.

1. **Learners and technology**

Over the last decade we have experienced a 'disconnect' between the rhetoric regarding 'digital learners' and the reality of working alongside our learners in online and blended

learning environments. Students born after 1980 have often been referred to as the Net Generation (Oblinger and Oblinger 2005), Digital natives (Prensky 2001) and Generation Y (McCrindle 2006). Such learners have grown up surrounded by technology and are portrayed as always 'plugged in' and online 24/7. This has led '[...] many higher educators to assume that contemporary students have the skill, desire and knowledge to use technology in the learning process [...]' (O'Connell and Dyment 2016, p.404), and to expect it within their learning environments. There is often an implicit assumption that such learners' sophisticated skills with technologies can be harnessed to develop and nurture critical and higher order thinking skills within their studies. However, as noted by many authors such as Buckenmeyer et al. (2016), the situation is much more complex.

Margaryan and her colleagues in 2011 summarise studies from Australia, Canada and UK which present a less coherent picture of student comfort with, and desire for, technologies in the learning environment. Most notably they call upon Kennedy et al.'s work in 2008 with over 2,000 undergraduate students that concluded '[...] we cannot assume that being a member of the Net Generation is synonymous with knowing how to employ technology strategically to optimise learning experience in university settings' (p.10). Such findings have been corroborated in more recent studies such as that of O'Connell and Dyment's (2016) work in 2013, in which 42 participants undertaking studies in Physical Activity and Education reported a lack of skill or knowledge in using Web 2.0 technologies for a reflective journalling assignment. Learners preferred word processing, as being more familiar and easier. One learner commented:

> "Ah, I mean it takes, it's quite a lot of time and energy to you know, to come up with something all of your own. So maybe that was daunting. Maybe they don't expect, maybe they've just never had this, you know, this experience of having freedom of choice before, and they just like to be told what to do." (O'Connell and Dyment, 2016, p.403)

Like Kennedy and his colleagues (2007) several years before, they concluded that many students did not have the technological know-how or aspiration to use Web 2.0 technologies in their studies to any great extent (O'Connell and Dyment, 2016, p.404).

In our work (Peacock and Hooper 2007; Cowan, 2006), and noted in the writings of others such as Dohn (2009) and Buckenmeyer et al. (2016), we have found that learners' preference, or not, for learning in technology rich learning environments may be particularly linked to their individual view of education and their underlying values and beliefs. As Dohn

(2009) suggests, those learners who consider education to be an acquisition of knowledge, skills and working life practices may find a disconnect between what HE is like (SCL, creative and participatory) and their expectations – didactic, reproductive or acquisitional. Implementing technology based upon SCL may cause a particular disconnect which is made all the more transparent in online learning. Thus, like Margaryan et al. (2011) and Jones (2015), we agree upon the important of a more nuanced understanding '[...] of the extent and nature of technology use by university students [...]' (p.430) including the context in which technology is being used, students' socio-economic background and their personal psychological characteristics, such as openness to new learning experiences.

So what?

To provide us with this deeper understanding, we are collaborating with our online learners to explore how we can help the transition into and through online learning for those new to this alien environment based upon SCL. As in many institutions, Queen Margaret University (QMU) seeks to have learners playing an active part in the co-design and delivery of curriculum and services. We also seek to engage with our learners through joint-research initiatives such as a small institutionally-funded project where we recently worked innovatively with our learners as co-researchers. They co-constructed the questionnaire, interviewed other learners, and took a significant role in the data analysis undertaken during an away day. The outputs of such rigorous work indicated that the learners were particularly underprepared for online self-managed learning, struggling with workload management and use of technologies, whilst also missing the intimate face-to-face interactions of their previous studies (MacDonald et al. 2016). As a consequence of this partnership activity, we are developing longitudinal inductions for our online learners in which learners can, for instance, take a version of the Readiness for Online Learning questionnaire (Parkes et al. 2015), informing them and their tutors of their levels of self-regulatory maturity. However, like Shea and Bidjerano (2010), we wonder if, in the future, criteria for entry into online programmes should include formal assessments of students' preparedness for online learning and levels of self-regulation. A further output of this collaboration was the learning for us, as tutors, through hearing our students' voices explaining their joys, frustrations and challenges of moving to a more active approach to learning, in their own words. After the project, one of our learners shared their thoughts with us:

"My very small part in the process was enlightening and it was a privilege to be involved. Each of you have inspired me on my journey in learning at different points and in different ways during the course so it was bit like being with my heroes for a day!"

2. Tutors and technology

Although there have been some veritable successes with technologies in learning, as discussed in our individual accounts, we acknowledge that the heralded changes have not always been as innovative or widespread as hoped. For instance, virtual learning environments such as Blackboard and Moodle are all too often used as repositories providing learners with access to materials and supporting the administration of learning and teaching rather than explicitly encouraging innovative approaches to learning and teaching. There are certainly peripheral innovations such as flipped classrooms but the core learner experience for many learners is the lecture/seminar. Too often it is simply more of the same with sometimes visually attractive technology to make it look as if we are doing something new. We thus concur with Henderson and his colleagues in Australia (2015) that

> much of how digital technologies are being used, and [are] perceived as being useful, appeared to be shaped by dominant university models of the 'transmission' of learning, rather than any more fluid, networked, connected or individually driven forms of learning.

So what?

There are fledgling online learning offerings at QMU, with tutors beginning to move postgraduate programmes online. Like others across the sector, our tutors are challenged by the prospect of becoming pedagogical, and technological experts, requiring them to turn the '[...] computer screen into a window so that students feel and behave as if they are working together with a group of peers' (Rovai, 2002, p. 331). Tutors in many cases take the known (face-to-face) as their starting point when developing online learning, being reluctant to change and/or lose their familiar face-to-face practices. Such approaches may result in less than ideal online environments with learners failing to engage at an appropriate level in activities that should foster deep learning.

To support our academics, an online tutor network is being launched in autumn 2016, based upon the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison 2011). The Network, supported by senior management, will bring together staff to engage in collaborative, educational conversations, sharing resources, pooling knowledge and exchanging experiences. Core to this Group will be acknowledgement that innovative, risk-taking individuals need to be associated with kindred spirits with positive tales to tell, who have similar aspirations for scholarship and rigour in student-centred online course design, monitoring, management and evaluation. We envisage this initiative as a mechanism for advancing participants' understandings, knowledge, and practice about online, collaborative, community-based learning in general, and their own communities of inquiry with their learners in particular. The aim is to enhance '[...] understandings of what it means to be a faculty member in contemporary times' (Brooks 2010, p.267).

3. Institutions and technology

Institutional conversations about technology and learning often take a techno-determinist turn, focusing upon the impact, or not, of technology on learning. Whilst such an approach has been largely discredited in the rhetoric of learning and technologies (Hartnett et al. 2014), it persists in the wider community. This may, in some circumstances, lead to an institutional over-emphasis on technology initiatives, with funding following suit, rather than on informed institution-wide decision-making about the creative management and leadership of the opportunities afforded by technologies in supporting learning. Learning technologists may, as a consequence, often find themselves subsumed into Information Technology Units, or equivalents with limited opportunities for progression.

So what?

Innovative, risk-taking trailblazers, who have a track-record of change management, should be recruited and nurtured within institutions, acknowledging the importance of learning and technology for long-term institutional sustainability. Such individuals should be located in key positions with direct reporting lines to senior management, provided with appropriate resources, influential in strategic and audit decision-making. Critically such

individuals should have formal and informal networks outwith their institutions, for instance, with JISC, SEDA and ALT as well as working alongside learning technologists who work on a day-to-day basis with tutors. The outcome of such an approach will surely be a more balanced, informed, contextually-appropriate, and more effective perspective on learning and technologies.

Conclusion: the promise of a new educational renaissance

We are allowing ourselves to close this article on a note of optimism, tinged with concern for the future. We feel positive about our cautious suggestions in the previous section of how the sector might progress. However, these feature initiatives that are driven, to some extent, by "battle-hardened" veterans continuing their ongoing struggles to achieve student-centred and student-managed higher education. We acknowledge that over the last five decades, conditions have favoured the efforts of passionate and idealistic innovators; we can only hope that in the coming five decades such conditions will continue to sustain and flourish further innovations that feature technologies. We trust that managers and policy-makers, at the local, national and international level, will avoid decisions that constrain or crush the factors we have suggested as conditions for a quality of innovative educational life which leads to worthwhile educational development and progress.

In this closure, however, we are counterbalancing such anxieties with our continuing belief in the innovatory efforts of the next generation. Again, and again, it has been shown that newcomers can generate injections of creativity and originality in ventures which surge forward on the wave of their enthusiasm. We sense that higher education in the UK is presently on the brink of just such an educational renaissance. Such a change is dependent upon progressive staff/student partnerships, mutually facilitative and committed to adventurous and even risky creativity and innovation in higher education and its use of emerging technologies. We envisage powerfully constructive and trusting interactions involving less experienced members of staff, well-prepared by their learning in effective PgCertHE courses, but unprejudiced, and unhindered, by the influence of established practices. Such tutors will be teamed with eager students immersed in their experiences of learning and able to suggest and plan how these can be changed to good effect. If, and when, this collaboration becomes sufficiently rigorous and advanced to attract postgraduate recognition for those concerned in innovative research and development, it will surely

increasingly feature useful and influential action-researching of the consequent learning. We are encouraged in our optimism by the fact that this summary of our vision for the future actually embodies all of the eight features we have earlier identified as catalysts for effective development, and for motivation of the innovators. We hope that we will be involved in such initiatives, supporting and nurturing those who will be fundamental in its emergence.

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