

The Danger of Impersonalisation in Mass Personalised Learning

Mary Kiernan and Ray Stoneham

University of Greenwich

Abstract

This paper discusses the dichotomy between socialisation and personalisation, and questions whether the two can coexist. It presents evidence that socialisation does lead to improved student achievement and that there is a significant issue with personalisation, in that it limits social discovery because it does not cater for the development of an energetic learning community to share and exchange information. This is particularly relevant in the context of mass personalisation and must be a key consideration when developing personalised learning environments.

Introduction

'Personalised learning for all' has many possible benefits but there are also drawbacks, particularly when scaled up to large cohorts of learners. Mass personalisation needs to go hand-in-hand with socialisation of learning to enable effective learning to take place, because a significant issue with mass personalisation is that it limits social discovery by learners. It restricts the development of an energetic learning community that is needed for the sharing and exchanging of information. The development of technology (particularly Web 2.0) enables both online personalisation and socialisation of learning to develop in ways not previously possible.

It is important that teachers and facilitators of learning remain proactive in ensuring that interactive features are used by all students for socialisation. The authors believe that personalised learning where there is no shared experience amongst learners leads to impersonal learning environments and will not provide the well balanced employees and entrepreneurs that industry and society needs.

The study

To investigate the importance of socialisation over 3,500 messages from six online groups were analysed using content analysis, an established methodology for studying the content of communication (Neuendorf, 2002). This technique was chosen because of its reliance on coding and categorisation of data, which makes it a particularly rich and meaningful method to use. As Krippendorff (1980) noted, '... much content analysis research is motivated by the search for techniques to infer from symbolic data what would be too costly, no longer possible, or too obtrusive by the use of other techniques'.

The technique of a priori coding was adopted as the categories were established prior to the analysis based on the e-moderator role, activity, stage (eMRAS) framework (Kiernan, 2004). To make the analysis

manageable, a critical set of activities at each stage of course evolution was determined (table 1) using the rankings given by experienced e-moderators at each stage of a course life cycle (Kiernan, 2008).

Key Activities for High Performing Distributed Self-Led Groups	
5 Stages of an online course	E-Moderation activity
1. Access and motivation	Send welcoming message Identification that all have contributed
2. Online socialisation	Encouragement of contributions Provision of good social environment for learning Allocate and implement group roles and responsibilities
3. Information exchange	Declaration of the discussion objectives Use of meta comments to clarify issues and reduce information overload Provide effective file management
4. Knowledge construction	Supporting/shaping/guiding the discussion Constructive use of conflicting opinion
5. Development	Reflective postings Constructive feedback on how the conference impacted on their learning

Table 1: eMRAS Critical Set of Activities

The findings provided evidence that high-ranking groups were proactive in the early stages of the course and quickly socialised with each other, as evidenced by messages welcoming people to the conference, encouraging contributions, and posting detailed information about them including when they would be available to work on the course. As they moved further into the socialisation phase there was evidence of the 'storming process' for group development. For example, one member of a group posted work in advance of the agreed date and another group member responded:

"I must admit that I do begin to feel stressed when people post pieces of work some weeks in advance of the due date. The course is structured and timed so that we all have the chance to remain 'in sync'."

The person who posted the work early refuted this and said that it was only just over a week early but that they sent their response with respect. A further e-mail revealed that the concern over posting work too early was in response to his reflection on a previous course where this had happened to the detriment of the final result but noted he was

“...certain that any carefully and sensitively expressed concerns would receive the attention deserved.”

The successful transition through storming process moved the group from just socialising to effective socialisation that engendered trust. In one group there was a Progress Chaser - when they were sending messages in this capacity, they called themselves ‘The Time Police’ although they remained very friendly. The group also acknowledged important personal issues and accommodated them into their strategy but they never deviated from their aim - success in the assessment. For example:

“I’d prefer not to do this for this assignment, because I have two other assignments due in the same week.”

The middle ranking groups took longer to achieve the socialisation stage. One group did socialise but never acknowledged, or factored into their work schedule, personal issues that a group member may be experiencing. One instance was when no one responded to a member who posted a message to say that they were struggling to come to terms with a close bereavement. Their lack of effective socialisation meant they did not display empathy in this or other personal situations and arguably they did not achieve maximum effectiveness within the group.

The low ranking groups had a very friendly conference environment. For example, one member started their message:

“Keong Hee Fatt Choy. I am not swearing at anybody. The four words mean Happy Chinese New Year. I am celebrating with friends tonight with a big party at my flat. We will have Chinese music and show a Chinese DVD. It will be crowded with 26 people coming to a medium size 2 bedroom flat...”

However, they socialised too much and never really stormed in their development process until late in the course. As one student observed:

“Our messages have been polite and gentle. Perhaps it is time for us to progress to messages that are more vigorous and effective.”

They did not achieve true socialisation until towards the end of the course where they did significantly improved their grade mark for that phase. The results from this study provided evidence that socialisation is an essential aspect in helping people to achieve their maximum learning potential.

Personalisation of learning

Mass personalisation of learning is not just a phenomenon of the internet age. Schemes like SMP Maths11–16 were personalising learning for large classes using paper-based technology in the 1980s. However, personalisation of all forms of information is now becoming commonplace. Not so long ago ‘My BBC’ meant something we all owned; now it means a customised BBC home page and an iPlayer so we do not ‘miss the unmissable’. The development of technologies such as RSS and the growth of customisable portals (e.g. iGoogle) means we can filter our online experience in whatever way we want, thereby isolating us in our own pool of interests.

A key issue is how we personalise a learning environment. One way is to ask the user to complete set tasks and for the system then to produce relevant content. This presents the danger that we stereotype the user which can often lead to mistakes. Another potential danger is that of privacy. To effectively generate the personalised learning environment one needs to collect and store sensitive data such as preferred learning styles, exam/test scores and possibly conversations in forums. Therefore it is important to ensure that the user has trust in the system. Another way to personalise the learning environment is to allow the user to choose their content. This has the inherent danger that they may forget there were other options they could have taken.

The author's research into developing an e-moderation framework for tutor-led courses and courses based on self-led groups supports the concept that socialisation is central to the academic progress of the overwhelming majority of students (Kiernan, 2009). The use of forums in personalised learning environments does help students to socialise; however, although this is needed for socialisation, it does not necessarily lead to socialisation (Kiernan, 2008). Mass personalisation may lead to reduced socialisation and the effect of this for most students will be reduced motivation and may lead to a negative impact on their learning.

Opportunities for socialisation

Web 2 (O'Reilly, 2005) refers to a perceived second generation of web-based communities and hosted services that bring with it a new range of asynchronous computer communications. These include weblogs (blogs), wikis and blikis. Mash-ups and virtual worlds also make use of asynchronous communication via e-mail and kiosks for asynchronous communication.

Blogs can help to engender a community of practice for individuals who are interested in co-constructing knowledge around a common topic. For example, students could use a blog for inputting comments on their work progress during a common project, and this would be a useful tool when producing their individual evaluations. The 'Flatplanet' course (O'Carroll and D'Aguiar, 2007) utilised a wiki involving digital natives rather than the digital migrants; however, there was still evidence that the students who gained the highest grades quickly achieved socialisation, even though they were based in two continents, and reinforced the results from the study mentioned above. Virtual worlds still require students to gain the social skills that will enable them to interact successfully with other students – exchanging information, constructing knowledge, reflecting on and evaluating their performance.

Conclusions

Personalisation of learning is often seen as a way of delivering efficient and effective learning to large cohorts of students. Advances in communications and the development of well designed software can make this seem a straightforward path, particularly if driven by financial constraints. This can lead to isolated and de-motivated students. What is appropriate for skills-based training may need to be re-evaluated for broad-based educational delivery.

When considering mass personalisation of learning institutions should take care to build in features such as moderated forums and a range of social networking (web 2.0) applications where ideas can be shared and students can interact with one another. Most importantly, providers should be proactive in making sure these interactive features are used by all students for socialisation, and not just for socialising, creating a shared experience amongst all the learners.

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