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THE CASE FOR 'PASSIVE' LEARNING – THE 'SILENT' COMMUNITY OF ONLINE LEARNERS

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Abstract

This paper examines two modules within the Faculty of Social Sciences at The Open University (OU) and considers the extent to which 'passive' learning may be taking place. Both are level one modules (first year undergraduate) and use a combination of asynchronous (forums) and synchronous (Blackboard Collaborate technology, branded 'OU Live') technologies for teaching. The data reveals that student 'passive engagement' with forums (reading messages in a forum, but not 'actively' posting, colloquially known as lurking) is far higher than 'active engagement' (posting in the forum). The data also shows that participation in OU Live is very low. This initially suggests that teaching and learning strategies needs to be reconsidered, to encourage or increase 'active engagement'. However, the data, alongside literature, also suggests that some students may find value in engaging 'passively'. From the perspective of a Higher Education (HE) institute such as the OU, this may have implications for the tuition delivery strategy used to deliver the module material, as well as how staff development occurs for the tutors that deliver the material. For example, rather than focus a significant effort on encouraging students to participate in active forum use, the emphasis may need to be shifted to ensuring that appropriate/sufficient material is available to 'passive engagers'.

Introduction

This paper examines two modules within the Faculty of Social Sciences at the OU and considers the extent to which 'passive' learning may be taking place within these two modules. Both are level one/first year undergraduate modules and use a combination of asynchronous and synchronous technologies for teaching, and for the creation of a learning community. These are, specifically, VLE (Virtual Learning Environment) forums for asynchronous teaching and OU Live (via the Blackboard Collaborate technology) for synchronous teaching.

The authors acknowledge that 'passive' can be a, somewhat, provocative word. In this context it refers to students who read messages in a forum or listen into/watch an OU Live session, but do not 'actively' post or speak. This is similar to the notion of 'passive' participants' that was proposed by Webb et al. (2004).

This paper considers the levels of 'active' and 'passive' student participation, comparing forums and OU Live within the modules concerned (with some consideration of face to face tutor group tutorial attendance too, as context), and considers some of the reasons for the patterns within the data. Finally, the authors consider whether the teaching strategy within the Faculty needs to be addressed based on the data discovered, and what this means for teaching and learning at the OU more widely.

The OU Strategy for Teaching and Learning – a Blended Approach

The OU is the largest academic institution in the UK and also the largest provider of part-time HE. Most OU students register to study on a qualification-basis (rather than simply registering to study a module in isolation). Most undergraduate qualifications have no formal entry requirements, with each level of the degree (OU undergraduate degrees consist of three levels, equivalent to three traditional academic years of undergraduate study) consisting of 120 points (often two 60 point modules per level). Students can complete a qualification in three years, although most take longer studying part-time. Teaching and learning takes place online and/or face to face depending on the Faculty's strategy. The approach for teaching and learning within the OU Faculty of Social Sciences is a blended one, with tutors and students working in clusters (groups of tutors and students), able to experience various forms of face to face and online tuition. The Faculty has long utilised face to face forms of tuition, such as tutorials, day schools (day long sessions with groups of tutors teaching large groups of students via lectures and seminars) and revision days.

In the last few years there has been an increased use of online tuition within all of the modules within the Faculty. Initially this was through asynchronous, module-wide, regional and tutor group VLE forums, through which tutors could run 'extra' academic or skills-based tutorials, post tutorial handouts and presentations, answer student queries, and provide 'social' spaces for their students to chat. Later on, Elluminate (which has subsequently become OU Live) was introduced. OU Live is a synchronous conferencing tool, through which tutors can run online tutorials, with participants communicating via microphone headsets. It has an interactive whiteboard on which participants can write and draw and to which PowerPoint presentations can be uploaded, as well as a text chat interface and webcam (see Blackboard 2013, for further information).

Initially, OU Live was introduced in an ad hoc way in the Faculty, with individual tutors requesting a working space if they had an interest in interacting with students in this way. However, in 2012 the Faculty's Level 1 tuition review implemented a policy which stated that all level one (first year) students should be able to access 12 hours of OU Live tuition on a 60 point module, and six hours on a 30 point module (Smith & Middleton, 2013).

Individual regions and nation areas (at the time of this research the OU was divided into ten regions, and three nation areas, for module provision) were able to decide on their own strategy for delivering this requirement. In the East of England region, where this research was based, a decision was made to divide the region into geographical 'clusters' of tutors, with each cluster offering both face to face and OU Live tuition to all students, through ALs taking it in turns to run these sessions. For example, on the level one introductory social sciences module, there were four cluster areas. In each cluster there were six to eight tutor groups. Each tutor ran their own face to face tutor group tutorials as normal, but worked in pairs to offer OU Live tutorials to the whole cluster. The 'student experience' was paramount throughout the decision making for this strategy, and this clustering approach has since been adopted by the Faculty for all regions/nations for level one modules from October 2014.

Understanding 'Passive' Learning

This paper explores the number of students that engage with asynchronous forums and OU Live in a 'passive' manner. 'Passive' is, of course, a loaded term (it suggests someone who is not communicating/engaging/bothering). It is used here with this knowledge, but it is considered a useful term nonetheless. This is not a new area of concern within the study of distance education. In the 1990s, Helmut Fritsch coined the term 'witness learners' following the evaluation of

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participation in an online seminar. He argued that the 'passive' participants appeared to be learning from witnessing the interactions among the 'active' participants' (Beaudoin, 2002).

The modern parlance to describe a member of an internet community who observes, but does not participate, is a 'lurker'. Dennen (2008) describes how this term often has a negative connotation which may stem from people feeling uncomfortable about being observed, yet she discusses how it is perfectly reasonable to think that someone may wish to observe others' communication and interactions with a positive intent. So being 'passive' or 'lurking' can be reconsidered in this context.

The active/passive dichotomy is a useful explanatory tool; in fact, as useful as 'engagement' is, by itself it doesn't do the job, as students can be 'engaged' whether posting or not. Perhaps then the key phrases are 'passive engagers' and 'active engagers'. After all, just by entering a forum or OU Live space, learners have begun to engage (but not necessarily 'learn' at this point), even to a limited extent.

There are various reasons that students may be active or passive engagers and, whilst the purpose of this paper is not to discuss all of these reasons, the authors do consider two issues of fantasy and dominance within OU module asynchronous forums in an earlier paper (Smith & Smith, 2013), and consider the idea that some students (consciously or otherwise) create personas when working online, with some students also fearful of appearing dominant, or fearful of being dominated by others. Much of this was influenced by Bayne (2005) and the familiar notion that online students can present different selves to others, and the idea of embodiment – we do not start anew, our online selves are informed by our offline selves – but in cyberspace the boundaries are more wobbly. As Bayne puts it, there is the chance of 'metamorphosis' (p.31): '…within cyberspace identities are more freely transformable, boundaries less firmly drawn, and possibilities of metamorphosis of the self more open. In this sense, for students the online world can be an unsettling one, with tensions surrounding the mutability of self, the temptation of multiplicity and the threat to unity of the self. As such, fantasy and dominance were considered to have a potentially negative impact, and could contribute to a reduction in the incidence of students becoming 'active' users of discussion forums. Instead, they are 'passive' users. This suggests two things: firstly, that lack of participation is, generally, considered with a negative view; and secondly, that being 'passive' is not always considered to be a good thing.

Further work, presented in this paper, has consequently led the authors to consider whether being a 'passive' learner *is* necessarily negative. Perhaps, *engagement* (with material, with students, with tutors etc.) is critical, but not necessarily 'active' participation. Of course, this is not a new idea, but it does involve challenging and reworking more common notions of learning. Indeed, the established and traditional idea of learning as 'knowledge acquisition' (Sfard, 1998, p.1) has been joined by an alternative, newer conceptual approach, in which 'activities' and 'doing' (Sfard, 1998, p.2) are important; the learner becomes part of a community, with the focus on communication and bonding between learners. Sfard (1998, p.2) notes that participation is about not only being part of a community, but also using the community's language and understanding its 'norms'. Seely Brown et al. (1989, p.37) also stress community, noting learning works best if it is situated or contexualised, giving an authentic experience: learning through 'authentic practices' and 'activity and social interaction'. They call this 'cognitive apprenticeship'. By participating this way, learners are enculturated into their community.

However, as Sfard also notes (1998), the metaphors of 'acquisition' and 'participation' can be combined and work together. So, online learners can be part of a community of learning ('engaging' in the community), not only learning by doing, but also learning from the contributions of others. So, taking this further, participation does not have to mean

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posting/speaking or being *seen* to contribute. As such, acquisition and participation can be seen as helpful, but limited, ideas; while helpful framing tools, it is important to step outside of and question the frame. The authors prefer 'engagement' as a learning metaphor; it suggests, more strongly, that a learner can be active and part of a learning community by looking and listening, as well as speaking and writing. As learning is actually a mixture of acquisition and participation (rather than one or the other), this suggests that within a community of learning learners can acquire and participate as much as they find useful.

The concept of 'community' ties in with the work of other key theorists, such as Engeström's (2001) concept of expansive learning, where the individual and social are linked and learning is distributed between members of a community. His later work (Engeström, 2007) on the limits of communities of practice, suggested the importance of non-hierarchal cluster communities ('mycorrhizae') interacting to solve problems ('knotworking'). As such, online spaces such as forums can be seen as hierarchal communities, working together, but not bound together in a fixed manner: online communities can be flexible, with movement within and in/out possible. In a sense they are networked communities, and within this community there can be strong and weak links (Jones, 2004) – strong/weak in the sense that sometimes people participate fully or 'actively', and at others they did not.

Of course, this is not to say that 'active' participation is not important and should not be encouraged. A recent Horizon Report (New Media Consortium, 2012) notes the growing importance of collaboration, teamwork and collective intelligence, and the OU is taking this focus into account in module design, in which for a growing number of modules learners are asked to collaborate on forum tasks, specifically teaching skills which are useful in the world of work. The OU is also seeking to create active academic communities of which students are a key part, through development of qualification sites and curriculum focused (rather than geographical) Student Support Teams. This is not to limit, however, the importance of working *individually*, as this teaches important skills too. Working within a community of learning provides space and opportunity for both skills to be practised.

A Method for Gaging the Extent of Passive and Active Learning

The data used in this research was collected from two level one modules within the Social Science Faculty in the OU. One of these modules is a 60 point 30 week level one module. The second module is a 30 point 30 week level one module. Forums and OU Live are used in particular ways on these modules. OU Live is often used as an alternative to face to face tutorials, and the forums are used for extra material to be posted by tutors, as question and answer spaces, and on occasion for subject specific online activities. Students are encouraged to access the forums regularly, and encouraged to attend OU Live sessions if they cannot attend face to face, but it is not compulsory. These factors obviously have to be used as context when considering participation rates.

Stage One

Initial examination of the combined data from both modules, in Figure 1, reveals that 'passive' use of asynchronous VLE forums by the students registered on these modules is higher than 'active' use across all levels of interaction (low, average and high). When this data is split between the two modules, the proportions of students who post and view remain the same for each of the modules. This initial data was collected from the total number of students studying the two modules. For the 60 point module, this was from 4578 students. For the 30 point module, this included data from 1743 students.

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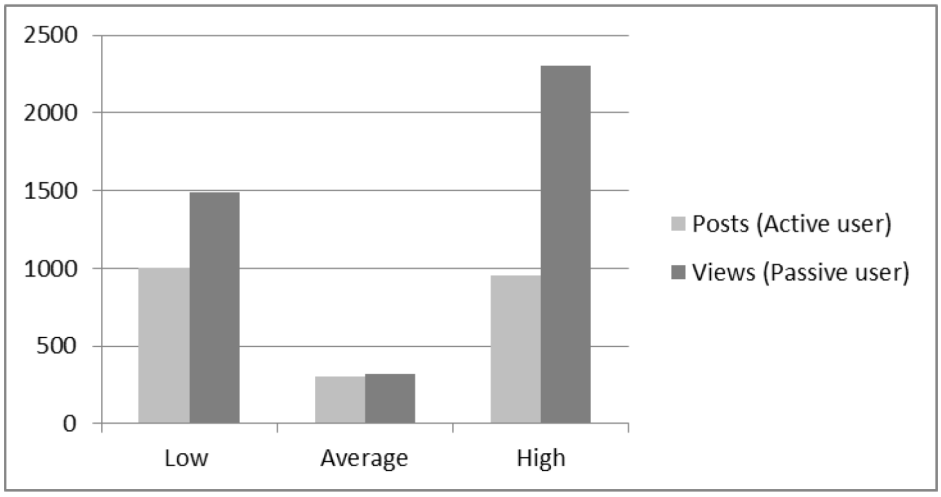

Figure 1. Comparison of Active and Passive use in asynchronous forums on two level one modules at low, average and high levels of interaction

Stage Two

Due to the large number of students used for stage one of the data collection process, the second stage of the analysis was reduced to a subset of these students. Data was collected from both modules, but from students based in one regional area within the OU. There were two main reasons for using a subset of students for this second stage of the analysis. The first was that the data collection required a count, by 'hand', of the various different types of interaction with forums. 1200 were students registered to these two modules within the subset of students. The second reason was due to the forums in the selected region being structured in a way that students only had access to one forum, i.e. the cluster forum. Other regions had different forum structures for their students (i.e. a cluster forum and an individual tutor group forum) which may have influenced the student's access to the forum.

Stage two of the data collection looked at students who:

- Actively used asynchronous forums, by counting the number of active students who were posting messages to the forums
- Passively used asynchronous forums, by counting the number of students who were viewing the forums but not posting to them
- Attended synchronous online teaching activities. The authors are line managers of the tutors who run the online activities and were able to gather attendance numbers to the teaching activities.

Although forum posts and views will normally be counted, students do have the opportunity sign up to a Rich Site Summary (RSS) feed that sends the content of the forum directly to an email inbox. In this case the view of a posting is not visible on a forum and is not counted in this data. The implication is that this may actually mean that a higher number of 'passive' viewers exist than are included in the figures in this paper.

In this second stage of the analysis participants in both of the modules were divided into teaching clusters within the region. Each cluster of tutor groups was set up to have access to its own asynchronous forum and to a synchronous teaching 'room'.

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Level 1 30 point 30 Week Module Findings

This module had four clusters, two of which had four tutorial groups, and two of which had five tutorial groups.

Engagement with Asynchronous Forums

The table below shows the number of threads that were posted onto each cluster's asynchronous forums. Clusters for this module typically had between four or five tutor groups contributing to the cluster (with each tutor group having no more than 15 students in each). Therefore approximately 60-75 students had access to each synchronous and asynchronous forum.

The table shows the average number of active students within each thread, for each cluster. In addition, the table also shows the mean number of passive student viewers (*i.e.* students who view but do not post to the thread). For the 30 point module, the mean number of students posting in the forums was 1.7 in all of the four clusters. The mean number of students who viewed (but did not post to) the thread was 15.2 students.

Table 1: Asynchronous forum use, 30 week module

Cluster	Number of threads	Mean no. of active student posters per thread, per cluster	Mean no. of passive student viewers per thread per cluster
1	28	2.0	12.0
2	16	2.5	16.3
3	30	1.9	19.0
4	24	0.7	13.7
Total	98	Mean no. active students per thread for all clusters = 1.7 (SD=2.5)*	Mean no. passive students per thread for all clusters = 15.2 (SD=5.6)*

* The total Mean and SD is calculated from the original list of all threads for each cluster.

Engagement with Synchronous OU Live

Tutors are not asked to provide tutorial attendance figures as a matter of course at the moment, so were instead asked after the event to forward any data for attendance they had collected. Not all tutors responded, but the data that was received allows for a mean attendance rate to be calculated. As the below data makes clear, the highest number of students who attended an OU Live session was five, and the lowest zero, with the mean 1.8 students.

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Table 2: Synchronous OU Live use, 30 week module

Cluster	Module week	No of students attending session
3	3	5
3	3	4
4	5	2
3	8	3
3	9	2
4	16	0
3	17	2
3	17	1
2	17	0
2	17	3
2	23	0
2	23	2
3	23	0
		Mean = 1.8 (SD=1.6)

Level 1 60 point 30 Week Module Findings

This module had four clusters, two of these clusters had eight tutorial groups contributing to the forums; one had seven tutorial groups, and one had six contributing to their forums.

Engagement with Asynchronous Forums

For the 60 point module, the clusters typically comprised six-eight tutor groups, and each tutor group comprised of approximately 20 students in each. Therefore approximately 120-160 students had access to each of the asynchronous and synchronous forums.

The table below shows the number of threads that were posted onto each cluster's asynchronous forums. The table also shows the average number of active students within each thread, for each cluster. In addition, the table also shows the mean number of passive student viewers (i.e. students who view but do not post to the thread). For the 60 point module, the mean number of students posting in the forums was 2.2 in all of the four clusters. The mean number of students who viewed (but did not post to) the thread was 27.8 students.

Table 3: Asynchronous forum use, 60 week module

Cluster	Number of threads	Mean no. of active student Posters per thread, per cluster	Mean no. of passive student viewers per thread, per cluster
1	58	1.9	27.2
2	24	2.3	31.6
3	39	2.5	23.2
4	47	2.2	30.2
Total	168	Mean no. active students per thread for all clusters = 2.2 (SD=3.1)*	Mean no. passive students per thread for all clusters = 27.8 (SD=9.5)*

*The total Mean and SD is calculated from the original list of all threads for each cluster.

Engagement with Synchronous OU Live

For the 60 point module, the average attendance was 4.6 students.

Table 4: Synchronous OU Live use, 60 week module

Cluster	Module week	No of students attending session
2	3	2
1	3	6
1	3	2
2	3	3
4	15	9
2	15	6
4	19	12
3	20	4
3	20	3
3	24	3
3	24	4
3	24	1
		Mean = 4.6 (SD=3.2)

Overall, the data for each module makes it very clear that 'passive engagement' is much higher than 'active engagement' for forums, as summarised in the figure below. It is also clear that participation in OU Live is very low.

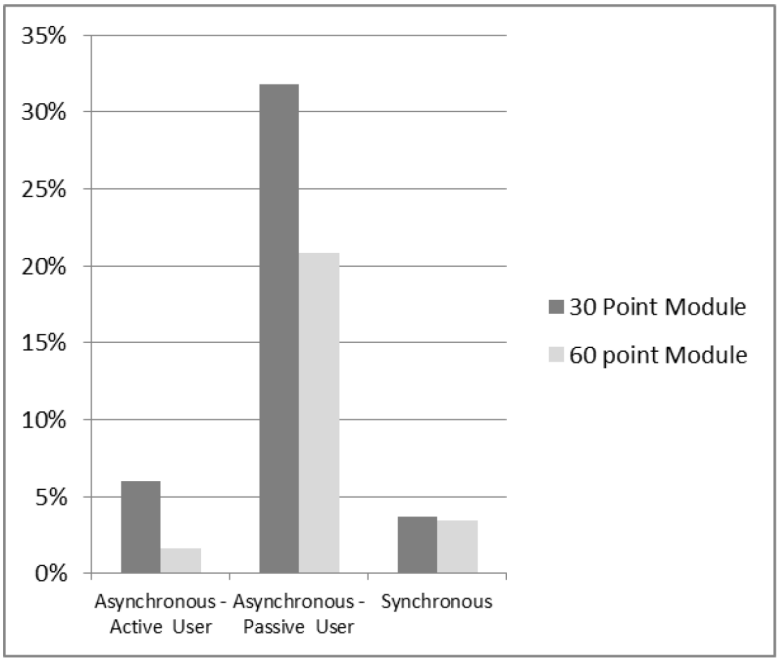

Figure 2. Percentages of students engaging in different ways, across two modules

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Summary of Findings

At first glance it suggests that these technologies and methods of teaching are relatively unsuccessful, if active engagement is the measure of success. To some extent this may be true; if only a few people attend an OU Live session, than it could be argued that the tutors' time (and learners' time) could be better utilised and that their integration into the teaching and learning strategy needs to be better worked through. However, the 'passive' data for forums is very important: many more learners 'lurk' than is clear when first looking at number of posts.

As discussed above, students may 'lurk' for a variety of reasons, but their presence, even if it is not an 'active' one is important. They may learn from others about a subject, learn how to use forums by watching others be 'active' and observing interaction and cultures online, and through this process work out what works for them as a learner. Even so, if more learners are engaging 'passively' than desired by the module team, the teaching and learning strategy does need to be reconsidered, either to encourage and increase 'active engagement', or to alter the approach of the module to allow for more 'passive engagement'. Indeed, even though the passive numbers are higher, it must not be forgotten that there are many more students who did not engage at all, with either the asynchronous forums or the asynchronous OU Live (these students are perhaps even more essential to reach).

Follow up research would be of value to survey or interview learners about their experiences online: how they approach forums and OU Live, why they do or do not attend/take part, strategies used when making decisions about participation *etc.* Indeed, the data does not show whether students who are 'passively engaging' are having an effective learning experience or not; surveying students to try and assess this would be useful. It would also be useful to look at modules from levels two and three, to see whether participation ('active' or 'passive') is higher. The authors' hypothesise, based on personal experience of teaching and managing these groups, that it is higher (perhaps because learners have worked through the processes described above, and have learned how to be an 'active' engager), but data is needed to support this.

Making the Case for the Passive Engager

Beaudoin (2002) considers that whilst it is assumed that learning correlates closely to what is visible (*i.e.* students' written words that appear on the monitor), it may also be concluded that if there is no visible online activity, then little or no learning is likely to occur. In fact, in contrast to this, Beaudoin found that minimal online participation does not compromise grades. The grades may suggest that these low-visibility students are dedicating more time to reflection and processing of course material that translates to stronger assignments than those submitted by students participating at an average level. The high number of students, shown in figure 1 at the start of this paper, who have low posting levels, and with high levels of low-visibility (i.e. views) may bode well in terms of Beaudoin's conclusion that grade performance for students with a low-visibility is not compromised.

This is also demonstrated by Webb et al. (2004, p.99) who found that: 'Participation in e-learning dialogue, whether active or passive, was positively associated with learning outcomes. Overall, the results from both modules demonstrated a relationship between learning outcome at the end of the modules (as an outcome measure) and rates of participation in electronically supported dialogue (as predictors).'

There may be even further benefits to being a 'passive engager' or 'lurker'. Dennen (2008) reports on how vicarious learning may take place as one student sees another engaged in a learning dialogue. This approach may actually be ideal for learners who are grappling with a new topic because it lowers their cognitive and emotional load, taking the pressure off them to perform or

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articulate and instead allowing them to focus on the content itself. Dennen also reports that students who lurk at one point may be active message posters in other threads or may simply return to the discussion board to re-read and reflect, which may be an effective method for promoting learning in an online environment.

From the student's perspective, the process of being a 'lurker' (or 'passive engager') means that a student can safely find out information about the module without the perceived risks (such as being dominated or fear of being dominant) associated of being an active forum user. For new learners, the action of being 'passive' may be an introductory approach to becoming an active forum user. Indeed, as Salmon (2000) writes, 'lurking' can be the first step engaged in by students when first being socialised within/into this sort of environment. Way back in 1998, McKendree et al. established the benefits to learners listening in to others who are actively participating in discussions. From the perspective of a HE institute such as the OU, this may have implications for the tuition delivery strategy used to deliver the module material, as well as how staff development occurs for the tutors that deliver the material. For example, rather than focus a significant effort on encouraging students to participate in active forum use, the emphasis may need to be shifted to ensuring that appropriate and sufficient material is available to 'passive engagers'.

This paper makes no claim that students who are passive engagers in forums are having a less effective learning experience than those who are active engagers. This paper is simply looking at the extent to which active/passive engagement was taking place in two OU modules. Ongoing research is considering whether there are differences in the effectiveness of learning between active/passive engagers, tying in the notion of deep/surface learning (Biggs, 1999). Additionally, as many students on modules within the OU do not engage in synchronous or asynchronous activities to any extent (either actively or passively), and yet still manage to complete the module successfully, this research needs to consider whether effective learning is influenced by any engagement at all.

Designing the 'Correct' Pedagogy

There seems to be an accepted idea that *institutions* / *designers* / *tutors* do not understand the technology enough in order to be able to get many learners using it in an 'active' way. As a Faculty we have assumed in the past that we need to train our tutors to use the technology effectively. However, while training is certainly important (as discussed by Smith & Middleton, 2013) in relation to Elluminate/OU Live, it can increase tutor confidence to deliver online teaching), maybe many tutors *do* understand the technology and our students chose not to be 'actively' engaged whatever they do.

Referring to Conole et al.'s (2004) idea of the individual/social strata, use of forums can be mapped, as a helpful explanatory tool, but also as a way of planning future teaching and learning provision. Indeed, Conole et al. (2004, p.22) see such models as useful in these ways. As they write, as 'Explanatory – as a framework for understanding learning theory… [and] As a process of enabling practitioners to evaluate their own practice and make more explicit their underpinning pedagogical approaches and how this informs their learning and curriculum design… [and] As a tool to help plan, design and profile learning opportunities'. Using Conole et al.'s key terms (2004), it is clear that many students utilise forums as INDIVIDUAL/PASSIVE/INFORMATION, rather than SOCIAL/ACTIVE/EXPERIENCE. We can accept this use and adapt the modules to suit this mode of learning – or, adapt modules to encourage more social/active/experience use (while at the same time, perhaps, providing opportunities for individual/passive/information which may in turn encourage more active use later on). So, it is not a problem with the technology as such, but rather an understanding of what

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type of learning and teaching we want to encourage at particular points in the module, what technology suits that, and what the benefits are to students/tutors/institutions.

Interestingly, issues of 'active participation' are in play with face to face teaching too. Earlier research undertaken by the authors about face to face tutorials (a survey of 34 ALs teaching on level one modules in 2012, for which 14 ALs responded, a 41% response rate), found the average number of students attending was 4.9 (with answers ranging from three to eight attendees). This data in itself has to be contextualised, taking into account the fact that while on average tutor groups have 15 students, it can be as low as 11 or as high as 30. Also, geographical constraints have to be taken into account; in some areas it may be more difficult for students to travel to face to face teaching opportunities because of poor public transport. The fact that these are Level 1 students, and therefore mostly new to OU study, must also be taken into account – for more experienced students, attendance rates could be different, as explored above in relation to forums and OU Live. But, face to face is another example of some students choosing not to 'actively engage'; they may totally disengage (so not seek to catch up material missed at all) or partially disengage (they may catch up by looking at materials posted by the tutor, such as the tutorial presentation or handouts). What is important about this face to face example is that it should not be assumed that it is only *online* that notions of active/passive come into play, or worries about attendance more generally. As such, face to face teaching and learning needs to be reconsidered and re-engaged with when designing teaching and learning, as much as online opportunities do too.

Accompanying the face to face survey, a focus group was held in late 2013 in which tutors were asked about their experiences of teaching. Ten tutors attended, all of whom had clear opinions on OU Live. Many did see the overall benefit, noting that students with travel/access issues could easily attend – although, noting that attendance was often not high. However, there was a clear recognition that student participation once *in-session* was an issue, whether that related to technology or how comfortable learners felt:

> *'Some students are too shy to speak or else they don't have headphones so can't speak'*

> *'One of my students was so nervous… but the third time she spoke and it was great'*

It was also suggested that some learners may share their computers with other members of the household, and/or the computer may be in a shared area making listening to audio, even with headphones, difficult (all of which apply to forums too).

Linking this tutor feedback with participation data (forums, OU Live – and also face to face) paints a picture of keen tutors (keeping in mind some concerns over the technology), a desire for students to attend sessions, but relatively low 'active engagement' rates (with even the 'passive engagement' rates relatively low compared to overall possible number of participants). It is therefore essential that module designers endeavour to understand what it is they want learners to get from a module/activity/technology; if 'active engagement' is desired, engagement with learning styles, learning types and explanatory frameworks are essential, in order that what is designed meets the module's needs – and crucially, the students' needs. However, the authors maintain that there is a case for 'passive engagement' when learning online; this kind of engagement is higher, as the data shows, suggesting that some learners may prefer this (generally, or at particular times) – although surveying students would be useful to better understand motivations and/or blocks to participation. It is clear that collaborative learning and communities of learning are here to stay – as they should, as working online, working collaboratively, and engaging with communities of learning and important skills and experiences. However, 'passive

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engagement' should not be discounted as a learning method, nor as a type of engagement more generally.

Conclusions

This paper therefore proposes that there is a case for passive learners, with regard to the learners themselves, their tutors and institutions:

- Learners 'passively engaging' can safely find out information, without the risks associated with being an active forum user (i.e. fantasy and dominance)
- It is a more 'gentle' approach than active forum use for students; they may 'passively' engage at first, but as they become enculturated chose to 'actively engage'
- By accepting 'passive engagement' as a learning strategy, institutions give control to learners and respect their decisions.

Perhaps institutions assume that students are all 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) due to the increase in use of Facebook, twitter, blogs and so on, but this is not necessarily the case. As Kennedy et al. (2008) note, we cannot assume this, as all learners are different. Indeed, some 'young' learners may have limited experiences with new technology. As the authors write, 'Clearly we cannot assume that being a member of the 'Net Generation' is synonymous with knowing how to employ technology-based tools strategically to optimise learning experiences in university settings' (Kennedy et al., 2008, pp.117-118). And although the familiarity with, and ease with which people use technology may have assumed to have moved on in the past two decades, the issues being faced by institutes of distance education remain the same today as those identified by Fritsch in the 1990s. As such, technology the practitioner and institution assumes a learner will utilise well, may be thought of differently by the learner.

There may therefore be a tension: between institutions that expect students to 'actively engage' for all sorts of reasons, and learners who may not want to (at all, or some of the time). Institutions therefore need to explain the benefits of 'actively engaging', design modules where this is seen as useful by learners, make sure that those teaching the modules understand what is expected of students and know how to encourage participation and have undergone relevant staff development (something which also applies to those writing and designing online modules). Institutions also need to understand that some learners will simply resist engaging as much as possible (making the above strategies even more important, if activity is deemed essential by the institution).

Designing modules where 'active' engagement is seen as useful suggests that there may be times when it is not useful or needed; such spaces need to be well defined, understood, made relevant, with 'passivity' itself understood and valued (and possibly even designed into an online module) as part of a wider learning experience. Institutions and designers need to a) chose the right technology to get the desired outcome, and b) make sure that technology is utilised in an appropriate way so learners feel welcome and comfortable. As Thorpe (2008) makes clear, online activities should be integrated into the module, with clear aims, targets, outputs and explanations. If three possible types of learning are considered, as identified by Conole et al. (2004) – individual-social, active-passive, information-experience – technologies should be thought about with their possible uses mapped before the decision to use them is taken. So, do we want students to work on their own or in a group, engage actively or watch and learn, be hands on or more information based? Such consideration allows learners' needs to be understood and met; what works best for them, and what technology can be used to aid their understanding and progression.

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