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# TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED LEARNING IN ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES: WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT?

## INTRODUCTION

Technology-enhanced learning (TEL) delineates the defining feature of the changed and changing learning landscape in higher education (HE), within which sector its provision and use have escalated over the last decade, prompting what have been described as ‘epoch-making changes’ (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1993, p. 9) to organisational environments, marked by ‘the push to e-learning’ (Trowler et al., 2014, p. 11). It is on that changing landscape that this paper focuses. It presents selected findings from a funded study that examined how strategic change initiatives and the embedding of technological developments in institutions may enhance students’ experience of higher education.

Details of the research design will be included in the SRHE conference presentation. Here, to conserve space, we simply explain that we gathered data through interviews with two broad constituencies:

- academics, learning technologists and academic developers who had been involved with TEL-related projects in their institutions;
- HE students.

Presenting the student voice, this paper focuses exclusively on data derived from interviews with students.

## THE STUDENT VOICE: BRIEF OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

Since precisely what is meant by ‘TEL’ remains contested, every interview with a student began with a brief explanation of what we mean by ‘technology-enhanced learning’: the use of digital technologies not only to course delivery and students’ learning, but also to the administrative-related elements of students’ study-related lives, such as coursework submission and feedback. Interviewees were then asked to evaluate, overall, the TEL provision at their institutions.

Responses were generally and broadly positive, indicating a student body that, on the whole, is relatively satisfied with the TEL facilities and provision that they encounter.

## CONVENIENCE AS AN ENHANCEMENT

Convenience emerged as a key factor in students’ evaluations: facilities that make their lives easier are evidently considered enhancements, whilst anything that adds complexity or creates inconvenience is a source of irritation, frustration or dissatisfaction. Many students readily provided examples of convenience-related enhancements; some related to the availability and ease of accessing learning resources.

Lecture capture – whereby lectures are recorded and the recordings made available to students, usually through having been uploaded onto a VLE – is currently the latest ‘big’ TEL facility to be incorporated into many UK universities’ strategic change initiatives (Cilesiz, 2014; Panopto, 2011). Students are evidently very enthusiastic about it – even if they have not yet experienced it first-hand – and perceive it as an unqualified (potential) enhancement to their study-related lives in allowing unlimited access to lectures:

A lot of what the lecturer says during the lecture isn’t apparent anywhere in the lecture notes or online anywhere ... . Having the lecture recorded, you can always go back and check it. ... There’s a much greater number of pros as opposed to the cons. (*male engineering post-graduate student, pre-1992 university*)

The one thing I will say is that this [UK] university has lecture cast, which we don't have at [US Ivy League university]. None of my courses here have it, but I have friends who have it and they can just watch the lecture online – which seems convenient. (*visiting American undergraduate student, pre-1992 university*)

And a student union sabbatical officer highlighted academics' under-use of lecture capture as an issue that provokes students' dissatisfaction. Yet, interestingly, few of our interviewees had direct experience of lecture capture; their comments were, for the most part, based on their perceptions of what they imagined or expected it could offer, and were focused on convenience-related rather than cognitive-related issues.

## THUMBS DOWN FOR ONLINE DISCUSSION

There is widespread, and longstanding, acceptance that students' learning – by which we mean the processes by which students increase their knowledge or understanding – is often fuelled by communicative exchanges with others, through discussion that involves questioning and responding in ways that promote reflection, analysis, and knowledge re-structuring and revision (Evans & Abbott, 1998). Fora such as online chat rooms, wikis and blogs offer opportunities for such exchanges, yet our findings suggest that students have little appetite for them. All except one of our interviewees responded 'No' to being asked if they engage in course-related online discussion fora, and one of the student union officers whom we interviewed confirmed that chat rooms are seldom visited.

If students' learning is to be supported and enhanced by the kinds of discursive exchanges that academics have long considered valuable elements of course delivery, then it seems likely that this will continue to be achieved principally through traditional, tried-and-trusted, fora rather than through their 21<sup>st</sup> century digital equivalents, unless student engagement and enthusiasm are successfully harnessed through the kinds of media and platforms that manage to strike a chord with them. For their part, students have an important role to play in ensuring that those who work together to design and deliver their courses are aware of their study-related needs, and of what is likely to spark their interest and motivate them, as well as what holds little allure or attraction for them. To be effective, such communication is dependent upon students making their views known vociferously.

## A SUBDUED STUDENT VOICE

Yet our findings suggest that, for the most part, students are relatively uninterested in making their voices heard. We detected amongst our interviewees a lack of interest that borders on apathy in communicating their views to those with the capacity to make changes. Indeed, a student union sabbatical officer highlighted student apathy as a major frustration in his role. He provided an example:

The e-learning team had this huge event for students called *DigiScene* a few months ago, and they thought it would be something that loads of people would attend – it was a 3-day event. And you could count on one hand how many students actually turned up. Only about 3 or 4 people actually came, and they were expecting about a hundred.

But what is it that accounts for students' apparent reticence, or apathy: their reluctance to have their say about the teaching and learning facilities and provision in their universities?

## THE BASES OF STUDENT ATTITUDES

In relation to satisfaction in the workplace, research has revealed people's far greater tendency to identify sources of discontent than sources of satisfaction, because the satisfactory elements of their work quickly become taken for granted (Evans, 1998). If we dig a little deeper into what influences where people find themselves on a hypothetical satisfied-dissatisfied continuum we find an explanation in what one of us has called the 'relativity factor', whereby satisfaction or dissatisfaction occurs as a result of individual's evaluation

of her or his current situation in relation (or relative) to her or his comparable experiences. Such comparable experience may be one's own previous experiences, as in the case of a postgraduate student interviewee who evaluated the TEL provision she currently enjoys more favourably than the facilities that had been available to her as an undergraduate at a different university. Similarly, a student union sabbatical officer's comment succinctly illustrated the relativity factor's influence on satisfaction levels: 'The most dissatisfaction comes from postgraduates. And it's usually about something that they had at their previous institution, but don't have here'.

In other cases the comparator – the yardstick against which the individual measures the satisfactoriness of her or his current situation – may take the form of *other people's* comparable experiences, which one may have observed first hand, or heard about second-hand. This was a source of dissatisfaction for an interviewee who evaluated his own situation as less satisfactory than that of his friends:

The TEL facilities aren't bad, but I don't think they're fantastic. Some of my friends from other universities have got a lot more - just the amount of stuff they can access for their assignments. We just, literally, get just the lecture slides. *They* get links to other pages, with stuff that will help them, but we have to access all that ourselves.

The relativity factor may also involve comparison between one's own experiences and an *imagined* alternative – potentially better – experience that represents an 'if only' kind of hypothesising about what *could* be:

The students find it very frustrating and irritating when academics don't use lecture capture – especially when you're in a lecture room where you have the facilities and are not making use of them. (*student union sabbatical officer, pre-1992 university*)

## SUMMARY

The student voice, then, represents a chorus of relative satisfaction with TEL. Asked if they could think of any TEL-related facility, or provision, or practice that they would like to be available or extended to them, or that they felt could enhance their learning experience, very few interviewees were able to identify anything. Students, it seems, are easy to please. For the most part, they seem to want little more than they already have, in terms of TEL provision and facilities.

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