

# **LEARNER SUPPORT IN TEXT-BASED ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: LEARNER EXPECTATIONS AND VALUES**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports on an exploratory study into learner support in online learning. The paper seeks to promote understanding of learners' experiences with learner support in online learning including their expectations and values with regard to the provision of support. The findings are structured with respect to learner support in the forms of interpersonal interaction and supportive infrastructure which facilitates learning activity. The discussion links findings about learner values and expectations with regard to the provision of learner support to future directions for the provision of high quality learner support in online learning.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Online learning environments (OLEs) offer opportunities to move beyond place-based education to increase flexibility, accessibility and personalisation through the creation of online spaces for learning activity. These spaces accommodate rich media presentations, timely interpersonal communication, and a variety of tools which combine input, output, production and experience to create a myriad of customised learning situations.

However, the opportunities afforded by OLEs are counterbalanced by the challenge of supporting learners in complex and novel learning situations. The use of new or unfamiliar technology tools adds complexity to online learning activity. Extended networks of provision create increasingly diverse cohorts, adding issues of culture and language to a learner support menu. Additionally, novice online learners are not well equipped to deal with the demands of highly interactive text-based online learning (Kehrwald, 2008). To add further difficulty, physical distance and mediating technologies create social and psychological barriers to learning (Riva, 2002).

These conditions foreshadow the need for robust learner support structures in online learning. This paper addresses the issue of developing more robust learner support in online learning communities by drawing out key findings of a study into learner experiences with learner support in text-based online learning environments. The aims of the paper are, first, to promote understanding of learners' experiences with learner support in online learning and, second, to inform the ongoing development of learner support systems in that context. Findings are organised according to two types of support mechanisms: (1) responsive, dynamic in-person support provided via interpersonal interaction and (2) supportive infrastructure of online learning communities. The findings focus on learner expectations and learner values to inform the further development of learner support structures in OLEs.

## **BACKGROUND**

Generally, learner support includes all those elements capable of addressing a known learner or group of learners, before, during and after the learning process (see also Thorpe, 2002). Learner support in this paper refers to the process of addressing the needs that all learners have because of their status as learners. This view includes not only what people do (i.e. supportive activity) but also structures which organise and facilitate that activity (i.e. supportive infrastructure).

### **History**

While teaching as always had a supportive dimension (McLoughlin, 2002), formalised learner support has a historical basis in open and distance learning. It arose from a need to help learners overcome isolation in distance learning situations and personalise their learning experiences (Tait, 2000). In place-based education most learning is mediated by the teacher (Laurillard, 2002). Learner support in face-to-face situations is mostly tacit, carried out informally in the activities of the teacher (Ryan, 2001). In distance education, physical distance precludes much of the interaction that is taken for granted in face-to-face contexts. Because tacit learner support mechanisms provided in the person of the teacher are not present, formal learner support systems are required to help learners succeed.

## **Learner Support in Online learning**

Online learning creates opportunities for support in the workings of online learning communities and the infrastructure which sustains them (Kehrwald, 2005). With emphasis on community, connection, and interaction, learner support in online learning has shifted away from discrete, industrial model of support to an integrated, holistic learner-centred view which is consistent with the constructivist and other socially situated pedagogies that feature prominently in online learning (Ryan, 2001). Thorpe (2002) highlights the fundamentals of support in online learning: “Learner support is essentially about roles, structures and environments: support roles and supportive people, together with support structures and supportive environments” (p. 110).

Social connectivity via networks creates opportunities for extensive interpersonal interaction, dialogue and collaboration (Kehrwald, 2005). E-mail, discussion tools, instant messengers and other communications tools connect members of the learning community and allow for timely, convenient interaction. More particularly, these tools create opportunities for responsive support which is personalised, timely and interactive (Thorpe, 2002). Furthermore, OLEs cater not only to educational activities which promote organized, formal learning but also to natural (non-educational) learning which occurs incidentally and informally whenever people interact (Fox, 2002). Learning occurs both as a result of direct participation in learning activity and also through legitimate peripheral participation in communities (Lave & Wenger, 1997).

Supportive infrastructure is a key component of productive social systems, including online communities (Hung & Chen, 2001). *Infrastructure* refers not only to the technological network, but also the social infrastructure which supports and organises the operation of networked communities. Such infrastructure facilitates the operation of the community because it promotes participants’ understanding of the processes they are engaged in. Infrastructure has a particular significance for online communities in both the need to manage and regulate the activity of distributed groups; and also the opportunity to re-imagine activity freed from the constraints of place-based, face-to-face modes of work. The technology allows learner support to be integrated, seamless and user driven in online learning.

Hung and Chen (2001) identify three dimensions of infrastructure which support activity within communities: *rules and processes*; *facilitating structures*; and *accountability mechanisms*. First, rules and processes structure activity within the

community and help define its ways of working, seeing the world and solving problems (Brown & Duguid, 2000). Rules and processes support practice by defining the roles of participants, promoting the use of particular tools and structuring collaborative activity within the community. Second, facilitating structures such as particular communications tools or the information architecture of networked communities assist in the organisation of individual actions into productive activity. Third, accountability mechanisms help communities regulate themselves and ensure effective practice (Hung & Chen, 2001).

## **RESEARCH FOCUS AND DESIGN**

This paper is drawn from a wider study into learner experiences with mediated social processes and learner support. The study took a constructivist research approach which sought to ground understanding of the operation of OLEs upon the experiences of online learners.

The main question addressed within the paper is: How do learners in online courses experience learner support within a course, particularly in the (a) human--human interaction within the course and (b) infrastructure of the course? The research was structured around a number of related questions including: Do participants value human--human interaction? Why? (e.g., do they find it supportive?) What types? What supportive infrastructure exists (is experienced by learners) in particular courses? Do participants recognize this as supportive? Do they value it?

The research design included four online postgraduate courses in Education as part of a collective case study in which each case was a single instance of an online course. Individual courses were chosen for their fit with contemporary networked (online) learning: high levels of interpersonal interaction, a significant portion of the course content that was generated through interpersonal interaction and use of learner-centred constructivist pedagogical approaches. Respondents were all volunteers recruited from within the online course environments. More experienced online learners were preferred for the study due to the richness of their experience with the phenomena in question. Information was collected using a dialogical process consisting of five phases: questionnaire, initial interview, group discussion, second interview and summary group discussion. This process acted as an extended conversation which allowed respondents to identify, explicate and reflect on their experiences as networked learners, then work collaboratively to construct shared understandings of the

phenomena in question. Information was analysed using an iterative thematic analysis and findings were verified through extensive respondent validation and multiple forms of triangulation. Therefore, the findings for the collective case are a collaborative construction which represents the experience and views of the 20 respondents and the researcher.

## FINDINGS SUMMARY

Following the research questions, findings are organised according to (1) *dynamic responsive supports* which are provided via interpersonal interaction using CMC tools, including both facilitator support and peer support and (2) *supportive infrastructure* in the form of rules and processes and facilitating structures. Within these areas, the particular themes of learner expectations and learner values with respect to learner support are highlighted below in tables 1-4.

### Responsive supports

Respondents clearly affirmed the supportive nature of interpersonal interaction. Interaction and the related development of relations between individuals were highly valued.

Facilitator Generated Support Mechanism	Value	Expectation
Facilitator Presence	Very high	Very high
Timely response from facilitator	Very high	Very high
Feedback from facilitator	Very high	Very high
Encouragement from Facilitator	moderate	mixed
Facilitating connections between learners	moderate	no
Moderating discussions, enforcing norms of behaviour	moderate	Very high

*Table 1: Respondent values and expectations of support from online facilitator*

Facilitator activity was seen as an essential form of learner support. Respondents indicated very high expectations of timely, responsive support from course facilitators. Data suggested that responsive support was the single most important function of online teaching staff. Lack of response and untimely responses were seen to have a negative effect perceptions of support, levels of peer interaction and the facilitator's presence. Expectations of supportive facilitator activities included: (a) responding to questions; (b) providing feedback on ideas in discussions; (c) providing encouragement; (d)

facilitating connections between learners: and (e) moderating discussions, including enforcing norms of behaviour.

Peer Support Mechanism	Value	Expectation
Visible peer presence	Very high	High
Responses from peers	Moderate	Mixed
Contributions from peers for explicitly collaborative tasks	Very high	Very high
Contributions from peers for general tasks	Moderate	Mixed
Benchmarking provided by peer interaction	Very high	No
Motivation provided by collaborative activity	Very high	no

*Table 2: Respondent values and expectations of support from peers*

Findings related to learner expectations and values regarding peer support were mixed. Throughout ongoing discussions about interaction and learner support, respondents indicated a relatively high value on peer support provided through interpersonal interaction. Peer interaction was seen to be an important source of affective support in the form of motivation and overcoming a sense of isolation within distributed cohorts. Respondents also noted that they benchmarked themselves against their peers when discussing particular aspects of the study program. This was seen as an important form of feedback. Respondents referred to successful collaborative activities in which they experienced a wide variety of supports that included: (a) other affective benefits such as a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with the learning experience; and (b) academic benefits from working interdependently in a diverse group.

By contrast, relatively few participants indicated high expectations with regard to peer support or high levels of commitment to collaborative processes. Following from the points in the previous section regarding support from the facilitator, a majority of respondents indicated that they expected support from the teaching staff, but had little expectation of support from peer learners. Furthermore, comments suggested that, despite being engaged with explicitly learner-centric processes and acknowledging the benefits of successful collaborative activity, learners had limited expectations of peer support and little commitment to collaborative processes. Comments indicated a value on efficiency through individual activity and self-reliance over the potential richness of collaborative work.

## Supportive Infrastructure

Respondents identified a number of supportive structures within their online courses, including course design, task design, assessment structures, clear and explicit course processes, orientation activities, group and community structures, explicit participant roles and ‘rules of engagement’. Responses indicated a high value on clear, coherent processes within courses which were supported by responsive facilitation.

The overall design of the course was seen as an important component of supportive infrastructure. Respondents noted the importance of alignment between the constructivist underpinnings of course designs and the related values of learner-centeredness and active, constructive learning processes. The identification of processes which promote and facilitate interaction was seen as an important part of course design. In particular, respondents also noted the importance of alignment between constructivist pedagogical foundations and the intended outcomes, learning tasks and assessment scheme. This was viewed as a mechanism to reinforce the expectation of interpersonal interaction as a key aspect of such activity. Participants suggested that poorly designed courses amplify needs for learner support rather than being a source of support.

Supportive rules and processes	Value	Expectation
Clear process indicated within the course design	high	by veteran learners
Alignment between pedagogical commitments/values and intended outcomes	moderate	moderate
Explicit promotion of interpersonal interaction (e.g. tasks and protocols which support interaction)	moderate	mixed, variable
Commitment to dynamic content within the course structure	moderate	no
Explicit identification of participant roles	moderate	no
Orientation activities	high	no

*Table 3: Respondent values and expectations supportive rules and processes*

Roles for both learners and facilitators were identified as essential infrastructure in online courses. In courses which were seen as (relatively) less supportive, there was a clear indication of a need to re-assess facilitator roles and the implications for facilitator activity. In particular, comments focused on role expectations, the establishment of shared understandings of roles and the implied activity for both learners and facilitators.

Some of the facilitator roles identified included: creating an inviting social climate, prompting learner responses, structuring discussion topics, creating spaces for work groups, aiding in the selection of content and responding to emergent issues. Also, given that collaborative activity is a departure from the norm in many formal education contexts, the identification of explicit collaborative roles for learners was seen as essential to support interaction and collaborative activity.

Respondents noted that meaningful orientation activities which not only contributed to learning but also initiated community development within the course were supportive. These findings suggest the importance of orientation activities which: (a) explicate norms for behaviour; (b) provide opportunities to begin interactive relational processes early in a course; and (c) promote an understanding of group roles, rules and process. Given recent research findings regarding the need for novice online learners to learn skills necessary to cultivate online social presence, interact with one another effectively and collaborate (Kehrwald, 2008), orientation activities represent an important area for further consideration and study in creating supportive infrastructure.

### **Facilitating Structures.**

Structuring was identified as an important supportive function. In particular, the size of the course cohort was discussed. Some groups were deemed too large for the development of meaningful relationships and the use of smaller work groups was identified as supportive structuring technique. Although no ideal group sizes were suggested, some participants commented very favourably on their experiences in the small group of 10-15 members while others had mixed comments about very small groups of 3-4 members: some liked the intimacy of small groups; others felt that this technique segmented the whole class into too many subgroups.

Mechanism	Value	Expectation
Explicit group structuring	Very high	moderate
Rationale for group structuring (re: groups size, composition, roles, activity)	Very high	Mixed, increasing with experience
Explicit community development	High	mixed
Clear content selection and structure	Very high	Very high
Flexibility	Very high	mixed

*Table 4: Learners' values and expectations of supportive facilitating structures*

Also of interest was the basis for group creation. In one case, the whole group was divided based on professional contexts into school teachers, tertiary educators and corporate trainers. This basis was seen as providing an important source of commonality for participants which helped them identify shared attitudes, beliefs and experience as a basis for relationship building. The grouping also helped them establish commonality of purpose in their learning activities and focus their efforts on shared objectives. Small groups were seen as a means of promoting the development of community within the course, albeit in 'groups within the group'. However, respondents also noted some need for progression in the creation and use of groups. It was suggested that groups should be periodically re-formed in order to expose different individuals to one another and thereby introduce new ideas and fresh perspectives to group activities.

Community structures were seen as another important source of support. As part of the development of small communities within the larger course cohort, participants identified: (a) an enhanced sense of the identity of group members with whom they were interacting and a related greater sense of accountability to those individuals; and (b) a greater commitment to group activities and the shared goals that emerged. Critical discourse within these community structures was identified as a very important aspect of learning in text-based online environments. Some participants were vocal in their identification of the supportive nature of these workgroups and identified it as a highlight of their postgraduate program. Others indicated that the experience had positively affected their views of social support and collaborative activity. In particular, this was seen to influence the roles of participants and imply a set of rules for activity

which include timely response/contribution and maintenance of a positive social climate through the use of netiquette.

Respondents identified an important supportive role in the selection, management and use of course content, including the participant generated dynamic content. The content structure is important because learners take meaning from such structure (Laurillard, 2002). In some courses, the quantity of content was seen to be excessive, even burdensome. As a result, participants highlighted the need for informed content selection in order to focus their efforts on the most important tasks and information. The selection of content was aided by advice from peer learners and the facilitator.

Respondents noted the need to balance structure and flexibility. In particular, participants in courses during the shortened summer term commented that a lack of flexibility undermined the general notion of a course as 'supportive'. Conversely, participants in other terms commented favourably on the flexibility afforded in those courses. This suggests some need for attention to the alignment of course processes with institutional timelines and the need for supportive flexibility.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

The findings highlight three key issues which inform the provision of learner support in online learning environments: (1) identifying valued learner support mechanisms; (2) dealing with learner expectations; and (3) reconceptualising support in the context of online learning communities.

### **Identifying Valued Learner Support Mechanisms**

In-person support delivered via interpersonal interaction is highly valued by online learners. Interaction with the teaching staff was most highly valued and this was related to high expectations of specific, timely in-person support from course teaching staff. Respondents' experiences imply particular supportive activities for teaching staff including timely response to learner queries, cultivation of a visible online presence, promoting a productive social climate within the course, and thoughtful structuring of learner activity. While this list of facilitator activities is not exhaustive, it is consistent with a growing body knowledge around good online teaching practice (e.g. Gunawardena & Zittle, 1996; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001; Salmon, 2000). Further work is needed to elaborate these roles and explicitly link them to learner support practices.

Peer interaction was also valued, though not expected. Findings indicated a need for further study into learner experiences with peer interaction as a support mechanism, particular with respect to (a) transference of support expectations from face-to-face to situations and the potential interference with support in online learning environments; (b) the relationship between increasing skill with technology mediated learning and changes in learners' support expectations and (c) further identification of supportive aspects of peer interaction.

Supportive structures (i.e. 'infrastructure') were not only identifiable by learners, but were highly valued. These include various aspects of course design, explicit role assignments, orientation activities within the networked community, and explicit rules which organise activity. In particular, these structures were seen as most supportive when placed in the context of a cohesive whole such as a community structure which includes a combination of roles, rules and tools to facilitate activity. Further work is needed to understand the operation of community structures as a form of learner support and the development of community within networked environments.

### **Dealing with Learner Expectations**

Despite the value on interpersonal interaction identified above, the findings highlight discontinuity between ideals of community participation, learner expectations of activity in online learning communities and actual learner activity learning environments which are based on community learning models. At the heart of these issues is the question: *What does it mean to be a learner participant in text-based online learning communities?* The answer is not straightforward. Because community models may be more democratic and egalitarian than other structures, roles must be carefully considered for all stakeholders. Learners must be prepared to assume more control not only for their own personal learning, but also for the functioning of the community as a whole. They are asked to play roles and follow rules which, while not directly related to learning activity, are part of larger interconnected systems of activity within community structures.

Findings from this study highlight the need for the development of understanding around roles within the learning environments. Notably, respondents indicated that, in most cases, they were unwilling to assume more responsibility for the operation and management of the learning community. Whilst they were happy to have input into decision making, they were unwilling to invest time or energy in roles that they associated with traditional teaching, including structuring, support and creating

accountability within the learning environment. These findings underscore the need for further research and development related to roles within learning communities, particularly as they relate to expectations of various stakeholders with regard to activity, participation, responsibility and the distribution of power in online learning communities.

### **Reconsidering Learner Support in Text-based Online Learning Communities**

Further to the suggestions above about the creation of supportive community structures, the discussion of values in online learning communities and the roles of participants in these environments, there is a need to reconsider learner support with regard to the questions of (a) learner needs vs. learner wants; and (b) responsibility for the provision of high quality learner support.

There is danger of creating learner support systems which are *too* responsive. The point of learner support is not to cater to every whim of individual learners, but rather to provide adequate support to allow learners to realize success in their respective learning endeavours. The focus must remain squarely on *learning* as a measure of success and support must be linked to learner *needs* with regard to learning as opposed to focusing on *program completion* and learner *wants* with regard to their learning. While we must not discount learner preferences, the point is to create and support pedagogically sound learning programs which account for a diversity of learner interests and seek to meet learners' needs within the program. Ideally, learner support will cater to a variety of member (learner) preferences whilst emphasizing learning as part of a productive community system.

These issues relate to questions of responsibility and control within online learning communities. Further to the points above regarding roles, this issue highlights a particular area for further research: working out the balance of shared responsibilities for learner support in online learning communities. How much responsibility do learners assume for their own learning? How much responsibility do learners assume for the learning of their peers? What responsibilities are assumed by the education provider and its agents (facilitators, tutors, subject matter experts, etc.)?

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