

A Critique of Participative Discourses Adopted in Networked Learning

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ABSTRACT

The predominant discourse of e-learning is frequently focused on the adoption of participative learning approaches involving co-operation, collaboration and peer assessment incorporating implied principles of democracy and 'community'. There are tensions in the practical application of these features, particularly in relation to working with 'difference' when comparing the underlying course philosophy with student experience of such courses. There is an implicit assumption that being *participative* means sharing control but what, in practice, does this entail for the students? Different interpretations of participative approaches will be identified (pedagogical, ideological or both) and an illustrative case discussed in which the principle of participation was applied to the design and assessment of assignments.

Keywords

Participative discourse, difference, power, control, community

INTRODUCTION

As concepts of collaboration and participation are central to the Equel Project, our starting point for this paper is that they should be interrogated, rather than taken for granted. If we consider assessment for example as the core locus of power and control in an educational programme (Reynolds and Trehan, 2000), collaborative assessment might be considered the ultimate application of participative principles. Yet some courses espousing participative principles do not apply these principles to the process of assessment. Furthermore, when collaborative assessment *is* adopted in a networked learning environment little is known of its effects on students' learning experience. Similarly, the requirement in a 'collaborative programme' for individual reflection to be made accessible to peers requires a high degree of compliance from the learners, and the effects of this procedure are also not yet well understood. Until we question the assumptions and assertions underlying the use of these principles within networked learning contexts it is difficult to evaluate, let alone promote, their role in the learning process.

In this paper we distinguish two broad areas of application of control, which we see as implicated in participative course designs. These are: *substantive processes*, (such as the curriculum - learning about ideas, concepts and theories), and the more *structural/procedural processes* (the detail of the course design, teaching and assessment methods, roles, schedules, instructional material, and the architecture of the networked learning environment). Different interpretations within the discourse of participative approaches will also be proposed and looked for in the samples of course text and students' reported experience of a participative networked learning programme.

The case study on which we will draw focuses on student's experiences of participating in a networked learning module entitled 'New technology and Lifelong learning' which forms part of a taught, campus based MSc in Adult and Continuing Education at the University of Glasgow. The original purpose of the case study was to look at how the principle of participation was applied to the design and assessment of assignments. In this further examination of the data we are looking for reflections in students' accounts of their experience of the participative aspects of the programme and of the ways in which they may have experienced 'difference'.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Our aim is to distinguish different ideas that underlie the use of such terms as co-operation, participation, collaboration, democracy and community in learning designs and in descriptions of practice. We have chosen the term 'discourses' because this implies that they are not simply descriptions but imply an intention to 'shape'

the social relations in which students and teachers are involved. The examples are mostly taken from *networked learning*. The account which follows inevitably obscures some differences and exaggerates others but there is a sense in the literature and in our own practice, of quite different ideas – *pedagogical and ideological* – which are present in the way people write about ‘participative’ approaches to learning. From a *pedagogical* perspective, participative approaches may be adopted because they are seen as most likely to support learning. Such approaches may be based on psychological principles (the motivational ‘school’ of theory and practice) but may also indicate attempts to manipulate learners by creating an impression of involvement through a superficial application of ‘participative’ methods (the instrumental approach). From an *ideological* perspective, participative approaches may be adopted because they are believed to transmit the same social and political values necessary for the development of ‘citizenship’, which in turn is believed necessary to support a more democratic society.

These values are most clearly seen in the rationale for student centred learning approaches and, more recently, in ‘learning communities’, both of which owe much of their inheritance to the traditions of ‘democracy’ in education. On the basis of our own practice and from accounts in the literature, we have tentatively identified four distinct versions of ‘participative’ discourses which we have called Instrumental, Emancipatory, Communitarian and Cosmopolitan.

Participative Discourses in Learning

Instrumental approach

This is the approach in which teams, groups and even the idea of ‘community’ is used as a *motivational* device. While the instrumental approach may seem more interactive than conventional teaching methods, the structure of the course, the methods and curriculum are determined by teachers. They select materials unilaterally, and there are some fairly normative values about how groups *should* work which are conveyed and reinforced by the reward process. If such a course is described by the tutors as ‘participative’ you would at least have to ask ‘participating in what, exactly?’. A distinction we find useful throughout this analysis is between the direction of students’ activities within the structure of the course and the methods used and the selection of frameworks, concepts and theories that are intended to shape their ideas and assumptions.

Emancipatory

This perspective is illustrated by writers who view CMC as a means by which hierarchical power differentials can be leveled out amongst networked individuals. Ng(2001) for example refers to a collaborative learning experience in which ‘participants can relate to one another and share a sense of community and a common goal’. This is perhaps where most ‘participative’ practice lies. It differs from the Instrumental approach in that there is a belief in the possibility and the value of people learning from each other and that this not only enhances learning but also facilitates individual development beyond the classroom and the immediate focus of study. The language of ‘development’ and ‘growth’, with its roots in democratic education and learner-centredness would probably characterise this approach. But to belong in this school of practice would probably mean that the *pedagogy* was tutor-led, even though the tutors would be more likely to adopt a facilitatory than a didactic mode.

Communitarian

The most obvious example of this is the ‘Learning Community’. It shares with the emancipatory approach, a fundamental difference with an Instrumental discourse in that democratic relationship is valued for its own sake, as a belief, not as a motivational device or means to an end. Pedagogical and ideological beliefs are brought together in the Learning Community. Learning is seen as self-directed to some extent because of the emphasis on individual choice in that students are thought to learn from each other as well as from tutors. How learning is organised is also shared between tutors and students. Decisions about the focus for learning, the methods used and the membership of workgroups are worked out collectively amongst tutors and participants. This is a *pedagogical* (collective structures to support collective learning) and an *ideological* position (a normative model for how people should work together generally). Assessment can sometimes reflect these values. If so it will be collaborative (peer, self, tutor assessment). Another common feature of communitarian approaches is an implicit acceptance of community as a ‘*good thing*’. This ignores community’s darker side – coercion, conformity, marginalisation of minority interests and denial or suppression of difference.

Cosmopolitan

The cosmopolitan approach is a *critical* response to the communitarian position (see Reynolds, 2000 for a more detailed account of this position). Cosmopolitan discourse also promotes democratic values but with greater emphasis on *difference* and *learning* from difference. It regards proponents of ‘community’ as unrealistic. Collective arrangements are seen as vulnerable to the same hierarchies that exist in the social context. To deny this or imagine it can be circum-navigated in some way is to collude with dominant interests. More preferable is the idea that we each belong to *multiple and shifting (sub) communities* and these should be acknowledged in the way learning becomes organised. Taking a research context as an example it is often possible to identify with some colleagues (and less so with others) on the basis of gender, nationality, pedagogical values, institutional status, age and so on. Most of the time these *differences* add interest and richness to working together. But occasionally they might become more evident as a basis for the emergence of sub-groups when a difference of some kind becomes too important to people’s ideals, values, or sense of who they are to be avoided or discounted. Applying the cosmopolitan discourse to education would mean accepting and valuing this process, while hoping that an *overarching interest in learning* would mean that it was possible to talk, argue and negotiated across sub-group boundaries rather than fragmented beyond reach.

This basic typology should not obscure the likelihood that a course design may draw on more than one interpretation in different aspects of its structure, approach and methods. This is always the limitation of typologies. We hope this provisional analysis, at least, helps to identify questions that are worth asking in research and in the process of course design. The questions we have considered are:

- What choice do participants have over method, content, and whom they work with?
- If ‘participation’ is claimed, *participation in what* exactly, and where is control of the degree and object of participation situated?
- How much control is there over what people *do* and over what they *think*?
- Where are ideas thought to be situated and/or generated in the student and tutor relationships?
- How is difference regarded? What happens to minority interests, or to differences of any kind? Are they worked with or ‘managed’?
- Do assessment procedures reflect the values implicit in the other aspects of programme design? Or if there are inconsistencies, how are these acknowledged and worked with?

CASE STUDY: NEW TECHNOLOGY AND LIFELONG LEARNING MODULE

The following research was gathered initially for another purpose, the principle aim being to examine students’ orientation to collaboration in network learning. The study was undertaken as a way of gaining a better understanding of what makes collaboration work (or not) within a networked environment (Sclater and Bolander 2004). It involved examining the interaction between students’ learning orientations, course design and assessment methods. For the purposes of *this* paper we are re-examining the data. Our enquiry is an exploratory exercise to progress our ideas on ‘participation’ and ‘difference’. The following research data was gathered from the cohort of 2001.

Design and assessment methods

The campus based MSc in Adult & Continuing Education at Glasgow University offers a networked learning module component entitled “New technology and lifelong learning”. To date, the module has run for four consecutive years since its introduction in 2000. The online module, which is 18 weeks in duration, is the only networked learning module available to students undertaking the MSc and is offered over two consecutive UK academic terms. The aim of the module is to enable participants to appreciate how electronic communications and the Internet might be used to develop and sustain their professional practice. Participants experienced new ways of learning by engaging in dialogue in pairs or groups of varying sizes to reach new understandings in response to a range of identified topics. The research data for this paper focuses on the activities of the *second half* of the module (April – June 2001) where participants worked together in a much more concentrated way by splitting into smaller groups (comprising two or three people) to explore a topic of mutual interest, with the aim of writing a joint paper. The ‘collaborative study project’ (8 weeks) was divided into two phases, a ‘co-operative phase’ and a ‘collaborative phase’ where a combination of an *individual* (Phase I) and a *group mark* (Phase II) was awarded. After the collaborative project participants were asked to undertake a critical assessment of each group’s final paper for which an individual mark was awarded. Our research finding centre

on participants experience of ‘participation’ and ‘difference’ in relation to the assessment of the ‘collaborative project’ and with respect to the ‘peer review’

Course team expectations and collaborative project introduction

The rationale for the collaborative project offered in Term II was to shift from a less hierarchical to a more open, critical and participative approach to learning and teaching where the emphasis is on learning from each other in groups. However, in looking at the module handbook the course design draws on more than one interpretation in different aspects of its structure, philosophy and methods. The module appears to embrace a combination of the instrumental, emancipatory as well as the communitarian discourses which contain a number of apparent contradictions. For example, the module can be seen as an example of an *Instrumental discourse* in that there was an implied shift from a more transmissive mode to an approach that was more interactive and learner centred yet the structure, method and curriculum was, nevertheless, determined by the tutors. In particular, the learners’ motivation to participate in collaboration was reinforced by the reward process.

“We believe that the introduction of new technology can be used to enhance learning in situations where there has already been a shift in teaching style from transmissive modes to more participative or cooperative and collaborative forms of learning i.e. small group work where learning is student rather than tutor centred. This module is therefore about the experience of cooperative and collaborative learning and teaching within small groups online.” (Module handbook 2001)

The module may also be viewed as representative of the Emancipatory discourse in that it stresses the belief in the possibility and value in peer learning whilst similarly facilitating individual development beyond the classroom.

“Educators now recognise that learners require teaching methods that will prepare them for a rapidly changing world. This module aims to help equip you with the tools and processes that will allow you to adapt to and influence these changes...it will enable you to identify opportunities where new knowledge is needed and opportunities to actively construct this knowledge within real life contexts” (module handbook 2001)

It is also possible to view the module in terms of a Communitarian discourse because of the emphasis on ‘communal’ knowledge building where students learn from both their tutors and peers. The handbook implies that the module provides a degree of individual choice and has a focus on self-directed learning.

Defining roles, assigning tasks, resolving conflicts, writing joint papers, moderating and mediating discussions as well as giving feedback on individual and group projects are just some of the aspects of group work you will be encouraged to explore as you undertake this module”(module handbook 2001)

However it should be noted that whilst a communitarian ideal was being espoused the contradiction lies in the fact that there was no room for negotiation over assessment procedures despite noble attempts at introducing a ‘peer review’.

During the second campus-based workshop (Term II) participants were introduced to the two-stage process of the collaborative study project. During **Phase I** participants were asked to brainstorm ideas relating to their chosen theme and to then flesh out related yet separate strands which each person within the group individually pursued. Whilst this was a phase where each group member was responsible for their own ‘strand’, they were asked to work closely together to ensure that their individual pieces of work remained linked. Participants were given a period of four weeks for this initial phase, before submitting a 2000 word paper on their chosen strand to the conferencing system. The tutors awarded an *individual mark* for this, which amounted to 30% of the final module total. During **Phase II** of the project, teams came together over a three week period to negotiate and amalgamate their separate strands into a joint paper to which a group mark was awarded based on the final artefact. This *group mark* amounted to 20% of the final module total. We hoped that by structuring the activity in this way course participants would find themselves in a position whereby they simply had to work together in order to create the joint document. However, on completion of the activity the tutors realised that whilst they were asking participants to collaborate, for some groups, this clearly turned out to be no more than a copying and pasting exercise undertaken by one or two people. In this sense a purely instrumental approach might be considered to have been implemented. The last activity of this term involved participants each submitting a critical assessment of the final group papers.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

For the purposes of this paper we concentrate on the qualitative data gathered from interviews and the online transcripts. Our aim was to understand participants’ viewpoint on their experience of ‘difference’ by way of in-

depth interviews and to ‘make sense’ from a naturalistic research perspective (Koschman, 1996, p. 15). Broadly speaking the methodological basis of this research has its roots in the phenomenographic approach described by Marton (1994) and Richardson (1999) and is an approach advocated by others researching experiences of online learning (McConnell, 2000). Phenomenography attempts to describe qualitatively the lived experiences of individuals and the way they experience and perceive a phenomenon. Marton defines phenomenography as:

“The empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend understand or conceptualise various phenomena in and aspects of the world around them” (Marton 1994, p. 4425).

The phenomenographic approach thus relies on participants’ discursive accounts of their own experiences and their conceptions of the world. The principal aim for the researcher is to classify and to discover *differences* in people’s experiences of reality (Richardson, 1999 p. 65). Marton made the proposal that the phenomenographic interview could serve as a means by which aspects of a person’s experience could be thematized (Richardson, 1999 p.70).

FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH – ‘PARTICIPATION’ IN PRACTICE’

As we summarized earlier in the paper, our intention in this section is to compare students’ reflections on the collaborative course described in the case study with the different interpretations of participation developed earlier. We will look for illustrative material which support the idea of distinct participative discourses, but given the limits of this exploratory study, we are conscious that at most the outcome will be suggestive rather than confirmatory, hopefully providing some pointers for further investigation.

In the course which we are using as our case study the ‘peer review’ exercise was a crucial element of the design, signifying its emphasis on a collaborative approach. The intention was that each collaborative group could receive feedback on their assignment from the rest of the student cohort. As it turned out, this exercise was greatly resisted by many of the participants. The students were asked to submit their critiques as part of their assessed work, which amounted to 10% of the module mark. The tutors felt that there was a need to assess this exercise in order to ensure that the participants would take it seriously. In the interviews with the participants they realised that the tutors’ attempts to persuade individuals to submit their critiques on other group assignments required a great deal of compliance and that most merely submitted their comments to fulfill the course requirements. The comments on each other’s work were, on the whole thought by participants to be cursory, lacking in critical awareness and overly positive.

The collaborative peer assessed project did not work at all. People were just not critical at all really. They all ended up the same. Everyone said the same things and I think in the end these were not the things that were interesting really.

So an attempt by the tutors to create a less hierarchical, more participative approach by encouraging collaboration where it might be argued it counts most – in the assessment process - was resisted by at least some of the students. Furthermore, illustrating a dilemma in participative approaches, there remains a sense of inevitability in the way tutors and students remain defined by a hierarchical relationship, as reflected in the metaphor of rebellion in the following extract:

I was thinking of not doing it (peer review). The only reason why I did it was because everyone else did it and I thought it would be mean to say I am not doing it. I think if you [tutors] had done it face to face I think you would have had a rebellion on your hands.

The reasons this student gave for engaging in peer assessment are significant in working with collaborative designs. In the interview she pointed out that she was prepared to contribute her critique only because she did not wish to let the others down, as they also had to undertake this exercise under duress. She sensed that, had it been conducted in a face-to-face context, the tutors would not have found the participants very co-operative. This is interesting in that it suggests that the networked environment was, in part, responsible for diffusing what could have been a ‘rebellion’.

But these observations are also significant in illustrating the frustrations of participative designs, particularly where there is an expectation of consensus as a defining characteristic of ‘collaboration’ – often a characteristic of community-based interpretations. So in our case study, it could also be argued that participants felt inhibited in airing their grievances within the text based environment because of the real possibility for their communication to be misinterpreted by classmates. It certainly seems that some were particularly concerned about this. For example, although some welcomed the opportunity to engage in debate it did not seem as though that there was a good level of critical awareness during the collaborative project - including the peer

assessments. The fact that the participants knew each other in person, if not by sight, seemed to be a factor preventing people from being honest with one another.

People were not really critical and I know I was not either and it is understandable why.. I think the fact that we knew each other had an effect

As a response to this problem, one interviewee suggested that group participants should be asked to submit three *positive* comments on the projects rather than a general critique which could be misinterpreted, and that negative feedback be left to the tutors.

...maybe all you need to do is ask for three positive aspects of the projects because inevitably I think even with the most constructive criticism in the world - no matter how you word it - people can take it personally and to be negative. I must admit I did not care for it because it did not feel like people were being very positive..... if you had said right we would like you to make some 3 positive comments on each other's project. And kept the negative for the tutor!"

The discomfort of changing the social process of assessment is in part therefore a wish to maintain good relationships within the course. But not only so. Students who in their working lives are also teachers for example, have the additional discomfort after years of educational socialization of having their role expectations disrupted by participative approaches.

I do assessments (as a teacher) myself and I find that easier because that is my role. I think it is psychological ...you learn different roles whether it be a learner role or a student role or tutor role... putting people in that psychological role of marking other people's work.... didn't appeal because you are in the student role and you don't feel comfortable being in the tutor role

These views are not representative of the whole student group however. Some welcomed the opportunity for peer review and the chance to receive critical comments from others in the group

..it (the peer assessment exercise) opened up to a different level what this course should be about. About developing ourselves as adult educators. I found it surprising that people said that they did not want to be critical

As educators concerned to develop collaborative approaches to networked learning, there are some of these findings that seem as of particular significance. First, there is a tendency for students in this situation to experience collaboration as the tutors' agenda, not theirs. This is not surprising. It often is our agenda - at least at the outset. Second, and paradoxically, collaboration can be undermined when it applied to assessment because of students' concerns that their relationships during the programme will be undermined by it. Third, we say paradoxical, because assessment is arguably the most important aspect of an educational programme in which to introduce collaborative principles. It is this intervention that develops the design from the instrumental to a more fundamentally participative approach. Yet as a student observed, assessment was partly responsible for constraining what people said to each other and which led as a consequence to a lack of debate and dialogue.

People were just not being critical... I think because people were having to do the same thing – it's the assessment as well. It gets in the way of being critical because you are being assessed

Participation and difference

In addition to illustrating some ways in which students can find the introduction of collaboration problematical, students' reports of their experience that we have included in the previous section also give some sense of how difference plays a part. Indeed it seemed as though it was the avoidance of difference which made the debate anodyne for some of them, undermining the opportunity for critique intended to benefit all students on the programme. It seems clear also that there are quite different responses to peer assessment among the student group - whether attracted to it or wary of it.

Furthermore - and an important criteria few suggest for evaluating any collaborative educational approach - the possibility that this difference does not appear to be addressed contributes to the mechanistic approach to peer assessment and feedback which was disappointing to some of the students interviewed. As course designers we see this as a dilemma. The challenge being to find a form of collaborative working in which differences can be addressed and worked with. Our brief cameo of this programme suggests that advocating collaboration and consensus does not readily support working with difference and possibly gets in the way - a similar view was expressed by a participant who felt strongly about not sounding too critical.

Because part of my job I am an assessor I find it quite easy to assess and come up with an opinion but the bit I found difficult was that this was my peer group. I felt that I did not want to criticize anything

anyone had written because my work was no better so I found that quite daunting. I did not want to crush anybody by coming out with anything too damning really, it was quite difficult.

Other differences are indicated by students' accounts of the programme. For example, preferred methods of working, or the timing of assessment which some found difficult because of its being at the end of the module, believing that that there could have been a more positive way of ending the course, although not all students held this view.

The timing was difficult.... But if it had to be put in (peer assessment) I would not put it right at the very end. I would have another activity right after that because it was not the best thing to have finished off on...and not to have had any more dialogue with anyone after that wasn't very positive...So at least another activity after that and then give people a chance to come back to each other.

CONCLUSION

The research has underlined the need to follow up the questions we raised at the beginning. Do participative approaches make it possible for students to work with 'difference'? Does the networked learning environment support or hinder working with difference? We have noted this and noted the negative aspects of community such as compliance, and there is no doubt that the more positive aspects of community can be a source of considerable support to course members, especially when they experienced difficulties of one kind or another. Nevertheless our examination of students' experience of this programme shows some of the dilemmas in working with participative approaches. In our case study it was clearly the course designers' wish that critique would be encouraged through extending participation to include assessment yet it seemed as if collaboration and consensual norms did not readily lead to stimulating debate and formative critique when applied to this key component of the educational process.

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