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**Heterotopia in Networked Learning: Beyond the Shadow
Side of Participation in Learning Communities**

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Heterotopia in Networked Learning: Beyond the Shadow Side of Participation in Learning Communities

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Abstract

As it has evolved, networked learning (NL) has come to emphasise the importance of the collaborative learning aspects and possibilities of online learning. The importance assumed for 'collaboration based' forms of participation within NL has almost become ubiquitous and is frequently seen as an unquestionable good aspect – a utopian view of participation which does not acknowledge the 'shadow side' of participation in learning.

In the paper we examine some of the darker sides of collaborative participation which in its extreme manifestations can be experienced as normative and, we suggest, a form of tyranny of the dominant and which instead of having a liberating effect, reinforces a form of oppression and control. We argue this is most likely to be the case in the absence of reflexivity and understanding of different ways and approaches to participation. We go on to suggest an alternative and potentially more productive perspective which, after Foucault, is a heterotopian one. A perspective that acknowledges and assumes disruption and which disturbs our customary notion of ourselves. Participation in heterotopian spaces is disturbing and ambiguous, but it offers a space in which to imagine, to desire and act differently.

Keywords

Networked learning, collaborative learning, participation, heterotopia, learning communities.

Introduction

Ideas underpinning the concept and theory of networked learning (NL) have moved from the greater emphasis being on networked technology to promote connections between learners and resources (Goodyear et al 2004) to, increasingly, an equal emphasis on 'collaboration as a major form of social relationship within a learning context' (McConnell 1999), as well as on networking people and resources. Collaboration through participation in learning communities has come to be seen as a key characteristic of NL from a learning perspective. As Mynatt et al (1998) foresaw 'the promise of networked computational devices for collaboration and community-building is compelling'. The importance assumed for collaboration within NL has almost become ubiquitous and is frequently seen as unquestionably desirable. Collaborative learning and perhaps more specifically participation in learning is closely linked to emancipatory approaches to learning that, following the tradition of Freire and other critical pedagogues, aspires to a pedagogy of 'liberation' underpinned by dialogue and critical thinking. However, an unreflective view of participation and emancipatory approaches can lead to an utopian ideal and one which does not acknowledge what some authors have referred to as the 'dark side' of critical pedagogy and participation (Reynolds 1999, Brookfield, 1994). Ellsworth (1989) showed that on closer examination, 'emancipatory' educational approaches that incorporate participation and collaborative dialogue revealed another dimension: one that is not always liberating and beneficial, as a more utopian perspective would assume, but rather an education approach that can as easily be experienced as inhibiting and oppressive. These authors suggest that participative learning can involve unintended domination and control, especially if adopted unreflexively by tutors and/or participants.

In the paper we take the analysis of the dark side of participation a step further in exploring how participation without reflexivity has the potential to be not only oppressive but can develop into a form of tyranny of the majority. We do not want to suggest that collaboration and participation are either unhelpful or ineffective approaches to learning. Quite the reverse we think participation in learning is pedagogically very effective. However participation in learning is neither straight forward nor unproblematic and, we argue in this paper that we need to move from an unreal utopian perspective of collaborative participation to one that acknowledges participation, even when carried out critically, is not without problems and discomfort. Further we suggest and that these problems contribute to the potential for learning.

We draw on the Foucauldian notion of heterotopia spaces (Foucault, 1967) to develop the idea of online spaces having the potential to be heterotopia learning spaces. That is spaces which can be defined and described by the network of relations within them but remain open –ended ambivalent and contradictory places where disruption and discomfort can be expected. But on the other hand spaces that draw us out of ourselves, disturbs our customary notion of ourselves and allows us to imagine and desire things differently. They don't however, as Johnson (2006) explains offer any resolution or consolation and therefore we suggest that in requiring students to engage in participation in such spaces we are putting requirements on them and ourselves that are complex and which demand a degree of circumspection and reflexivity on the parts of both staff and students. And as we show the potential for a form of tyranny of participation based on a collective belief in a utopian view of participation that can emerge or dominate and fail to engage with the dark, or we prefer the term, the shadow side of participation i.e. that which is not immediately visible or observable to either participants or staff. As we shall see, the attachment to a rather utopian discourse of community (articulated in our case study through the idea of an unspoken 'spirit of Mamll') led to the marginalisation of some participants

The 'dark' or 'shadow' side of Participation

The idea of a 'dark side' to participation is associated with the work of Brookfield, who coined this term. For Brookfield, paying attention to the dark side often involves resisting or challenging common-sense readings of what is going on in learning spaces. In his 1994 study, he argues that in learning to question assumptions widely accepted as 'common-sense,' to take alternative positions on social and political structures, and to pay attention to 'hegemonic aspects of .. theory and practice, the students experienced what they reported as a sense of liberation and empowerment' (1994: 204 – 205). However, in the course of his phenomenographic study, it emerged that they also experienced powerful feelings of alienation both within their learning community and outside it. Brookfield identified five themes that exemplify what he terms the 'dark side' of critical reflection: impostorship (feeling unworthy to participate in critical thinking), roadrunning (incremental struggles with new modes of thought), community (support for those engaged in the critical process); and also 'cultural suicide' and a sense of 'lost innocence' resulting from the multiplicity of new ideas that replaces old certainties, and the resulting sense of isolation and exclusion within the subject's existing communities whose value systems seem to remain untroubled by critical thought.

Michael Reynolds extends Brookfield's notion of the dark side of critical pedagogy, using it to describe the consequences awaiting those who *do* throw themselves into the process of critical reflection. This process, he writes, can be 'unsettling, mentally or emotionally ... a source of disruption at home or at work', and could cause risk to employment and even to life itself (1999: 178). This, for Reynolds, illustrates Brookfield's notion of the 'dark side' of reflexivity and participation. However, it is useful to think through how we use the term 'dark' side: after all, a dark side might imply that there is also a light (enlightened) side. Brookfield's use of the term, far from invoking such a binary politics of what is 'positive' and 'negative' in education, suggests a far more nuanced reading of educational interaction.

What this suggests is that paying attention to the dark side often involves resisting or challenging common-sense readings of what is going on in learning spaces. What this implies is that the 'dark side' is not simply what is 'bad' or needs to be eliminated in participative learning. Instead, it might be more useful to think in terms of the dark side as the unconscious or shadow side: that which we are unaware of at the time, but which feeds into and structures the kinds of communication that are possible in any given space at any given time.

By proposing that re-framing the notion of the 'dark side' as the shadow side in this way, it is possible to account more fully for the role played by power relations in participative learning. Whilst Reynolds and Brookfield illustrate well the potential for individuals to experience the dark side of critical pedagogy, they tend not to focus on the micro social dynamics and often unquestioned assumptions embedded within participatory approaches. For this we draw on Cooke and Kothari's notion of 'participation as the new tyranny' which demonstrates that, again without reflexivity on the processes of participation enacted, it is easy to find examples of participation that are for some participants experienced as anything but emancipatory and become (however unintentionally) experienced by some as an unjust or unfair exercise of domination and power

Therefore, we are using the term shadow side not to suggest that certain forms of interaction and dialogue are bad, necessarily, but to account for the fact that learning does not take place in discrete spaces that are separate from everyday life: instead the learning space is structured by the unconscious, the messy and the emergent aspects of psychic and social life. The shadow side hence refers to what is hidden, suppressed or overlooked as 'irrelevant' in learning encounters. An important element of critical reflection is to be attentive to the shadow side of learning, not in order to eliminate it but in order to recognise that learning is not necessarily always a comfortable process, and that participation does not simply 'happen'.

MAMLL as a Case Study

We examine this shadow side and the potential for the tyranny of participation to develop through reference to and discussion of a part-time MA in Management Learning and Leadership (MAMLL). The MA is designed and run on the principles of a learning community approach and thus participation is integral to the design of the programme.

As explained on the MAMLL web pages (see <http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/masters/mamll/learn/>)

MAMLL participants work together in a self-managed **learning community** committed to engaging with process as well as content. Within this learning community you are expected to be responsible for your own learning and also to share responsibility for other people's learning. The differing experiences and knowledge of all members of the community are seen as an important asset for the whole community and for the learning that takes place within it.

And as the pages go on to state;

Networked learning is a crucial component of the programme, and various types of networking take place: A specially designed virtual learning environment (VLE) is used to help all the MAMLL community members to keep in touch with one another and engage with work and study issues when they are back at work and dispersed throughout the world. **You are expected to participate in this learning environment throughout the two years.** (emphasis added)

Therefore on MAMLL the expectation of participation underpins the pedagogy of the programme and as part of the approach participants are encouraged to engage in participative and collaborative online support of one another during the two years of their studies.

The MAMLL programme has six residential workshops spaced over two years. Between workshops, participants work in tutorial groups or 'learning sets' usually comprising 4-5 students plus one tutor. All the learning sets have an online space where they can conduct asynchronous discussions. In addition the whole learning community has the opportunity to communicate and interact in a general conference which is open to everyone on the programme (hereafter called general group conference). It is participation in these online learning sets and in the general group conferences that we consider in this paper.

In examining the issue of participation in the online discussions it is thus important to bear in mind that the design of the MAMLL programme has built in this expectation of a commitment from all members of the learning community to participate in their learning set's discussions about each others' work and also, crucially, in discussions about the feedback and marks for each learning set member's assignments/dissertations. To this extent it is fair to say that the programme would not be able to operate

effectively if this commitment was not forthcoming from participants. It is also important to comment that most participants frequently state that participating in the online environment contributes significantly to their learning during MAMLL.

This is the central issue of this paper: how to address the need for participation, without allowing the imperative for participation to become a form of tyranny?

The ‘Tyranny’ of Participation

In *Participation: The New Tyranny*, Cooke and Kothari (2001) focus on participatory development within marginalised underprivileged communities; where the broad aim is to increase the involvement of socially or economically marginalised people/stakeholders in decision making over their own lives, to show how acts and processes of participation (such as sharing knowledge and negotiating power relationships) can both conceal and reinforce oppression and injustices in their various manifestations. For us, Cooke and Kothari’s analysis and ideas resonated with our experience of the MAMLL programme (and its participatory design) around, for example, their references to operational constraints of the institutional context; the failure to recognise the impact of different, changing and multiple identities of individuals on their choices about how (and whether) to participate; and failure to reflect on the ways in which ideals of participation result in the adoption of largely unrecognized practices of inclusion and exclusion. Their analysis starkly illustrates how problematic a naïvely and seemingly utopian model of participation can be in practice. In particular, Cooke and Kothari show the frequency with which there is often a pervasive naivety with regard to the complexities of power and power relations in participation. They define ‘tyranny’ as ‘the illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power’ (2001), and they identify three forms this can take in practice, namely tyranny of decision making and control – where existing legitimate decision making methods are overridden; tyranny of the group, where the group dynamic leads to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of the powerful; and tyranny of method, where participatory method can be at the expense of other potentially productive methods (2001: 7-8), or in the case discussed here, different approaches to learning that work for individual participants.

Tyranny, therefore, is not necessarily carried out by one individual intentionally exercising power over another. Instead, it is an effect of often unconscious processes through which power is enacted in learning spaces: that is, it is the ‘ideal’ of participation itself, when it becomes understood in rather inflexible and dogmatic ways that has the potential to be tyrannical. In this sense, tyranny is linked to the idea of utopia.

Above, we have discussed an overly idealistic model of community which we describe as ‘utopian’. We are not using this term simply to dismiss over-optimistic ideals; instead, we believe it is only by understanding those ideals that it is possible to engage with the shadow side of participative learning. When participation is approached in this way, it becomes a utopian project, representing an ideal to which all group members must be seen to subscribe. Such a utopian understanding is hence performative, in that a group identity (in this case ‘spirit of MAMLL’) comes into being through actions, practices and speech acts that enact a belief in these shared values: failure to do so means exclusion from the group. This is precisely its limit: utopia is always orientated towards the creation of an ideal future and so is always inscribed with its own failure, since that future is by definition yet to be achieved. Because utopia is always in a different (temporal or spatial) location that is yet to be reached, utopian thinking can be seen as revealing anxieties about what is lacking in the present: in other words, it represents not only the hopes of a group, but also its fears. A close examination of utopian ideas might, then, reveal the shadow or hidden side of a group or community, helping to illuminate what that community cannot acknowledge about itself. It is this shadow or unconscious side of a learning communities ‘ideal’ participation that is examined in the next section.

The Potential for the Tyranny of Participation within MAMLL

The notion of tyranny of participation is exemplified for us within MAMLL in relation to a fairly common situation where particular students become positioned as unsupportive. Experience of MAMLL suggests that in most cohorts there are a few students who are regarded as in some way different and/or unsupportive by other members of the group. Anecdotal evidence based on experience of teaching on the programme suggests that is not uncommon, towards the end of the programme when participants choose

dissertation learning sets, for other participants on the programme to try to avoid these individuals. This minority of students come to be seen over a period of time by the majority as different or unsupportive, largely as a result of low or perceived weak participation in their previous learning sets.

Sometimes they end up in the same set, with the members feeling victimised, excluded or misunderstood. In practice, they often work well and report feeling that their set operated more 'in the spirit of MAMLL' – an important (and contested) category, as we shall see – than the supposedly more dominant and self-proclaimed more supportive participants who, they frequently feel, treated them unsympathetically. Other times they are accepted into learning sets that are otherwise comprised of members who are seen to be active and supportive participants.

We will focus on this minority of students who become seen as unsupportive due to low or inconsistent participation in their learning sets to discuss how attention can become focussed on them and that this attention can be interpreted, however unintentionally, as an illegitimate or unjust exercise of power over them and that such practices thus fits with the notion of 'the tyranny of participation' as outlined above.

A disclaimer feels necessary at this point in that one of the dangers of online discussions is that none of us can 'deny' we said what we said, as it is there in black and white. However nothing we say is black and white in terms of what was intended or the meaning and construction put on what is being said. In fact we have to say that in writing this paper this became a contentious issue in that some MAMLL participants felt the interpretation of their words and intentions were being used inappropriately and casting them in a role and position that they were not comfortable with and not willing to be placed in. What we were seeing as the tyranny of participation they were seeing as us taking their words and actions to describe them as tyrannical. Especially when done in the context of a programme that required participation, particularly for their work to be read and assessed this was experienced by some as offensive. Not least when they had throughout willingly participated and supported each other and felt they had gone out of their way to support those members who were seen as consistently not participating.

However, as Cornwall (2004) comments in 'Participation; From Tyranny to Transformation?;

'For no matter how equitable the intentions that inform the creation of an arena for participation might be, existing relationships cannot be simply left at its boundary, rather the traces of these relationships and of previous experiences in other spaces continue to exert and influence on what is said, and what is sayable, within any given space' (p80)

She claims, after Foucault, that 'space' is fundamental in any exercise of power. As Cornwall also points out spaces are defined by those invited in to them as well as those doing the inviting and someone who is voluble and assertive in one setting may be silenced in another. She goes on to comment that having the ability to exercise one's voice requires 'more than having the nerve and skills to speak' or even ensuring everyone has an opportunity to speak and asserting the need to listen. Not least because;

'Resisting discursive closure, reframing what counts as knowledge and articulating alternatives, especially in the face of incommensurate knowledge systems, requires more than simply seeking to allow everyone to speak and asserting the need to listen' (p84)

These issues for participation identified by Cornwall are key concerns for us. Labelling some participants as tyrannical was never what we intended as we recognise that the course is untenable without participation and it is an issue for everyone when it is not forthcoming. And further this is why ultimately the need for participation can become experienced as a tyranny in which everyone gets caught up. This is why it is an important issue to explore. That the expectation for participation can become to be experienced as a form of tyranny is typified in the following comment from a MAMLL participant who read a draft of this paper;

The idea of the "tyranny of participation" has helped me understand my reactions to that – that I was aware of it at the time and of a chronic feeling of guilt and failure at not participating more (and a recognition that if I could only do so I would get more as well as give more) but the very process of others being "understanding" and seeking to be more "supportive" towards me was experienced by me as profoundly uncomfortable and ultimately threatening – aggressive even. The reaction it

provoked in me was to further distance myself from the group/set and disincline me to any interaction as this was always uncomfortable and only sometimes useful. Whilst I did not respond, I did read the postings and a number of comments were clearly barbed, designed (and effective) to provoke guilt and a sense of failure. I was also conscious that my lack of response infuriated other set members, even though this fury was cloaked in concern (possibly even for themselves). (Mamll student)

As this quote illustrates this is not an easy issue to explore as it places everyone involved in a difficult position. Another MAMLL participant in her dissertation recently examined some of the issues associated with support and supportive behaviours, (Ormand, 2007). Ormand found that the notion of support was a central organising concept of the learning community. For the participants, she writes, 'the recognition that one could not get through this alone was striking' (2007: 46

Since support and reciprocity were central to the notion of community and self as mutually independent, she points out, 'behavioural congruence was important,' and this became a site of debate and tension within the community (2007: 46). Frustration and tension occurred 'when the effort exerted by individuals was not reciprocated by others, or congruence with what was being said and done was not evident' (2007: 59). This produced narratives of 'working with unsupportive behaviours' in which participants who, for whatever reason, did not engage in discussions were seen as threatening the idea of the learning community. Failure to be supportive was not just seen as an individual failure, but as threatening to the entire community, which 'failed' at the points where the expected supportive behaviours failed to materialise. This tended to be attributed to participants who 'failed' in three predominant ways: 'not contributing, not being accessible and not responding to a call for a change in behaviour', and as a result were described as denying other participants the opportunity to learn. This reinforces a model in which community is seen as 'good' and the individual as 'bad' (2007: 59).

The idea of support was important in defining the 'spirit of MAMLL' that participants often invoked to account for their frustration and anger with those who were perceived to be letting the group down. The idea of a 'spirit' – of participation, supportiveness, reflexivity and so on – punctuated responses to perceived 'unsupportive' participants. On the one hand, the idea of a shared *esprit de corps* is important in constructing a group identity with which participants can align themselves: the discourse 'spirit of MAMLL' creates a sense of pride and belonging which can be instrumental in participants taking responsibility for their own and each others' learning. However, the use of this term to express negative reactions suggests that this narrative of belonging has a 'shadow side', in that it can in itself become rather coercive, a shared cultural 'belonging' which participants can use to bring others into line. The spirit of MAMLL can hence become a means of enforcing a utopian model of community in which all participants must be seen to participate in the same way, regardless of circumstances, or risk being held responsible for the community having 'failed'. Ironically then, this vision of the perfect community can become a means of reinforcing a dominant discourse, albeit one based on ethics of mutuality and participation, which can become rather unreflexive about its own lack of engagement with 'difficult' intercultural or other idiosyncratic issues, and which may be avoiding understanding and/or acknowledging other styles of learning or expecting ambivalence and contradictions to be present.

This can be seen in the way that some individuals were penalised for failing to be involved and hence supportive, but the reasons for this tended to be overlooked or positioned as special pleading. Cooke and Kothari make the point that failure to reflect on the ideals of participation result in the adoption of largely unrecognized practices of inclusion and exclusion. The online discussions on MAMLL offered us an opportunity to study this phenomenon within a networked learning context. Cooke and Kothari also point out that a failure to recognise the impact of different, changing and multiple identities of individuals on their choices about how (and whether) to participate is often not given sufficient attention. On a part-time post-experience programme like MAMLL it is common for students to experience difficulties in balancing the identity of learner with other commitments and identities, including that of being a spouse, becoming or being a parent, taking a new job, moving country etc. The impact of changing and multiple identities is not always considered in making choices about participation/membership of the sets. Arguably it is something that is even more problematic for those few participants on the programme who, in addition to experiencing all of the above identity issues, by their geographic/ethnic/cultural identity already inhabit a marginal subject position on a course which is predominantly composed of British students.

The potential for the tyranny of participation can reveal itself starkly in the case of any students who become seen or positioned as choosing not to participate. Whilst they might clearly recognise they are not meeting others' expectations for participation they do not necessarily have the capacity, understanding or, as explained by the student quoted above, the inclination to conform to a normative and inflexible view of participation. They are aware of the issues associated with their lack of participation and respond with such online comments as;

Apologies for not being around, but I spent that last part of last year overseas uncontactable. Over xmas had some interesting personal dramas to contend with so MAML has not featured in my life. As from this week end I will be back in the land of the living.

Another explains;

It is quite obvious that my participation during this set was very poor. This is due to several reasons but mainly due to work and travel requirements

This student continues to go on to say;

Considering my level of participation during the previous period I don't think it is fair to expect any contribution from any set member during the preparation stage other than reading and commenting on the final draft. This may make it very hard for me to proceed with my dissertation but it is just and fair. At the same time I should be able to be more active and responsive to the online discussions and posting

What is interesting in this last comment above and which helps us see how the tyranny of participation can occur is that in this instance the student's own notion of fairness in dealing with his non-participation was not accepted. It was seen as not fitting with the dominant view of participation within the programme and 'the spirit of the MAMLL community,' which required more involvement with each person's work. Therefore his proposal was rejected, and he was asked by another participant to provide regular updates so that the group could guide and advise him. In other words it did not fit with the prevailing and normative view of participation that the student was seen to have persistently failed to adhere to throughout the course of the programme. The frustration and tensions that this failure can provoke in other students can almost imperceptibly easily turn into a dogmatic insistence on the inherent rightness of the form of participation expected and thus lead to some participants becoming marginalised, or expected to conform and/or overcome their personal preferences and/or difficulties and perform to a normative view of participation.

In such instances support and participation is not expressed or seen in terms of a general notion of fair play, but is instead intertwined with a notion of privileging the community over the individual: one's individual emotions have to be overcome in the interests of the group. As already mentioned in relation to Ormand's study participants who, for whatever reason, did not engage in discussion were seen as threatening the ideal of the learning community. In these sorts of exchanges a form of tyranny of participation emerges through the rigid invocation of community norms, especially around the notion of support.

A Heterotopian Learning Space in MAMLL: the '5 Minute Social' thread

Having explored how the rigid adherence to community norms and ways of working can undermine the potential for learning through collaborative models of participation we will in this next section illustrate an example of a more heterotopian learning space. Cornwall's notion of space mentioned earlier is relevant to our use of the concept of heterotopian spaces. As she suggests, it is not enough to simply create a space that allows everyone to speak and assert the need to listen. In that listening is not just some privileged activity such as listening to concrete grievances of the kind described in the discussion above and which relate to something that emerges out of special or specific circumstance. It can/should equally apply to something that is apparently quite banal as is illustrated in the following example and discussion. Which we feel has more of the characteristic of listening within a heterotopian space.

Foucault (1967) explained that there is perhaps no one absolutely universal form of heterotopia to be found although each heterotopia has a precise and determined function – which changes with the synchrony of the culture in which it is prevalent. According to Johnson (2006) heterotopian spaces are inevitably ‘open-ended, ambivalent and contradictory places’. But as Foucault (1967) concludes heterotopian spaces are potentially the greatest reserve of the imagination. The idea of heterotopia as space is important here: as Johnson cites, “‘space’ is much more abstract than ‘place:’” for example, it can refer to ‘an area, a distance and, significantly in relation to Foucault’s concept of heterotopia, a temporal period (“The space of two days”)’. The term ‘place’, for Johnson, is more tangible; although it too is used metaphorically it refers to a fixed event or a history, which may be mythical or real (Johnson 2006: 76-77). Place has apparent boundaries, space does not. Arguably without boundaries there are no limits on what is appropriate, sayable, etc. The first posting quoted in the example below as a request for a social thread worked to create what could be termed a heterotopian space. This contrasts with attempts to ‘fix’ the learning community in place through the invocation of inflexible rules and norms (albeit ironically rules about the importance of flexibility and mutual support). Heterotopia is never a space that provides promise, it contrasts and disrupts utopia in deed Johnson claims that in all examples of heterotopia given by Foucault in some way or another they refer to a relational disruption of time and space. Johnson emphasises the potential offered by the disruptive and disturbing aspects of heterotopian spaces, that draw us out of ourselves and produce a disruption that forms a ‘reservoir of imagination,’ embracing ‘temporal discontinuities’ to the space where we feel at home.

Thus while they anticipate the expectation of incongruity and disruption, alongside the associated discomfort they also offer a space that provides for ‘lines of flight or ways to escape to imagine and desire differently’(Johnson 2006). This as discussed previous does not eliminate the discomfort of the ‘shadow side of participation’ but does as discussed further below incorporate ongoing critical reflection and possibilities for learning

In the illustration below of non-tyrannical participation a discussion thread was started as part of the general discussion forum, a space which is open to every member of the group regardless of learning set. Since it was some time since the last residential workshop, one member suggested that participants needed to catch up with one another. In the ‘catching up’ discussion themes of dislocation, alienation and exhaustion emerged as part of the discussion thread which was initially intended to be purely social. This discussion thread was initiated by a participant’s suggestion that;

It feels like a very long time since we were all last together - and a very long time until we will be again.

Can we take 5 minutes out of academia for a social thread?

I mean no offence to my current set in any way shape or form, but I'm missing my last set and news from everyone else - on life in general...

It is interesting to consider the responses generated by this posting. This initial posting can be read as delineating a space which, whilst positioned within the wider online learning space, is articulated as ‘outside’ it (i.e. ‘out of academia’). The definition of this space as non-academic further works to suggest that it may become a site of resistance, especially given the tensions that exist around the notion of ‘academic’ language (or ‘jargon’), which we had already identified in an earlier study (Ferreday and Hodgson, 2006). In that study we found academic language was frequently assumed to address a different audience from the students themselves and one from which they could feel implicitly excluded. Postings were also figuratively limited to five minutes, further reinforcing a reassuring tone (in contrast to the lengthy and arduous process of dissertation writing). Furthermore, the general discussion space is delineated as one that allows participants to cross the boundaries of learning sets: whilst this is arguably always a function of the group discussion, here it was stated explicitly.

Having given some context to the range of responses to this posting it should first be noted that all of the responses obeyed in some respect the imperative to be purely social and about ‘life in general’. This is manifested in various ways. Many of the posts included jokes or comic anecdotes; included details about family life, social events and travel plans; or used informal language and punctuation (such as repeated use of exclamation marks/double exclamation marks in nine of the eleven responses; use of emoticons to express emotion; and signs of speedy typing such as not spell checking messages and typing in all lower

case). However, despite these signifiers of ‘non-academic’ sociality, the postings largely shared one common focus. As one participant summed up, ‘In common with most people I guess, life these last few months has really been a case of trying to achieve a balance’. The need to balance academic study with other aspects of life quickly became a dominant theme of the discussion.

The first respondent was one of the tutors, who gave some positive information about the course having been praised in a teaching assessment exercise. Her post concluded, ‘other than that life goes on and things keep piling on and up. Hope things are mostly okay for you all’.

The first participant to respond thanked the initiator for starting the topic, but signalled her inability to respond in what she felt to be the requisite light tone:

Its a shame I can't be full of fun and sunny stuff just yet. If you have been following [learning set], you'll know things have been a bit rough of late. I don't know if it's the 'stress' of MAMLL but my usual coping mechanisms seem to have deserted me

Why is picking up the phone such a hard thing to do? I am sure we all feel the same. I had to say to my poor mum not call after 2100 or she would get no sense out of me! Just soooo tired

Others wrote of the tension between MAMLL and family life, and their different ways of resolving this:

On the home front I am feeling the MAMLL pinch a bit - and did something I have never done before which was to be away for one of my children's birthdays as a result of booking some work in Dublin - I am in big debt to my 17yr old - I do not recommend it!

In common with most people I guess, life these last few months has really been a case of trying to achieve a balance. Personally this has invariably resulted in me prioritising time with [family members] over everything else!

All of the above speak to the notion of ‘the shadow side’ of learning : whilst the posts are (to varying degrees) light hearted in tone, they are precisely concerned with participants’ difficulty in managing their identity as learners alongside other social identities, and the often demanding and challenging emotional and interpersonal consequences of this. Certainly the sense of guilt that arises from missing a child’s birthday could be read as a concrete example of the ‘social suicide’ that can result from juggling priorities. Similarly, one posting seems to resonate with the themes of social isolation and ‘lost innocence’ that Brookfield described:

On the private front I have to admit, that I have found it difficult to really share with my wife and friends, what the programme means to me, does to me and challenges me on. Seems a bit like a lonely and remote experience in that sense, especially when we do not see each other that often. Feel that I am on an exciting learning journey, not always able to express to my surroundings

The potential difference for online learning spaces, however, is precisely that they allow such feelings to be shared, potentially resulting in support. By opening up a more heterotopic space it allows this to be incorporated into ongoing processes of critical reflection – not simple opposition between ‘dark’ and ‘light’ sides but part of a learning process which is understood as a ‘journey’ – one that is inseparable from offline lived experience.

The exchange above illustrates how networked learning offers the possibility of opening up spaces that are heterotopias, in that they are open ended, allow behaviour that is deviant to the norm and are often linked to transitory periods in time. Such spaces refuse the tyranny of the search for utopianism: instead, they allow for deviation and difference.

Whilst heterotopian spaces might feel safe, participation in such a space is always going to be disturbing and ambiguous – ‘they offer no resolution or consolation, but disrupt and test our customary notions of ourselves – they hold no promise ... of liberation’ (2006: 87). There is no right way to act and behave in such spaces but they offer a space which is not separate from dominant structures and ideology but rather go against the grain and offer lines of flight. We suggest that a non-tyrannical space for networked

learning embraces these contradictions and ambiguities. In doing so, it has the potential to create a heterotopian learning space: a space in which imagination and reflectivity are focussed on as part of a NL philosophy and approach to learning. Unlike utopian projects, with their emphasis on creating the perfect community, heterotopian spaces are open, multiple, and diverse. As Johnson puts it, '[w]ith different degrees of relational intensity, heterotopias glitter and clash in their incongruous variety, illuminating a passage for our imagination' (Johnson, 2006)

Conclusions

In this paper we have examined closer the importance given to collaborative participation in Networked Learning.

Adopting participatory and collaborative approaches in NL are likely to be, almost imperceptibly, based on a utopian view of participation. That is one that is orientated towards the creation of an ideal future and is as a consequence always inscribed with its own failure since the future is by definition yet to be achieved. We have illustrated through the analysis of online participation in a postgraduate Masters, how utopian thinking will inevitably end up revealing both the hopes and the fears of a group, in that an ideal of participation will never be achievable but seeking to achieve it leads to a normative view of participation that can easily be turned into a tyranny of participation.

Acknowledgement of the significance of the unconscious or shadow side of participation we believe allows us to account more fully for the role played by power relations in participative learning approaches. Thus the shadow side is not something to be hidden or suppressed or assumed to be irrelevant in participatory learning encounters. On the contrary it is an important component of learning through participation and one which allows us to recognise that learning is not always comfortable nor that participation simply 'happens'.

We have argued and illustrated how NL can offer the possibility for a more heterotopian view of participation in ways not always possible in other spaces of participation. A heterotopian view acknowledges that it may well and often does test customary notions of ourselves and of participation but at the same time offer space to imagine and desire differently, not in a utopian, normative or comfortable sense but in a heterotopian, often disturbing and disruptive sense. We believe that by seeing online spaces more as sites for heterotopian learning spaces, NL can offer greater possibilities and opportunities for engaging with difference and critical reflexive learning that accepts and works with the shadow side of participation and collaborative learning approaches. Heterotopian learning spaces do however, as Johnson suggests, splinter the familiar and offer no resolution or consolation. There is no end or ideal place to arrive at though participation and collaborative learning approaches. The learning associated with networked learning and with heterotopia can only ever be a continuous and ongoing process of critical reflective inquiry and acting in the world.

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