

Learners' experiences of e-learning: research from the UK

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Abstract

At this symposium we describe the methods and early outcomes of research into learners' experiences of e-learning in UK higher and further education. The context for this research is given by learners' increasing use of networked technologies, not only those offered by their institutions but also those they own or use personally, and not only for learning but for many aspects of their home, social, leisure and working lives. Papers are offered from each of four parallel research projects, pursuing different aspects of the question: how do learners experience and participate in learning in this digitally networked age? The symposium will offer an opportunity to hear updates from these projects as well as exploring the issues raised in their presented papers.

Keywords

learners, e-learning, research methods, participative, social networks, social software

Research into networked learning has until recently focused on specific technologies, or specific interventions in learners' practice, or specific environments designed for learning. This was appropriate in an era when the technology used by learners was largely defined by the institutions in which they chose to study. Whether from a business process perspective - justifying the investment in digital technologies - or from a participative perspective - exploring how learners experienced the new digital offerings - the technologies themselves were often the starting point simply because they were in every sense a 'given'.

Today's learners are independently networked (Kvavik, 2005). Institutional technologies are not their only options, and among well-resourced learners they are often the least-favoured (Waycott *et al.* 2005). The curriculum as manifested through institutional web pages, bibliographies, lecture notes and scheduled tasks is only one route to the advertised outcomes: digitally wised-up learners will exploit many others. This makes it less easy and less relevant to research the impact of specific technologies or technical/ curricular interventions. Learners participate in a range of social and educational practices, supported by an array of personal, public and institutional technologies. We need to ask what these practices mean to learners, how they develop, and what characterises an 'effective' e-learner in this new environment?

The UK's Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) has a strong track record of funding development projects in e-learning, many of which have been evaluated for their impact on learners. Investigating learners' experiences in a more interconnected way became a priority because of the need to develop systems and standards to fit the learning lifestyles of this 'net generation'. A comprehensive literature review (Sharpe *et al.* 2005) found that learners' perspectives were poorly represented even in research claiming to place learners' experience at its heart. There was a particular need for studies that looked at learners' experiences beyond the boundaries of individual programmes or technical environments.

Following recommendations from this review, two projects were funded specifically to elicit experiences across different programmes of study and modes of technology use (Creanor *et al.* 2006 and Conole *et al.* 2006). Using innovative and participative methods, they were able to identify some common trends.

- Learners are living complex and time-constrained lives. In these circumstances efficient and flexible access to learning materials, experts and communities are increasingly important.

- Learners make frequent use of technology both at home and within their institution. They use the internet as the first port of call for information in their lives and expect to be able to locate and download relevant resources for their study. This fits with Frand's observation that for the 'Net Generation' '*computers are not a technology but a given*' (Frand, 2000).
- Similarly, many learners are used to establishing and maintaining technology-mediated conversations and expect frequent and responsive communications in support of their study. Again this corresponds to Frand's Net Gen characteristics of '*staying connected*' and '*zero tolerance for delays*'.
- Personalisation and choice are key aspects of technology use in learners' lives that they expect to transfer to their study.
- There is an 'underworld' of informal learning which is not mandated or supported by the institution but is frequently enabled and sustained by use of technology.
- Effective e-learning involves complex strategies in which personal beliefs, motivations and affective issues are a factor as well as access and skills.

This last point also illustrates how, within the general trend toward digital literacy, learners show enormous diversity. Although the specific practices may be new, learners are still highly influenced by their past history of learning. In considering this history we must now include their different experiences with e-learning (for example at school), with social networks, and with personal technologies. To existing difficulties of research into learning, therefore, we need to add the complexity of learners' relationships with and through technologies, considering that they offer both opportunities and constraints to personal development, and that they are open to sometimes radical change.

The projects presenting at this symposium are part of a second phase of JISC funding, designed to add detail to the broad picture. The projects have the common aims to:

- investigate how learners experience and participate in learning in technology-rich environments;
- investigate the strategies, beliefs and intentions of learners who are effective in learning in technology-rich environments (recognising that effectiveness is a complex and contested idea);
- develop methodologies for eliciting the learner experience, drawing on the relevant technologies where appropriate.

Although the projects collaborate regularly and have a shared wiki for research outcomes (<http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/JISCle2/Home>) the four papers offer different points of view. Jefferies *et al.* explore in more detail the innovative and participative research methods the projects have adopted, and which continue to evolve. They discuss the use of video and audio diaries and the implications of allowing participants to control the technologies they use for data capture. This project is identifying critical moments in learners' emerging practices and identities over two years of study. First-year learners in transition to HE are the focus of Hardy *et al.*'s research. Their paper explores some of the practicalities of data collection and offers insights into new students' expectations. They suggest that while most undergraduates arrive with already-high levels of IT competence and confidence, they tend to be conservative in their approach to university study.

Thorpe *et al.* situate their research in the context of well-established literatures on student learning in general, on work-based and informal learning, and on communities of practice. In dealing with learners as subjects of and in their own learning contexts, they argue that we can also learn from the methodological frameworks offered by identity theory and activity theory. They present early data from learners on two practice-based courses, and contrast their experiences with the educational intentions expressed by their course tutors. Finally, Childs and Espinoza-Ramos offer a draft typology of learners' preferences, suggesting a complex inter-dependency of choices around physical spaces for learning, levels of social engagement in learning, and supportive technologies.

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