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Vibrant and engaging online social learning: an innovative response to threatened part-time study in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT: Austerity measures and increased tuition fees place heightened pressures on universities to provide sustainable, cost effective, high quality provision. This paper analyses how a team of staff in a School of Education at a UK University are leading collaborative work with partner colleges, to deliver a model that ameliorates the financial pressures, whilst developing high quality student-centred engagement for part-time students. When face-to-face teaching sessions were significantly reduced, an online academic social network for tutors and students was introduced to encourage collaboration, peer support and 'coffee room' discussion. Feedback from participants through focus groups and surveys confirmed a social support network as important for engagement and was perceived as supporting achievement, even by those who were reluctant to join the network. Recommendations include: more time face-to-face at the beginning of the course, more online tutor presence and scaffolded activities to build confidence in using an academic social network.

Introduction

This paper begins by describing recent changes in the delivery of a part-time Educational Studies Degree at a UK University. The first section is an explanation of how the course team has endeavoured to retain the core values and philosophy of the course, despite tighter constraints on contact time and class size. The use of blended learning and a social learning network in the first year of delivery is outlined, before moving on, in section two, to describe the methodology used to investigate how students of the course have responded. The third section of the paper reports on the outcomes of this investigation. In the fourth section, the implications of the use of social learning networks are further explored and recommendations for future developments made before concluding in the final section.

1 Context

UK governments have increasingly identified Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as key players in the production of flexible knowledge workers for the new global economy. The neoliberal marketisation of education by all political parties in office over the past 25 years has created a shift in thinking about HE provision. What counts as 'world class education' and its purpose in economically stringent times has become a highly contested notion and there are differing perspectives on how to balance economy, quality and social justice. The call of the Browne Review (2010) to 'secure a sustainable future' for UK HE through a competitive marketplace was used in September 2012 to justify a new funding structure that removed much of the public funding and introduced substantially higher student fees. Despite the availability of student loans for part-time students, this has resulted in fewer overall applications for many HEIs (Ratcliffe, 2012). At the same time, growing international and private provision delivered in increasingly flexible formats demands a response. The metaphor which the course team used to visualise these new pressures and constraints was of themselves as the innermost of a series of Russian dolls, the outermost of which is globalisation, within which lies neoliberal ideologies, the UK coalition Government, their

educational policy and the implementation of that policy within the HE sector and at institutional level. At times congruent with and at others running counter to the direction and constraints dictated by this context, the course team approached curriculum design by looking for the 'rattle room' that would enable them to hold on to their core educational values and to continue to deliver the kind of educational experience they believed to be of value to their students. In particular, as one type of educational space in the form of class contact time became scarce, other spaces within which educational outcomes could be achieved were sought. Coffield's (2008, p 1) invitation to 'Just suppose that teaching and learning became the first priority,' underpinned their response and informed their choices wherever possible. This led to a radical redesign of the course in question, which made use of novel spaces for teaching and learning, including an online social network open only to students and tutors of the degree.

This degree is a key progression route for teachers and trainers working in the lifelong learning sector. Students have typically completed a Certificate in Education or a Diploma in Teaching in the Lifelong Learning Sector prior to enrolment. Their aim is to obtain a full honours degree that is professionally relevant to their work in post-compulsory education and training. From its inception as a Bachelor of Education programme in the early 1990s, it has evolved into a two year, part-time Bachelor of Arts degree, delivered across a consortium that includes the parent HEI and 16 partner colleges across the North of England. The delivery model has hitherto been a pattern of weekly, three hour classes, with separate cohorts at each of the centres. Starting in September 2012, face-to-face contact became limited to nine Saturday day schools across two academic years. At the same time and largely due to fee increases, cohorts at each of the centres dwindled, so that they were no longer financially viable as stand-alone provision. The day schools were therefore operated at regional level, with students from a number of different colleges converging on a regional centre. This pooling of resource and effort meant that cohorts as small as two students at any given centre were nonetheless financially viable. This was important in terms of the survival of the course but also in terms of the availability of opportunity at a local level for adult returners to education, whose lives and commitments root them to a particular locale. Selwyn's (2010) work highlights the contrast between this and young people's social autonomy when choosing where, when and how to engage in Education. The issue was seen therefore as not merely a set of economic considerations but also as one of opportunity and social justice, regardless of the age of participants and their status as parents, carers or breadwinners for a household.

At the heart of the degree lies the desire for individuals, previously trained as teaching practitioners, to acquire a sense of agency with regard to their work in education. Their prior teaching qualifications are aimed largely at developing them as highly effective teachers and trainers. The degree aims to enable them to contribute to wider debates in society about what education is and ought to be and to carry out good research that can be used to contribute to those debates:

distinguishing between 'merely useful knowledge' – the kind of knowledge that keeps people in their place and supports the status quo, and 'really useful knowledge' that enables people to ... understand the root causes of the circumstances in which they find themselves. (Thompson, 2000, p 2)

They need, therefore, to become confident in the use of what Freire calls the dominant syntax (2000); ways of speaking that enable people to question and perhaps influence what happens in society beyond the local level in which practitioners typically operate. Many of the adult returners on the degree, however, lack confidence in their ability to express their ideas in an academically convincing and persuasive way. A key plank in the delivery strategy has, therefore, been the provision of regular, iterative dialogue, through which students can develop a confident, well-informed, professional voice, both in writing and in speaking. Weekly classroom sessions provided plenty of scope for this. In redesigning the programme around radically curtailed class contact time, it was essential to find spaces in which this

dialogue could be maintained and developed. It has been acknowledged that there are few radical course designs or examples where technology is proven to enhance student interaction and communication (Sharpe et al, 2009). However, a careful choice of platforms within a blended learning approach was felt to offer the best chance of maintaining a viable, learning-led offer that would engage and empower the non-traditional students at whom the course was aimed, helping them to develop the 'really useful knowledge' that comes about: when individuals and groups begin to reflect upon their experience with each other ... which enables theories to be developed and linked to strategies for bringing about changes.(Thompson 2000,p2).

This is a fundamentally social activity and a prime motivator for the course team in identifying social networking as a potentially productive environment for this kind of learning.

For the purposes of this study, blended learning is defined broadly as a combination of online learning with face-to-face sessions. Bersin and Associates (2003, p 2) noted that corporate interests have found blended learning programmes had the 'highest impact, lowest cost' affordances, though were most effective when human interaction surrounded and supported the online component. The efficiency and economic value of the business perspective does not necessarily transfer directly to education, but can arguably be promulgated through the development of interdependent 'communities of inquiry' (Garrison and Vaughan, 2008, p 9). A sense of belonging is described as essential in order to sustain such a community, with a social presence proposed as of equal importance to the cognitive and teaching aspects of the course. It is well documented that high drop-out levels in blends of e-study can be attributed to the lack of a sense of belonging (Tinto, 1987; Sweet, 1986; Cohen & Garcia, 2008) and this further supports the emphasis on the social element of online learning in this instance. The blend arrived at therefore, endeavours to make provision for interplay of social, cognitive and teaching presence (Garrison & Vaughn, 2008) and is represented conceptually in Figure 1.

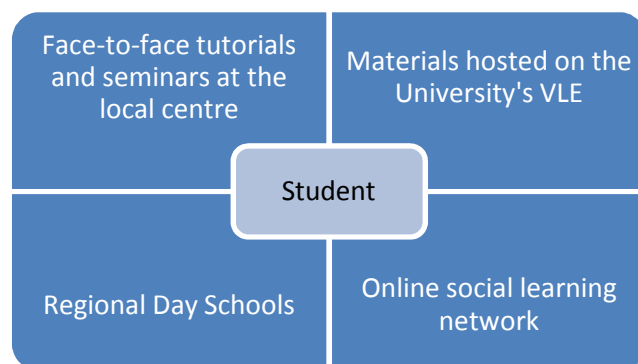


Figure 1

The students can draw variously from each of the elements of the blend to access academic content, discuss their ideas with a tutor or seek peer support, depending on their specific needs at any particular point in the course. Whilst the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) has some social affordances through discussion boards and group email, blog and wiki functionality, it was felt to be inadequate to support the frequency, degree and type of interaction that the course relies upon for some of its key outcomes. The alternative, social platform that was selected to address this perceived shortfall in the VLE was the Microsoft offering, Yammer ©, which has many of the features of Facebook, such as profile creation, 'recent activity' streams, 'feeds,' 'follow,' 'like,' 'reply,' 'share an update,' 'praise' and 'tag'. It was also more readily accessible and useable through mobile devices and a downloadable desktop application than the VLE and for all these reasons was felt to have greater potential for student engagement. At the same time, Yammer allowed the creation of an advertisement-free, private community that cut out the 'noise' from the wider world that is typically associated with Facebook and Twitter, keeping the focus on the course in hand and reducing distraction for students. The curriculum design, therefore, was informed by a series

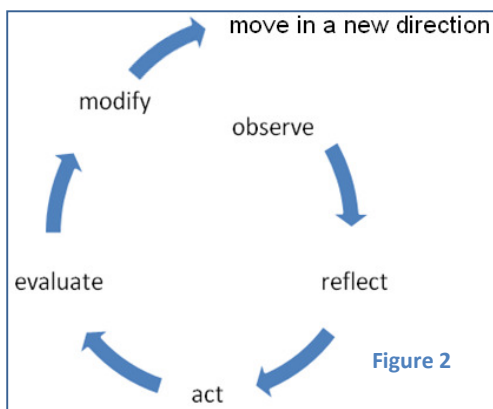
of pragmatic decisions and practical constraints but was fundamentally based upon pedagogical decisions. A cornerstone of this approach to curriculum design was the notion of the course development as an iterative process, informed by the experiences of participants. This paper reviews some aspects of the first year of that process and outlines how the course team investigated and reviewed the social learning network in its first year of use as well as their plans for future iterations.

2 Methodology

In order to establish the response of participants to the new delivery model for the course, the course team undertook an interpretivist, action research study, utilising both qualitative and quantitative data. The main research question was; 'Does the social learning network employed on this occasion have a positive impact on student engagement and learning?' The lively, engaging, diverse, sometimes contentious, invariably supportive, occasionally and increasingly academic exchanges that we have seen on the site during the year seemed to provide, on the face of it, good evidence of this. A case study to divine whether this impression was well-founded was conducted, using action research as the basis of our methodology. Our conception of action research is based on:

a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes ... It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities. (Reason and Bradbury, 2001, p 1).

Action and research are not conceived of as polar opposites but as 'inherently intertwined in real life [enabling] practical, effectual and transformational learning in action to take place'



(Chandler and Torbert, 2003, p 134). However, a particular conception of practical knowledge was envisaged here, broadening it beyond the purely technicist, operational knowledge that enables achievement of mandated outcomes. Instead, the study aimed to develop a more emancipatory knowledge, that would develop the course team's capacity to enquire, to create, to quest for an understanding of their practice and its context in their own way and to decide which way to go and how to get there in future iterations. The overall aim was to develop really useful knowledge that will be acted upon during 2013-14 academic year and as part of

this aim, the researchers have elicited the interest of some of the participating students to take part in future studies as co-researchers. Simply put, the study is seen as part of a developmental action-reflection cycle, after that propounded by McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p 9) (Figure 2).

Two methods were used to gather data. Firstly, we administered a survey to the 72 students who made up the 2012-13 first year cohort. The questions were inspired by a combination of the main research question outlined above, the desire to measure our outcomes against our original aspirations for the course and our experiential hunches arising out of taking part in the social learning network during the academic year. It was evident, for example, that whilst the community was vibrant and engaging for many, the frequency and level of contribution was markedly different for different participants. Clear quantitative data that established what proportion of students were taking part, how they were doing so and why there were differing usage patterns was required to evaluate the potential benefits and encourage productive

participation in the future. Some simple statistical analysis to establish patterns in the data and identify correlations was conducted. Clear themes and patterns emerged.

To shed further light on these themes, three focus groups were held. These involved between three and six participants and a protocol was used for consistency. The intention was that the focus groups allowed for a co-construction of meaning with opportunities for participants to articulate and make sense of what they heard collectively, through the interactions of the group (Wilkinson, 2004). Participants were presented with cards, each carrying a keyword that typified one of the themes that had arisen out of the survey responses. The keywords were; unequal, democratic, engaging, collaborative, academic, irrelevant and social. Students were asked to think about these themes in silence for 30 seconds in the context of their use of Yammer and then asked to discuss what struck them about the terms. Their feedback was then transcribed and arranged according to the same themes. The outcomes of this study are presented in the following section. They focus on the survey findings but make use of commentary to illustrate and add detail. As such, the study might broadly be described as a piece of qualitatively informed statistical research.

3 Outcomes

There were 64 respondents to the survey from a cohort of 72 students. 67% were female and 33% male. 66% lie in the age range of the 30-49 with 17% in the range 20-29 and 18% over 50. The focus of this analysis is on the ways in which site use correlates with perceived benefits. Students were asked how often they visit the site. The responses were very encouraging, being far in excess of VLE usage by similar groups of students on the Certificate in Education at the same University, where visit rate to a group blog averaged once per month. However, the results do indicate that the visit rate is highly variable. The mode, at 27% is to visit once a week but a significant percentage (13%) visit more than once a day; 'It's engaging for most people. It's addictive to read what's going on. I even have it on my phone.' (Student D). At the other end of the spectrum, 13% reported never visiting the site. To shed light on the potential reasons for this variability, students were asked about their motivation, technical knowledge and confidence when using Yammer.

Only 6% of responses indicated technical barriers of not knowing how to find or use the site. All students were invited to the site by email in the first week and follow up invites were sent to those who hadn't joined in the weeks that followed. There is a 24 hour IT Support helpline and emails were periodically sent out offering support to any experiencing difficulties. 64% of those who knew how to find the site were confident about taking part:

And sometimes if you find something that's really good, people will put that on there, "Well, have a look at this, it might be relevant." So in that way it feels really collaborative. It's like "I've done quite a lot of work and found this but actually I'd be quite happy to share it, if it's of use to you as well." (Student A)

However, 15% of responses saw no need for Yammer and a significant proportion (27%) whilst they knew how to find and use the site, were not confident about taking part:

I haven't done anything academic for a long time so I don't have the confidence to think that what I'm thinking will hit the mark and when you read something that others post, whether they're rubbish or not, they're written in such a way that you think, "Oh, they know what they're talking about, I better not expose myself by saying something stupid." (Student A)

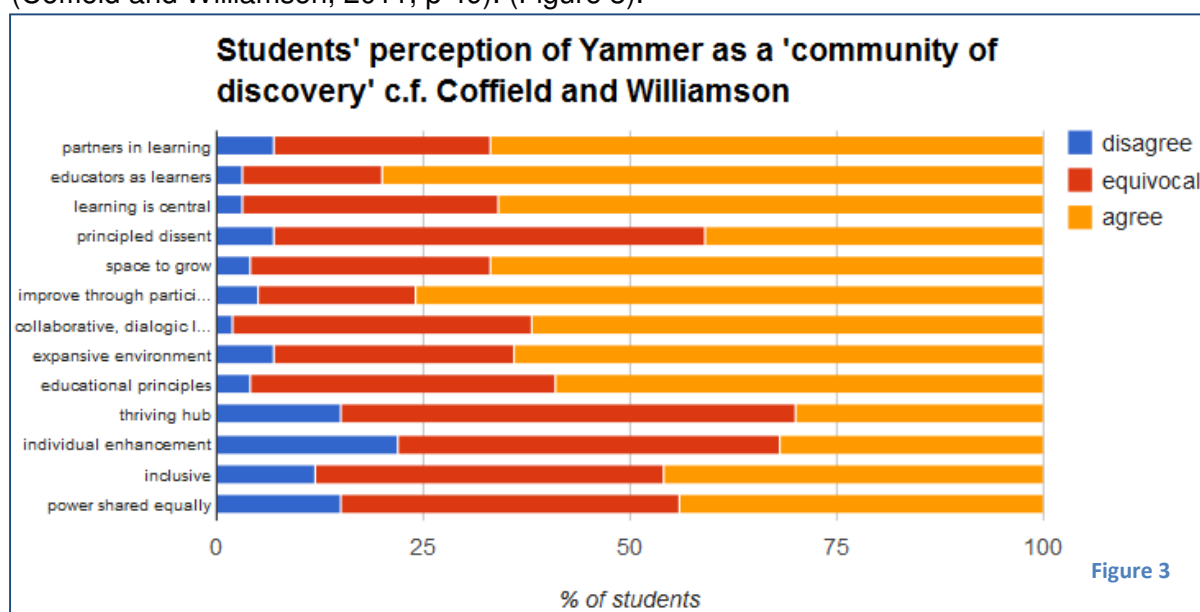
The course needs to address feelings of a lack of confidence and insecurity. The tutors need to draw people into conversations on Yammer. (Student B)

Conversely, others saw relatively unacademic contributions as unproblematic or potentially useful:

I think there are still people who are quite happy to go on and just ask an ordinary question or say, "Oh, I found this the other day, have a look at it," and they don't need to say anything else about it. It might be useful then. I know I've picked bits up that I have then ended up using in my module so it's useful in that way. (Student A)

This multifaceted response is borne out by the kinds of interactions that are apparent on the site. These range from prosaic questions about deadlines and day-school dates to light-hearted exchanges and supportive messages about the pressures of study, to relatively challenging academic posts that endeavour to prompt deeper thought and critical engagement.

Students were also asked about their perceptions of Yammer as a 'community of discovery' (Coffield and Williamson, 2011, p 49). (Figure 3).



The majority agree that on Yammer, educators and students are partners in learning and learn from one another and that learning is the central organising principle. Most feel that it provides intellectual space to improve through participation and that the learning is collaborative and dialogic. Most also feel that it is an expansive environment run on educational principles. Students are more equivocal with regard to whether the environment encourages principled dissent, allows individual enhancement, is inclusive and equal and is a thriving hub. The general concerns about equality, inclusivity and power in the environment were also reflected in comments from the Focus Groups:

I think some people swamp it ... I'll sit and I'll watch and I'll keep quiet and I'll put my opinion forward if I absolutely have to. But to go on there and become quite opinionated ... is not something I'd do, (Student G)

and conversely from a more vocal participant;

I don't feel Yammer has always been as collaborative as it could be and it's sometimes been limited and unequal as a tool. I don't think that I'm getting much back. I sometimes get things from conversations. It could be used better. (Student H)

In addition, students called for more face-to-face contact time at the beginning of the course to build trusting relationships with peers. The possibility of a two-day residential is currently being explored to support this request. On the basis of the findings of this study, the current blend of face-to-face and online provision is a good recipe but requires the seasoning that would be provided by knowing peers and feeling comfortable in their presence both online and in person.

The session at the beginning of the course was too quick, we didn't know each other very well and we didn't get the chance to know each other ... we had to get straight into performing which is why we didn't collaborate as much as we might have.
(Student B)

Perceptions of the impact of Yammer on student achievement, however, reveal a very encouraging picture. Their responses show 54% reporting a positive impact, 46% no impact and zero students reporting a negative impact. Correlations between the visit rate and perception of impact were also identified. Unsurprisingly, 100% of those who never visit said that it had no impact on their achievement. Of those who do visit at least once a week, 66% said the impact on their achievement had been positive. The focus groups offered some explanations for the kinds of academic benefits that students perceived:

I like the fact that Yammer stayed academic, it answers lots of questions about the module. (Student C)

Yammer allows me to see how other people put things down; it gives a wider scope and alternative points of view. (Student B)

What I've seen has made me "up my game" and to realise that I can be on the same playing field as them. It made me think more about what I can do.
(Student C)

In addition to asking about direct impact on achievements on the course, students were also asked about other benefits that they think accrue from particular aspects of the Yammer experience. Correlations were then sought between these more general benefits and the students' perceptions of direct impact on achievement. Interestingly, 56% of those who said there had been no direct impact on their achievement, nonetheless felt there had been some other benefit, arising out of reading the views of others, being able to ask questions or gaining emotional or peer support. Examples of these more general benefits cited in focus groups include;

I think it is social; some people do get a lot out of it. You can see friendships forming; you know people do chat to each other and things. I don't know, I think it's engaging and social, even though I'm just a lurker. That's fascinating. (Student G)

It is engaging talking to peers and I think that you would struggle on a blended learning course without it. (Student B)

I have found Yammer dead motivating; the [weekly email] digest motivated me because I see what other people do. (Student D)

Eight percent perceived no benefit and thought the site irrelevant to their studies:

Some people might find it useful but for me personally, it's not of any use at all. So it just seems sometimes all these toys and things are really nice but at the end of the day if it doesn't fit, then you've got to find a more traditional place, perhaps. (Student, Student E)

In total, however, 81% of all responses about the potential value of Yammer reported some benefit, either as a direct impact on achievement or of a more general nature.

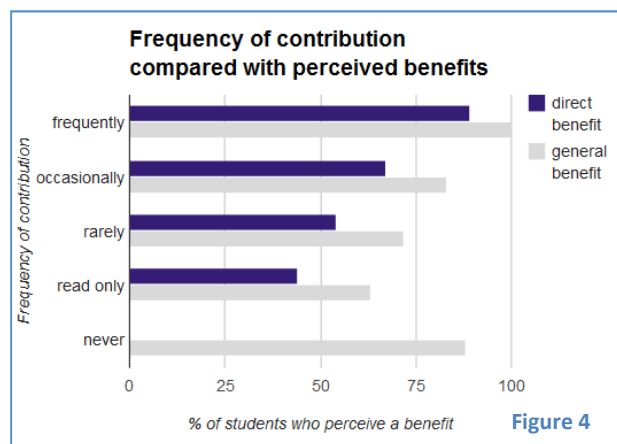
I thought that Yammer was irrelevant at the beginning, which is probably why I didn't use it. But I do now. (Student F)

Students were also asked about the frequency with which they contribute to the site. As with visit frequency, their responses showed a divergent pattern. The mode (29%) contributes

occasionally but a similar number (26%) prefer to 'lurk,' reading the views of others but never contributing:

[I think it is] social because I think I'm a lurker. I don't post anything. I lurk every couple of days. I do lurk. I find it interesting ... engaging. (Student G)

Significant numbers again appear at either end of the spectrum, with 15% contributing frequently and 13% who never contribute because they don't visit. In addition, 18% report that they 'lurk' but are prepared to contribute on rare occasions. These responses were again cross-tabulated with the perceived benefits of Yammer (Figure 4). This shows that in general, the more frequently the student contributes, the more likely they are to perceive Yammer as beneficial. It may be that real benefits accrue, resulting in this positive perception, or that a positive perception triggers participation, or a combination of the two. Again, unsurprisingly, of those who said that they don't interact with Yammer in any way, 100% perceive no direct impact on their achievement. However, what is surprising is that of these, 88% said they perceive a benefit of some kind associated with using Yammer. This may be an anomalous result due to lack of attention to the precise wording of the questions on the survey but it may indicate that even those students who don't use Yammer feel that some benefits would accrue should they begin to do so.



4 Discussion

A key aspect of the findings outlined above that demands attention is the perception of students with regard to power and inequality in the network. The affordance for anyone to create an utterance of any length at any time on any topic holds the promise of an entirely democratic medium but it is interesting to note that it was not perceived as such by the participants. Fluency, scholarship, confidence, frequency of contribution and forthrightness were seen as markers of power and as precluding contribution from those students who felt themselves to be deficient in any of those areas. This left the more reticent feeling somewhat disempowered and the more vocal sometimes feeling that they were not getting much back. Despite the fact that participation is not limited by the space and time constraints of the classroom, it was nonetheless seen as a finite resource, with reference made to students 'swamping' or 'monopolising' the network and a call for tutors to moderate discussion. This might have been predicted by the course team and the effects ameliorated through more careful and detailed induction into use of the site and encouragement of any and all types of interaction. In particular, Bourdieu's (1985) field theory is of use here. The social learning network can be seen as a field into which students carry varying amounts of economic, social and cultural capital, which is then evaluated within the field to accord them what they and others take to be their legitimate status within that field. Left to unfold organically, this might polarise the group into speakers and non-speakers. Whilst lurking is a

legitimate learning activity (Bishop, 2007), interaction holds out the promise of further development of some of the key outcomes of the course and more support might be given to encourage all to feel able to contribute.

In order to encourage a more inclusive environment and in answer to the call from students for tutors to take a more active, supportive role, the curriculum will be adapted for the 2013-14 academic year. Tutors across the network will be encouraged and supported to participate more. In each year of the course, there is a reflective module, which provides the opportunity to incorporate some staged levels of contribution to the social network, with students given a framework for participation. This could begin with reading the site on a regular basis, moving on to 'tagging' posts that are of interest, 'liking' the posts that they rate most highly, commenting or replying to another user, posting an update or question about their own progress on the course, sharing a recommended resource such as a website or journal article, collaborating with peers in the creation of a shared resource and culminating in the student taking a lead role in a collaborative initiative. Students could then be encouraged to set goals on this continuum that suit their own aspirations for use of the site and to reflect on and ask for support or help in reaching those goals if needed, cognisant of some of the benefits that might accrue should they chose to contribute.

5 Conclusion

In summary, the outcomes of the study illustrate that the initial positive impressions of the impact of the social learning network were broadly accurate. It has provided a vibrant and engaging online learning experience for a significant proportion of the students on the course and many have perceived this as beneficial. Our initial metaphor of the site as a kind of 'coffee room' is evocative of what we observed, with people dropping in, some often, some occasionally and some never; engaging in chat or listening in silence to others; sharing resources and formulating ideas; asking questions and giving each other support. The metaphor is also helpful in evaluating the implications of our findings for future iterations, in that physical spaces in educational settings such as common rooms and even classrooms, are similarly used in different ways by different participants, depending upon their needs and dispositions. The degree to which the course team needs to problematise those varying levels of participation is, therefore, arguable. The students on the course are encouraged to see their degree as a personal learning journey and so it is, perhaps a healthy aspect of the course that it enables students to make their own choices about whether or not to participate. This paper, we hope, facilitates more informed choices, because it equips students with the wider picture of how others see the social learning network and its attendant challenges and benefits. It is also hoped that some of the strategies adopted here have wider applicability that will help valuable provision to survive and flourish in an age of austerity.

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