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Medium for empowerment or a 'centre for everything': students' experience of control in digital environments within a university context

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Medium for empowerment or a ‘centre for everything’: students’ experience of control in digital environments within a university context

Abstract

In maximising opportunities to nurture rich and productive learning communities, there is a need to know more about the cultures and sub-cultures that surround virtual learning environments (VLEs). Drawing from a small-scale interview study of students’ digital practices, this paper explores how different discourses may have patterned a group of students’ experiences of VLEs. Unlike studies which have focused upon evaluations of specific projects or interventions, this study investigated their experience across their course. It explores the student identities they associated with digital environments and the power relationships which seemed to pattern how they positioned themselves (or felt positioned) as learners. Whilst none were intimidated by technical aspects, the student identities available to them seemed to vary, as did their perceptions of the student identities associated with university-sponsored digital environments. The analysis considers three aspects of their experience: how they related to the VLE itself, how they related to others through this, and the alternative communities they created to attempt to manage their engagement with the VLE. The paper concludes by arguing for further research which focuses on the broader student experience across courses in order to explore how university-based digital environments intersect with students’ identities as learners.

Key words:

new technologies, virtual learning environment, discourse, power, identity, online discussion

1 Introduction

I do think it’s useful, I think it links you in more. I suppose without [the VLE], you could be a lot more isolated. You somehow feel part of something because of [the VLE] as without it you might feel very much on your own and you might feel you can’t ask because you’re going to be a nuisance.

This comment from Grace, a second year undergraduate student-teacher, was made during a 7-month study of seven students’ perceptions of the role of digital technologies in different domains of their lives. Here she speaks of her feelings about the university virtual learning environment (VLE). Connectedness seems important: the VLE *links you in* and makes you *feel part of something*. This reflects the findings of Aspden and Helm (2004) whose analysis of students’ diaries of face-to-face and online learning experiences suggested that access to VLEs enhanced students’ sense of ‘connection’ to the university. Indeed it is a sense of connectedness that has been associated with the building of successful online learning communities (Thurston, 2005). However, whilst Grace suggests she finds this ‘connection’ reassuring, there are apparent contradictions in how she feels she is expected to behave within the community of learners which surrounds and includes the VLE; *You feel you can’t ask* implies both an expectation of autonomy (you should be able to manage independently) and of dependence (‘ask’ suggests there is something fixed to ‘ask’ about). As Grace’s tutor, this comment seemed patterned by themes of power and student identity. It spoke of Grace’s perceived relationship to her course and suggests how the VLE shaped or reflected this.

This example suggests the importance of examining student perspectives in understanding how learners experience the opportunities provided through VLEs. It raises questions about the kinds of power relationships that may pattern their experiences and the student identities they feel are available to them. In addressing these questions, this paper, drawing on theories of discourse and identity, uses

interview data to highlight some dimensions of how power and identity may pattern students' experience of VLEs. In doing so, it considers how the students interviewed related to the VLE itself, how they related to others through this, and the alternative communities they created to attempt to manage their engagement with the VLE.

A focus on power and learner identity explicitly or implicitly informs much research into the role of VLEs in higher education. Reflecting work which has explored the diverse and potentially egalitarian learning communities that have evolved around everyday virtual spaces (Lankshear and Knobel 2006), educational researchers and developers have seen possibilities for encouraging new kinds of relationships between learners and knowledge. Much writing about the benefits of VLEs focuses upon the significance of community. Clarke and Abbott (2008) and Williams and Tanner (2007), for example, explore the role of VLEs in developing and maintaining the student community for students off-campus whilst others have investigated the process of facilitating interaction and creating such communities (Jones and Cooke, 2006; Guldberg and Pilkington, 2007). Such approaches challenge transmission models of teaching and accord with movements within higher education to promote learner autonomy (Lamb and Reinders, 2007). VLEs typically host a variety of activities, used as: repositories for written and audiovisual resources and links to sources of information; ways of managing assessment and feedback; environments for reflection and presentation; media for course administration; and sites for asynchronous and synchronous peer- and tutor-led discussion.

Much research into use of VLEs is located within specific modules and relates to the impact of a particular curriculum, course or approach. As McPherson and Nunes (2004) indicate, however, in their examination of a 'failure' of a virtual learning space, students' commitment to virtual communities may be influenced by broader factors, such as priorities associated with other aspects of their lives. Moreover, as other studies have demonstrated, attempts to innovate with virtual learning may be framed by assumptions associated with existing curricula and modes of delivery (Matthews, 2008; Dutton et al, 2004; Whitworth, 2005). Claims for the potential of new technologies to empower students, therefore, may be patterned by contradictions when translated into practice.

A focus on discourses offers much to understanding how different aspects of the students' lives might inflect their experience of VLEs. Foucault's work explores how identities are linked to the varied roles that people construct, or are permitted to construct, within different discourses. For him, discourses are 'disciplines' or ways of being, upheld by how people interact, the spaces they inhabit, the kinds of actions and identities that are permitted within those spaces and the way they function as communities (McHoul and Grace, 1995). For Foucault, conventions, or rules, are historically located, reflecting beliefs, values and structures associated with a particular field within a particular period (Foucault, 1972). From this perspective, positioning within a discourse involves behaving, doing and communicating in ways convergent with that discourse. This positioning in turn maintains the kinds of behaviours, actions and meaning-making deemed appropriate within that discourse. Power therefore is not seen as held by individuals or institutions but developed and maintained through discursive practices.

This Foucauldian perspective, however, has been seen to underplay the significance of human agency as it suggests that subjectivity is created through discourse (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner and Cain, 1998; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006). As Benwell and Stokoe (2006: 31) write:

in this account, the development of the individual becomes a process of acquiring a particular ideological version of the world, liable to serve hegemonic ends and preserve the status quo. Identity or identification becomes a colonizing force, shaping and directing the individual.

This perspective suggests that individuals are subject to pre-existing power relations which are ultimately self-sustaining. Gillen's work on the use of VLEs within a doctoral programme, however, would seem to suggest that the reflexive relationship between contexts and the students' online practices can generate new kinds of discourses around learning: her fine-grained analysis of online discussion board postings explores how online exchanges seemed to enable new kinds of relationships

between tutors and students to emerge (Gillen, 2003). Acknowledging the potential for such shifts in power relations, Gee's notion of 'Big D' Discourses (Gee, 2005) is useful in theorising how identities and discourses may be continually re-forming.

Gee differentiates between 'small d' and 'Big D' discourses. Whilst 'small d' discourse focuses specifically on language, 'Big D' discourse refers to broader dimensions of how people position themselves towards one another. 'Big D' Discourses involve the activities through which people position themselves in different ways and the places, spaces and objects that construct and constrain social relations. For Gee, 'Big D' Discourses offer ways of enacting identities but these are 'combined with individual styles and creativity'. Gee describes this process as 'recognition work' (Gee, 2005): individuals 'perform' identity through how they align themselves and others to particular identities. New subjectivities can be created as the process of discourse¹ creation is ongoing and mutually constructive. Agency then arises as people operating in one discourse will have experience of others. It is this that enables them to use varied resources to envision and construct new ways of being. In this paper, then, consideration of how discourses frame students' perspectives on VLEs involves exploring how they seem to position themselves in relation to the opportunities provided and their relationship with others and with learning.

2 Methodology

The interview data presented here were generated during a larger study of seven student-teachers' perceptions of the role of digital technologies in their lives. The study focused on the continuities and discontinuities in student-teachers' personal use of digital technologies and their use as classroom practitioners. Whilst findings from this broader study are reported elsewhere (author, 2009a; author 2009b), this paper focuses on data relating to their experience within university-based learning environments. Importantly, the study was not designed to capture students' behaviour within digital environments and does not, like Gillen's paper, make any claims about the *processes* through which power relations are produced, maintained and challenged in virtual environments. Instead, drawing from the tradition of sociological phenomenology (Schutz, 1967), the study focused specifically on how students made sense of their experiences.

Three in-depth exploratory interviews were conducted as part of the main study, the first and third of which generated data relevant to this paper. (The second phase explored digital practices associated with their classroom practices as student-teachers.) The first round of interviews focused specifically on students' experience of technology-use in their personal and university lives. In order to maximise opportunities for participants themselves to drive the direction of discussion, they were asked to prepare by completing mind-maps (Buzan and Buzan, 1993), representing their use of digital technology in different domains. They then used these as prompts, commenting on the thoughts, feelings and significance associated with using technology in these different contexts. Whilst they were invited to talk about university-related digital practices, they were not asked specifically to speak about the VLE. Notably, however, comments on the VLE dominated their narratives of university digital practices and this in itself was perhaps interesting in understanding the salience this had for their experience as students. The third interview provided an opportunity to re-visit ideas and experiences from the first phase. In preparation, they created diagrams showing their relationship to a series of digital technologies and resources that they had suggested were significant to their lives. The VLE was one of these.

Despite attempts to enable students to drive the interviews, it was likely that it was not just students' described experiences that were patterned by discourses, but the interviews themselves. In order to support my own reflection on the process of meaning-making during interviews, a form of 'analytic bracketing' (Gubrium and Holstein, 2003) was used. This involved coding data twice: in relation to

¹ From this point forward, 'Big D' Discourses are referred to as 'discourses'.

both substantive content and how students represented their experience through the interviews. Systematic inductive analysis, drawing from the tradition of grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), was used to examine the data. Open coding was used to highlight salient features of participants' experience and the significance they ascribed to it. Constant comparison analysis was then used to re-visit the data in the light of emerging themes whilst axial coding explored relationships between different dimensions of the students' described experiences.

Participants

The seven participants were self-selected and in the second year of an undergraduate course of initial teacher education at a university in northern England. There is no attempt here to suggest that the experiences of the VLE they described were typical. Firstly, all were student-teachers and, consequently, their stories may have been influenced by their pedagogical beliefs and assumptions. Secondly, they were all female. Whilst gendered patterns of technology-use have become less marked over recent years and research has possibly underplayed the skills and aptitudes of women (Abbis, 2008), there still seem to be differences in technology-use by male and female users (Cooper, 2006). In particular, some research into gendered use of online discussion boards has suggested differences in patterns of use and quality of contribution (von Neuforn, 2007; Guiller and Durndell, 2006). It is possible that these students' stories of online environments could be associated with gendered identities. Thirdly, various writers have explored how generations that have grown up with digital technologies may have experience, expectations and orientations which differ from those of older users (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006; Leung, 2003; Prensky, 2001, 2007; Rheingold, 2003; Tapscott, 1998). Such work would suggest that the youngest participants in this study might have experienced the VLE differently to older participants. Interestingly, however, whilst their experiences of technology-use beyond the course could be seen as reflecting priorities and values associated with different stages of life, analysis of their stories of the VLE did not generate any trends that related to age. Whilst further, larger-scale research would usefully explore possible relationships between experience, age and gender, this paper does not attempt to make any claims in these areas.

In contextualising the analysis of their experience of the VLE, it is worth briefly summarising what was learned from the wider study about their technology-use beyond the course. All used digital technology in varied ways, but whilst uses reflected different purpose and preferences, there were some common threads in their narratives. Their accounts suggested that their online practices were embedded mainly in local activities and relationships located primarily in the physical world; for example, their most frequently cited practices related to digital communication within established relationships – texting from mobile phones, using instant messaging or sending emails. Moreover, whilst they used the Internet to access global markets, their web-based activity was mainly associated with consumption not production. Although some visited social networking sites, they were wary of sharing experiences or understandings publicly. It was also noteworthy that their induction to new practices was often mediated by friends or family and this process seemed to provide the confidence needed to try new experiences.

The following commentary explores participants' experiences of and perspectives on the VLE. It focuses on three aspects that seemed significant to understanding the kinds of learner identities they associated with it and the way they positioned themselves. The first focuses upon stories of their relationship with the VLE itself whilst the second addresses how they related to others within the virtual environment. The third concerns the unofficial networks which evolved to provide peer support for university-related requirements. The analysis draws on both the content of their comments and how these were phrased.

3.1 Virtual university spaces: connectedness & control

In considering the power relationships that seemed to pattern students' descriptions of their experience of the university VLE, it is worth returning to Grace's comments cited earlier. By noting how the virtual environment *links you in* and makes you *feel part of something*, Grace seemed to link the sense of community provided by the VLE to reassurance rather than empowerment. A similar perspective seemed reflected in other students' descriptions of their relationship with the VLE. Charlotte, for example, noted its role in helping her negotiate the demands of university life:

...That's my sanity, really. You feel in control when you're on there- you feel like you know what you're doing. You know, I try to go on every day for at least 20 minutes and I go into all the modules and skirt round, make sure I've not missed anything, print off any slides that I need, double check the tasks. I sort of read all the assignments at the beginning of the year as well so I actually knew what was coming and somebody said to me yesterday, 'You're really organised.' Actually, I'm really not- I'm absolutely messy to the point of ridiculous but I think Blackboard makes me feel better. It makes me feel like I know what's coming.

Again, the VLE seems to provide a means of clarifying expectations and managing complex demands. Charlotte describes herself as 'in control' when 'on' the VLE. However she associates this sense of control with personal organisation rather than learner autonomy. 'Control' involves feeling 'like you know what you're doing', making sure you have not 'missed anything' and knowing 'what's coming'. She creates a picture of a fixed world of tasks and assignments that can be downloaded and printed off. This control seems to gain its salience in contrast to what she suggests is the ongoing risk of losing control. By describing the VLE as her 'sanity' she implies the potential (in)sanity of her student experience which seems associated with the complexities of managing multiple demands.

Her comments here suggest a reflexive relationship between her sense of empowerment and the kind of 'place' she feels the VLE to be. As Davies (2006) argues, notions of space in networked worlds differ from those in the physical world: spaces are created textually and vary for different users at different times; it is easy to move between spaces and 'presence' is defined by behaviour within texts. Neither Charlotte nor Grace described interaction with the materials they encounter. Instead the environment seems to be chiefly valued as a repository of information. Charlotte presented Blackboard as a fixed place – she was *on there* and *goes into* all the modules. The VLE was her *sanity*, enabling her to manage the multiple demands of the course. Other students suggested that Blackboard was more than a support. Kate suggested its breadth and reach:

It's almost like a centre for everything at the university for communication and you can't...and that's the centre and everything branches out from it but if you weren't there, you'd completely, everything would bypass you and you wouldn't have a clue, really.

Like Charlotte, she saw it as a place necessary to visit – *if you weren't there, you'd completely, everything would bypass you* - but, rather than being characterised by flexibility; it became *the centre*, a powerhouse of information that must be absorbed and managed. It was only by being *there* that it was possible to navigate the course. They welcomed the VLE and the extent that it helped them engage with course requirements. This was not however a space in which they had any influence or ownership: they entered a fixed space rather than engaging with or shaping it.

3.2 Risky online identities: rejection, avoidance and obligation

Other narratives focused specifically on the role of the online discussion board within the VLE, and particularly those boards where students could post queries for peers or tutors. As discussion boards were the only place where students themselves posted content on the VLE, these narratives provided insights into their perceptions of their own and others' online student identities. Kathryn for example was frustrated by what she saw as the low level of engagement exhibited by others on the course. She explained why she rarely contributed:

Sometimes I think that the things that have been posted are really stupid so I won't dignify them with a response. You know things that I think people could look up for themselves and sometimes I think it's not really used as effectively as it could be [...]. So you can spend too long looking at these things. Maybe don't have much relevance to you. I think as I say maybe it could be used more effectively. I wish people could think about things more before posting it straight on...cos I think you've got to learn to do things for yourself and then if you're really struggling post it on.

Whereas Grace and Charlotte's comments in the previous section seemed to construct the VLE as a place to be visited, here Kathryn speaks of avoiding an online community which she associated with dependency: *-the things that have been posted are really stupid so I won't dignify them with a response* - and distances herself from this: *I think you've got to learn to do things for yourself*. Kathryn suggests here that she drew conclusions about others through how they behaved on the board and her non-participation, or absence from the boards reflected her more independent student identity.

Whilst Kathryn's student identity is implied rather than stated, others were more explicit in associating identity performance with the discussion board. Whilst Kathryn suggested she avoided the boards through frustration, other students described a fear of looking stupid and linked this fear to a need to 'create an image'. Kate, for example, expressed concern about avoiding threats to her professional identity in her online presence, unsure how to do this within the discourse of dependence created on the boards:

I wouldn't ask something myself but I would answer something someone else said but anonymously, but I think I've said this before, I don't want people to form an impression of me...[...] I see digital communication as something more formal. Like in the discussion board, I wouldn't want to display my personality. I see it almost like a professional thing in which I need to conduct myself in a certain way.

Kate's reluctance to display vulnerability seemed associated with anxiety about identity performance. For her, appearing 'professional' seemed an important aspect of her successful participation in the course. Indeed, elsewhere I have written about how Kate's presentation of herself as 'professional' patterned her narratives of both formal and informal dimensions of her life (author, 2009a). This particular example however seemed to highlight possible tensions between different aspects of Kate's student identity. She seemed to see a contradiction between asking a question and being professional and wanted to avoid displaying what she saw as her 'personality' in case this jeopardised the professional identity she cultivated. She did not seem to see this vulnerability as reconcilable with the professionalism she wished to convey: she could only engage with the discussion board as formal space rather than a place for tentative discussion of emerging thoughts.

An alternative conceptualisation of professionalism seemed to underpin Grace's comments about discussion boards. Whilst Kate seemed reluctant to reconcile vulnerability and tentativeness with professionalism, Grace seemed to view non-participation as unprofessional:

Grace *They're [discussion boards are] useful sometimes but they are, at other times, quite difficult. And I feel as well a responsibility in replying to something and I'm saying, 'Well, I'm doing it like this' and I think, if people take my word for it and I'm totally wrong then you know that's going to be really awful.*

Cathy *But you still go on there. What makes you go on there?*

Grace *I think because the idea is that it's to help each other, I do feel as if I should contribute...I perhaps don't contribute as much as I should. It's only if I'm quite clear about something.*

Grace's use of the modal 'should' here suggests an obligation to participate which had little to do with extending her own learning and more with being a 'good' student. Daisy too seemed to feel this, commenting, *I think I've only done it a couple of times. Just to show that I am actually looking at it as well.* Online collaboration was not seen as intrinsically useful but an important part of taking responsibilities to peers seriously. For Grace, however, this responsibility was double-edged: she felt guilty for not contributing more often – *I do feel as if I should contribute* - but, when she did so, worried she may be misleading others: *I think, if people take my word for it and I'm totally wrong then you know that's going to be really awful.* Once refracted through the discussion board, collaboration became less about negotiating learning and more about *getting it right* or demonstrating a willingness to collaborate. There seemed to be a clash between discourses of collective and centralised knowledge and Grace seemed to feel disempowered as she was unable to confidently perform the recognition work that she felt would cement her position as good student. Kate, Joanne, Daisy and Grace seemed to associate the discussion boards with risk. Both participation and non-participation could risk performing student identities which were not compatible with those to which they aspired.

Of course their implied definitions of appropriate student identities may be shaped or intensified through the recognition work they were doing through the interview. Kathryn emphasises her autonomy, Kate her professionalism and Grace her commitment to peers, perhaps highlighting what they saw as appropriate professional identities. What is noteworthy however is how each narrative highlights different ways of responding to their environment but also different feelings about their peers. Whilst Kathryn felt irritation, Joanne felt vulnerability and Grace, obligation. This seemed to suggest different ideas about the power relationships which structured these online environments and different feelings about how they were positioned within these; whilst Kathryn seemed to see online peers as less competent, Joanne saw them as potential judges and Grace as colleagues to whom she had an obligation to support. For all, however, it seemed that the discussion board gained meaning through behaviour within and around it and consequently became associated with certain kinds of student identity.

3.3 Unofficial networks: mutual support or collective risk?

Whilst the previous sections describe participants' feelings about institutional communities of the VLE, some narratives recounted what seemed to be more useful, supportive and less visible peer networks. These seemed to generate the kind of participatory practices and distributed knowledge that have been associated with digital environments in less formal contexts (Lankshear and Knobel, 2006). Charlotte, for example, described her immediate group of seven friends, all of whom supported one another:

I don't know really, it's just, I think we all are really glad we've got each other at university because it's hard. It's hard to balance uni and home and I think all of us miss something at some point like we're supposed to have read something or supposed to have done something and we all get each others' backs really. We're sort of, 'Have you seen this? Do you know about this?' You know for a fact somebody will know some of it. So we're always in touch with each other, saying, 'Have you seen this- it's been posted- have you read it?' 'I've sent you this because you need to read this.' [...] ... Now, S_____ is the king of the discussion board. I think he's got too much time on his hands. He's always on there so if anything ever actually key came up, he'll cut and paste it and send it to me, 'You need to read this email.' So that's nice cos that's the discussion board covered.

Unofficial networks seemed to help Charlotte and her friends manage complex demands and perform recognition work as successful students through meeting deadlines and completing set tasks. In doing so, however, they perhaps still upheld official discourses. From Goffman (1969)'s perspective, this collaboration might be seen as the 'backstage' work which upholds their identities as good students. By delegating the responsibility for checking the discussion boards to a friend, Charlotte suggests that the group ensures it is informed about debates and issues relevant to successful negotiation of the

course. This kind of network could be seen as simply re-contextualising the peer support that might always have existed amongst fellow students. However, it could be that the pervasiveness of new technology was subtly changing the relationships between individuals and their course as such supportiveness moved towards increased mutual dependency. Such practices could be seen as creating an alternative, parallel discourse of learning where participation and shared responsibility were central. From this perspective these informal practices could perhaps be seen as empowering. However, Charlotte suggested that they could also cause disempowerment or vulnerability if networks broke down. She commented, for example, on her frustration regarding lost contact with a peer she was working alongside during her teaching placement:

Actually, on my placement, R_____, for whatever reason her phone had disconnected for six weeks and I couldn't get hold of her. It drove me mad. Just ridiculous things like, I need to just talk to her about something or we're out and about and I'll just confirm that's right with R_____ and taking it in turns to drive as well and you know, not being able to get hold of each other. Because she's not at home that often so you can't really get hold of her on her normal phone and obviously email's OK. Honestly, she sent me a text about a week ago, I'd done something and I thought she might want to see it for an assignment, Couldn't get hold of her. Anyway, I got this and I couldn't get hold of R_____ and I felt like, she was cut off. She's back online now so that's all right. But it drives me mad. And also there's the response to text messages, that can differ a lot. Some people you can text and it's instant, quicker than a conversation almost. Sometimes it's three hours and I'm thinking, 'Oh for goodness sake.'

Using phone and email to share ideas enabled Charlotte to collaborate more extensively with her partner but this network of expertise and support relied on mutual commitment. The more they used the network the more that responsibility and even knowledge became distributed and the more she became dependent on and responsible to that network. Consequently, Charlotte was undermined and annoyed when her placement partner lost contact. In this context, this mismatch between digital preferences was not only frustrating but could have endangered the performance of successful identity performance within the dominant university discourse. Whilst the peer network provided a means of supporting her successful identity performance as student, increased dependence upon this may have increased her vulnerability within a context in which assessment still focused upon individual achievement.

4 Empowerment and control in digital environments

Participants' narratives seem to be significant firstly in describing the different kinds of feelings that they associated with digital environments. They varied in their feelings about peers, the kinds of communities that were created online and their relationship towards these. This seemed to reflect what they wanted to achieve, how they saw themselves as learners and how they seemed to want to present themselves to others. Such narratives illustrated how professional, academic and interpersonal discourses interacted differently for each individual at different times. Such insights remind us of the diversity of students' experience and reflect the findings of other studies which have highlighted the range and scope of digital experience and explained such diversity in relation to social and cultural factors rather than technical competence (Holloway and Valentine, 2002; Selwyn, 2004). This perhaps problematises polarisation of the experience of the older and younger generation. Whilst many young students may bring extensive experience of operating within online environments, this may not necessarily lead to confident participation within university VLEs.

The narratives are significant to understanding the power relations which may be enacted in VLEs through highlighting the feelings of discomfort, confusion or vulnerability that some students described as they performed recognition work within university-based digital environments. For some, these environments were framed by contradictory discourses: for example, it seemed that for Grace, the VLE was patterned by discourses of both collaborative learning and learning through transmission. Some students described opting out. Others described struggling to perform identities that they felt could undermine their performance of appropriate student identities. These insights are

important in considering how students interact in virtual environments. They suggest that behaviour may not only be influenced by the immediate context and management of the discussion board but sit within broader contexts of identity performance- most notably here across a course – as students attempt to maintain a particular student identity through interactions with tutors or peers.

Whilst this analysis suggests that life in virtual spaces intersects with life in physical space, it does not necessarily suggest that hierarchical teacher/learner relationships are inevitably self-sustaining. These students' responses can be seen as agentic responses designed to enact different kinds of student identities. By setting up their own networks or rejecting opportunities for online support, they could be seen as aligning themselves to learning contexts which suit their learning preferences. However, absenting themselves like Kathryn, or delegating membership to others, like Charlotte, does little to challenge the kinds of communities that may be evolving around the VLE. Unlike Gillen's doctoral students, these students seemed to have made judgments about the kind of community that exists there and then positioned themselves in relation to this. Indeed, there seemed to be little in the students' narratives which suggested that they were able to use the VLE to take control of their learning in ways envisaged by educational developers. Some welcomed the support provided in helping them manage their learning, but told no narratives of using the VLE to support the development of ideas, knowledge or critique. Where these students used the VLE, they seemed to refer to it in terms of 'control' rather than 'empowerment'. Whilst educational developers may focus on changing power relationships between tutors, learners and knowledge, these students seemed to focus more tightly on feelings of being in (or out of) control of their learning. Their sense of control seemed to relate to organisation and management rather than directing the focus and process of learning.

Whilst drawing from only a small sample of students, the interview data captured here complements other research in this area by exploring students' experience across a course rather than within a particular module. This analysis does not explore how local conditions shaped these particular perspectives and does not attempt to correlate particular pedagogical strategies with these students' perceptions. Useful evaluations of specific approaches and modules are widely available elsewhere (McConnell, 2006). Instead it argues that attention to the discourses which frame students' perspectives on VLEs are essential to understanding the quality and extent of their participation. The impact of strategies designed to develop online communities, such as guidelines for effective tutor facilitation of online discussion, may be lessened unless they are considered against the context of the broader course context and the discourses which pattern it. In exploring opportunities for further research into university-based VLEs, there would seem to be a need for further work which cuts across the whole student experience and looks more ecologically (Dutton et al, 2004) at how ethos develops across a course.

It is worth noting how the patterns noted earlier in relation to informal experience contrasted with university-based practices. Just as, in their personal lives, students were uncomfortable about public display in online environments, so at university, they all maintained networks with peers but were uncomfortable within more public spaces. Whilst personal digital networks were based on existing relationships, anxieties about online posting at university seemed exacerbated where networks were peopled by an unfamiliar or anonymous community (which each student seemed to characterise differently).

It is not suggested here that universities should attempt to re-create the conditions which structure informal digital experience. Unofficial spaces are likely to continue to exist outside official sites and attempts to re-create social networking sites within official spaces would not only be problematic but ineffective. As Selwyn (2007) notes, such spaces may be used in 'disruptive, challenging' ways to support identity performance of a broader student identity. However, attention to the qualities of informal practices could inform how VLEs are framed. Studies of effective online university-based discussion boards have highlighted a number of strategies that can be used to enhance students' sense of community (McConnell, 2006; Grubb and Hines, 2000). Whilst such interactions may not be possible within course-wide discussion boards, opportunities could be provided for students to reflect

upon the process of interaction in these environments; discussion around the kinds of learner identities that may be enacted online may help to dispel anxieties and generate discussion about alternative possibilities.

5 Conclusion

By focusing on the kinds of identities that student-teachers associated with VLEs, this paper attempts to complement evaluations of specific instances of technology use. Showing how students suggested they positioned themselves and were positioned by others within VLEs, this analysis draws attention to how power may be infused and distributed within such environments. At the same time, the distinctively individual responses showed how different discourses may intersect differently for each individual. Moreover, the opportunities provided by new technologies may be filtered through old assumptions about teaching and learning, so that students' experiences are out of step with the aspirations of course developers. These insights would suggest that significant attention needs to be paid to the social and cultural activity that surrounds VLE use and to possible intersections between online and offline experience.

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