



Student engagement and blended learning: Portraits of risk

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ABSTRACT

The widening participation agenda was instigated by a government seeking to develop skilled workers in the global economy, yet it has consistently refused to fund the burgeoning student population adequately. Managers and academics within the HE sector have to reconcile requirements for the implementation of policies with an increasing ‘audit’ culture and a mass education system. For these stakeholders, perceptions of the benefits of moving aspects of learning online can be attractive. But does this help the widening participation student, struggling to adjust to University life, juggling working to minimise debt and family commitments?

A model has been developed through cross case analysis of students’ learning experiences at a post-1992 University to illustrate how students are creating new and innovative ways to negotiate their engagement with Higher Education. The negotiation involves their individual expectations of:

- Their ability to control technology.
- Their forthcoming educational experience.
- Expectations of managing their ‘learning space.’

The model provides a way of mapping aspects of course design to different portraits of students, enabling students to be mapped as high, medium and low risk in terms of retention. The use of this model to design and analyse courses, in order to identify such risks for students, will then be demonstrated.

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1. Introduction

Imagine... that you go to a University where all of the buildings are empty – no desks, tables, or chairs, just big bulletin boards all over each room. Now imagine that you can go to school anytime you want. The campus is constantly filled with students, teachers, and administrators coming and going at all hours of the day and night. Each person, however, is physically invisible to all the others. The only way you can interact with each other is by posting your ideas, comments, and responses to other postings on the bulletin boards (Hamilton and Zimmerman, 2002, p.259).

Hamilton and Zimmerman provide an alternative view of the university, where all the activities are undertaken in a virtual place and in virtual space. Ideas like this are attractive for various stakeholders in higher education (HE) in the UK.

However, there is little research that gives an insight into students’ experiences of such developments. The few studies that have explored students’ engagement with technology and education show a complex picture: one shaped by social and cultural influences and full of distractions (e.g. Crook, 2002). Researchers such as Greener (2008) have developed this work by categorising student’s experiences of her course into nine views of blended learning, the most significant of which, for this work, concerns students’ confidence. Greener (2008:2) suggests, “Blended learning requires confidence in learning, choosing familiar ground, being prepared to be open... and working together in a safe and supported situation with both face-to-face and online support.” However, as we will argue, individual students can lack even this fundamental grounding.

None of this work has explored the detail of how specific students work with technology and manage their home space to manage their studies. It is this neglected area that this paper will explore, drawing on a series of interviews with students.

The university within which this research is situated is close to the bottom of the league tables in terms of governmental targets – staff-student ratios; average A-level grades (in the Business subject area only 12% of students enter with an ‘A’ level profile) and the completion

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of students within the traditional three-year study period (www.QAA.ac.uk, 2001 Accessed 02.12.02). Two-thirds of the student population are mature learners, many of whom do not have English as mother tongue. The students experience financial hardship, and many are trying to combine full time study with nearly full time work, with an average of 15 working hours per week (Holley, Dobson, & Yau, 2005). Thus the informal learning opportunities available at more residential campuses are missing (Pheiffer, Andrew, Green, & Holley, 2005).

2. Policy context

Given the background of governmental and institutional pushes towards e-learning (e.g., in the UK, HEFCE, 2005; NCIHE, 1997a) and the reality of work and study for a significant number of students, the actual experience of individual students studying within their own 'space' is surprisingly underreported. The question of how to integrate students into the world of higher education has challenged UK universities since the initial expansion in numbers in the 1960s. A typical early response was to make residential status a prerequisite of attendance. The university management saw residence as a suitable strategy for assimilating undergraduates, especially where the family background was not conducive to the habits and culture of study, and further thought that residence constituted "a part of the benefits of the University education whose value can scarcely be overstressed" (Evans, 2004, p. 14). This is very different today, because many widening participation students are unable, unwilling or even forbidden to study away from home. Attendance at their local university and remaining in the family home is the norm, rather than a move to a campus (Holley, Andrew, & Pheiffer, 2004).

Within recent new labour policy, Ruddick (1996) identifies the ideal learner as based on masculine perceptions of the individual: male, white, middle class and able-bodied; unencumbered by domestic responsibilities, poverty or self doubt. Meanwhile, the non-traditional student is vilified by the popular press and the wider society and, worryingly, in the Houses of Parliament (Sinfield, Burns, & Holley, 2004, p. 147), where claims are made that widening access polices equate to high dropout rates and 'dumbed down' students taking 'dumbed down classes', despite clear evidence to the contrary (Clare, 1999). Work by Bennett (2003) suggests the main reason for student dropout, especially in London, is financial difficulty. Individual self-esteem also played a crucial role in encouraging or discouraging withdrawal when a person experienced low grades or substantial financial problems; a very different picture from official policy.

For the student, higher education can be a cold, harsh climate (Sinfield et al., 2004) where they are over-assessed, expected to acquire 'independent study skills' in a very short time, and have very few opportunities to access the scarce resource of academic time. The undergraduates in this study are far from "the 'public schoolboys at Oxbridge' who make the unproblematic undergraduates" (Evans, 2004, p. 15). This study at an inner city university showed students have in excess of 170 mother tongues, work an average 30 h a week in paid employment and come from 'non-traditional' backgrounds – thus they are typical 'widening participation' students. In the UK policy context, widening participation refers to non-traditional students as having at least one of the following characteristics: being from an ethnic minority group; having a long-term disability; possessing non-standard qualifications on entry to higher education; being aged over 25 years on entry to university; or being from lower socio-economic groups of origin. (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/Pubs/hefce/1997/m8_97.htm) However, the focus of this paper is not on the typicality of these students, but upon their individual experiences within a post-1992 institution with a strong commitment to recruiting student from diverse backgrounds.

3. Approaches to student engagement

In spite of a growing rhetoric about independent and autonomous learners (Thorpe, 2002) the teaching profession have no confidence that our students know how to learn best. Instead we offer them modularisation and centralisation, a system where each topic has been packaged as a module which has been both delivered and examined within a single semester (Goodhew, 2002). These modules are centrally co-ordinated, and although wide choice exists in theory, teachers are able to screen out 'undesirable' students with numerous 'prerequisites' (where students have to have studied another module the previous year before accessing the module of choice). When students engage with these offerings, there is no trust in their ability to complete them, leading to regimes of surveillance (Land & Bayne, 2002). The rhetoric of personalisation and student centeredness constructs the individual learner primarily in the deficit, as having individual needs requiring individual support, and this hides and denies how people have been excluded from education because of their class or group position – not because of individual flaws or lack of aspiration (Sinfield et al., 2004).

When academics offer rich and engaging online materials, an opportunity is provided for students to learn in a different way, at a place and time of their own choosing. However, educators have to value this alternative way of learning and relinquish some of their power and control of the classroom, and embrace more personalised and individualised modes of study negotiated with individual students.

Mobile theorists such as Sharples argue that the traditional model of the classroom with the locus of control remaining firmly with the teacher changes with the introduction of mobile learning. Control and management of learning can be distributed, thus disrupting the carefully managed environment of the classroom. This has profound implications, namely a "cybernetic process of learning through the continual exploration of the world and negotiation of meaning, mediated by technology" (Sharples et al., 2005, p. 7). True power and participation for e-learners can be achieved by careful design of technology to include the previously excluded (Cook & Light, 2006), although there is still the need to understand what is required to design digital media that can assist the motivations of 'real people' in a way that empowers them (Cook, Holley, Smith, Bradley, & Haynes, 2006). It is against a background of contested ideas of what the student brings to the classroom, indeed to the 'blended' classroom that these case studies are located. It should also be noted that whilst authors such as Prensky (2001) talk of 'digital natives', matters are rarely so clear-cut in practice. For example, Padilla-Meléndez, Garrido-Moreno, and Del Aguila-Obra (2008) concluded that students are not, in fact, digital natives; indeed, they are not particularly prolific users of technology. Obviously this situation may vary – but that highlights the importance of exploring, rather than taking for granted, the practices and preferences of students. These contested ideas clearly demonstrate the need to develop both new tools and new conceptions of pedagogic space.

However, resistance from both staff and students is well documented (e.g. Akerlind & Trevitt, 1999; Holley, 2002; Laurillard, 2002). Mahdzadeh, Biemans, and Mulder (2008) suggest that lecturers' own opinions about computer and the web significantly influence their propensity to develop e-learning. In their study, previous attitudes and opinions were a major influence on their willingness to engage with curriculum (re)design for e-learning. Many staff do little more than 'stretching the mould', by including more technology without rethinking

or changing any of the traditional classroom teaching offerings (Collis & Van der Wende, 2002). So how might students react when faced with a design that tries to go beyond this? Conole, de Laat, Dillon, and Darby (2008:519) suggest that students still value face-to-face contact and consider this 'vital' in building a sense of community or belonging to a class or study group. Such preferences need to be taken into account. This study offers insights into the student experiences of two contexts, the first where students are scaffolded in their learning by the assessment process within a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and the second where all materials are freely available on the web.

4. Methodology

Recognising the complexity of the politics impacting on our students and their experiences, this work adopts a phenomenological approach, where the meaning of the lived experiences for individuals about a concept or the phenomenon is explored (Cresswell, 1998:51). Exploring the individual experience of learning outside the formal classroom environment has led researchers to call for new types of study to be undertaken – ones that explore peoples' patterns of use and seek to understand them (e.g. Potter, 2006; Selwyn, 2004).

4.1. Biographic narrative interpretative method

Biographic Narrative Interpretative Method (BNIM) draws upon the German 'gestalt' school of thought, developed by psychologists such as Wertheimer, Kohler and Koffa (Hill, 1990) in the early 20th century and is a particular method used to draw out the "stories" or narratives from interviewees' lives (Wengraf, 2001). What is of interest to the researcher is what the interviewee selects to tell us, and the way in which the story is told. The interview is structured such that the interviewee has the time and space to develop their own narrative contribution. The interview transcripts are then interpreted through a microanalysis of the lived life, with the aim of encapsulating the 'part' of the transcript, as representative of the whole interview. Thus, the method assumes that interview data are only about a particular research conversation that occurred at a particular time and place.

The BNIM approach, Wengraf (2001) suggests, limits counter transference, which is the emotional reaction of the interviewer to the interviewee's subject matter. Thus, this particular interview method recognises that power relationships do exist, and sets out a robust framework within which the researcher invites the participant to set the agenda, and by staying silent yet demonstrating empathy, encourages narrations of the participant's choice. The interview method of three 'parts' enables the researcher to stand apart from the interview emotionally and therefore examine power as a topic in its own right.

5. Case context and sampling framework

The study consists of two case studies, the first of which explores student online interactions in a specialist module towards the end of their University studies.

Students' accounts of their lived experiences of the classroom give a real insight into these formal aspects of education. However, these students were very much directed towards using the time and space within the assessment designed by the tutor, where a weekly task was set. The study did not address how and when an individual student would select and choose to study. Thus, the second case study explores new students' attitudes to learning after a complete module redesign, using interactive multi-media resources to scaffold their experiences of coming to University (Holley & Dobson, 2008). These students had not yet developed their own studying strategies.

The contexts of the two cases will be described next, followed by a presentation of the student cases that were analysed.

5.1. The context for case study one: use of face-to-face, classroom and online teaching

The focus for this case is a final year undergraduate module, International Purchasing. The module draws students from undergraduate courses as well as day-release students, studying to gain a professional qualification. For this study, the aim was to find out how students viewed their online and face-to-face interactions, and to illustrate some of the complexities of student engagement/non-engagement. Students were interviewed and placed within the grid below, depending on their level of online interactions.

The three selected interviewees had their own stories to narrate, and the interpretation of events draws from concepts of social constructivism, where each person in the 'story' has their own way of constructing reality.

5.2. The context for case study two: a blended learning approach

The students interviewed for case study two were drawn from a seminar group of students undertaking a revised introduction to study module. Every student was invited to be interviewed; this was because, in the previous study, the students who would have been most interesting to talk with declined to take part (i.e. those in Quadrant D, Fig. 1). This alternative approach made the research process more transparent to the students, and resulted in a much higher level of participation. Appointments were made with 11 students, of whom eight attended and were interviewed. Of these eight, three were selected for detailed analysis because this is the number recommended in the BNIM approach; these particular three were chosen because they offered the greatest contrast in terms of background, experiences and approaches to study.

5.3. Overview of the student cases

Case study one offers insights from interviews with 'Kwame', 'Charles' and 'Juanita' (all pseudonyms).

Kwame is a male student from Ghana, who came to the UK to study a one-year diploma in Higher Education. He started late, attending class in the fourth teaching week, which causes him severe problems. Kwame's story is one of overcoming challenges, and finding alternative strategies to solve his problems without engaging with those he perceives as 'in authority'. He uses friends and family to help him

<p>Quadrant A Students engaging online, and engaging face-to-face</p> <p>'Charles' takes the course as a 'virtual' student</p>	<p>Quadrant B Students engaging online but not face-to-face</p> <p>'Juanita' more confident online than in the classroom</p>
<p>Quadrant C Students NOT engaging online, but engaging face - to-face</p> <p>'Kwame' unable to access the materials</p>	<p>Quadrant D Students NOT engaging online, and NOT engaging face- to-face (no volunteers)</p>

Fig. 1. Sampling framework.

make sense of an alien world – coming from Ghana, he finds settling into UK life difficult. This illustrated the role of the assistance of a more experienced friend, rather than a reliance on the University's support systems.

Charles can be described as an independent learner as he shows confidence in approaching the teaching/learning materials on his own. He displays considerable self assurance in his own abilities in negotiating with the lecturer an alternative teaching mode, one not available by strictly following rules. Further, Charles presented himself as a work-oriented character, competitive in his approach to group tasks; we see him challenging the inclusive approach to learning modelled by the lecturer. A key feature of his narrative was a constant comparison with other learners, placing himself in the 'top 10%' of the classroom. He uses terms that classify the other students in his class by 'success' or 'failure' and implied that the students at the lower end of his scale would not be capable of forming an online group. He is satisfied with his own group, because, as he comments, 'the top 10% would be able to form themselves into sensible groups who could work together'. He is in no way apologetic about this; there is a confident honesty in this interview.

Juanita is heavily influenced by her early educational experiences of rejection and mockery, and finds it difficult to be fully confident in the classroom, which leads her to really value the opportunity of 'having a voice' in the spaces enabled by online engagement. The online tasks encourage her to develop her own ideas after considering the contributions made by other students. She also likes the more anonymous feeling of using an online discussion, "because sometimes you are not sure of your ideas. It's more anonymous on the internet." Juanita has found value in sharing ideas with other students using the online discussion board available from the University Virtual learning Environment (VLE). This helped her reflect and think through her own ideas, although often this was done at home, where she is more easily able to concentrate. The use of the online discussion helps her to think through her own opinion, and it seems less threatening than speaking out in class.

Close analysis of students' narratives about their learning experiences reflected themes of the changing role of the tutor and the relationship between technology and flexibility. What was novel, however, was the importance of controlling spaces for learning.

Case study two focuses on the new student experience through the narratives of 'Nyela' 'Marco' and 'Joanne' (all pseudonyms).

A refugee from Somalia, Nyela starts her narration by talking about how hard she has found the move to the UK both in terms of social and educational integration.

"You know when you can't speak the language its even harder for you to actually go down the high street or buy certain products, let alone start school and then not only start making friends with people you've never met in your entire life and completely different people to you, its harder to learn at the same time."

Her story is one of difficulties – with making friends, settling into a different education system, with not having the familiar extended family support network around her. Her very expressive language shows how hard she has worked to learn English as a foreign language, and she is able to use tone and intonation to convey the depth of her feelings. Her selection of words 'even harder' and 'you've never met in your entire life' hint at the resistance she has come across when trying to adapt and enter a new community.

Marco is an Italian student who comes to London for what he describes as "a new experience, new challenge." He has held down a number of jobs (office administration in Italy, hotel and bar work in London) and also studied to gain the ticketing qualifications needed to work in a travel agency. He is used to combining work and study, and is keen to attain his degree in England, as this holds a high status back home. Marco does not see himself as a typical student; this is partly because of his part time work. He prefers the peace and quiet of his home to study; student areas of the university are noisy: "I don't like to study with the TV or music on." His home space offers a contrast to the general busyness and noise elsewhere in his life. The home space also gives him an environment he can control to enable him to maximise his study effectiveness. His patterns of study either in the quiet at work after the bar has closed, or late afternoon, indicate the discipline of study on a regular basis. Thus, Marco is keen to use technology at a place and time of his choosing, and he wants to keep the University side of his life separate from the rest. He manages a combination of work and study by strictly controlling the impact of his study to regular periods when he has carved out the space, either in his preferred location of home or the post-work period when there is quiet in the office behind the bar. He is blocking out time to create space, and giving up sleep to enable him to continue to pursue his aims of a degree while living in London and earning his own living.

Joanne is a single mum with an older son of 13 and young daughter who is attending nursery school. She started University 6 years ago, and had to give it up when she became pregnant: "I had some problems and had to stop". During this period she feels she matured and started to learn to manage her time. She uses the term 'concentration' frequently in the opening narrative. She sees this as enabling her to take control of her situation, whether it is at home or at University. The circumstances that allow concentration to occur are typically

when she has been able to split her time up and create a learning space. Sitting down is important, in the peace and quiet of the university library, away from home. The space and freedom of the library is liberating for Joanne, and offers her far more now as a mature learner than it did previously as a young undergraduate. Online materials help with creating the circumstances for concentration, and Joanne prefers to make use of these. The university has IT studios where she can sit and focus on her work. She sees online materials as advantageous because she does not have to ask anybody for help. If she has to, she can access the online materials at home late in evening, even although she is tired.

The three students in this case have found ways to study online, but this required one-off expense and effort for Nyela, ongoing sacrifice for Marco and a compromise for Joanne between her preferred physical space at the University and the virtual space that enables her to study at home.

6. A proposed model for analysis

From the interviews, what is notable is that students very seldom negotiate with staff to find suitable learning spaces within the blended environment. The negotiation is much more subtle and involves their individual expectations of:

- Their ability to control technology.
- Their forthcoming educational experience.
- Expectations of managing their 'learning space' (typically at home).

The framework for analysis consists of three diagrams, each of which represents the students' experiences using a combination of the key themes. Each theme is portrayed by an axis, and the student experience plotted by a cell. The cases presented above are labeled by the first two letters of their name. The students' past learning experiences were used to place him/her on the 'expectations of education' axis. Their preferred use of technology in their home learning space is mapped onto the space axis. Finally the plotting of the students' technological experience is represented on the axis line, 'control of technology'. Each student is plotted as ordinal data, based on their position in relation to the other students for each of the axes.

In Fig. 2 it can be seen that students Charles, Marco and Juanita have successfully 'matched' their previous educational experiences against the blended learning course design. The students who have struggled with their learning are ranked towards the lower half of the diagram. The individual students preferred home space use; whether this was for private study or for recreating the social networks of the classroom does not alter their ranking in the diagram. It is the effective use of the home learning space that makes the difference, not the desire to make use of home as a learning space. Kwame gives us an illustration of this point: he wants to work in the comfort of the house he shares away from the university, but is unable to do this due to his lack of IT skills. The extremes of position for Charles and Marco compared with Juanita reflect the two men's desires for using their learning space for private study, whereas Juanita prefers to try to replicate the classroom by using online social networks.

Joanne, located in the middle of the two axes, could represent an 'average' widening participation student (in the sense of the 'typical' student assumed in policy), as her expectations of University life are combined with poor IT skills.

Kwame and Nyela demonstrate a mismatch of their educational experience combined with no expressed preference (or skill) for either social or private use of technology. In a blended learning module, these factors suggest they are at a higher risk of struggling. This is significant because it shows that a 'one size fits all' approach for tutors setting classroom activities to be completed outside of formal teaching will not suit all students.

Fig. 3 represents very clearly the disadvantage Kwame is put under by not having access to technology, nor the skills to use it. Charles, Marco and Juanita all rank highly in their control of technology within the home in comparison to Nyela and Joanne. Joanne is ranked slightly higher than Nyela because of her competence in a wide range of social technologies, such as facebook.

It is interesting that the cells occupied by the students under 'control of technology' replicate exactly the student marks on the modules they studied. Charles, Marco and Juanita all did very well, attaining grades of A/B, whereas Nyela and Joanne attained borderline D/C. Kwame had to resit some aspects of the module but did eventually pass at a later date. Thus it could be argued that students represented in the top half of this diagram are those that face the least risk of failing their course.

The advantages of Charles, Marco and Juanita with their high skill levels and up-to-date technology in their homes provide a striking contrast to the disadvantages faced by Kwame in the bottom (higher risk) quadrant in Figs. 2 and 3. The grid is slightly deceptive as, when laying out a diagram purely on rank order, an even spacing is implied; in 'real life' Charles, Marco and Juanita had more similar educational experiences, and so could be clustered towards the top of the diagram, and thus the gap between these students and Kwame and Nyela was more marked than appears in the diagram.

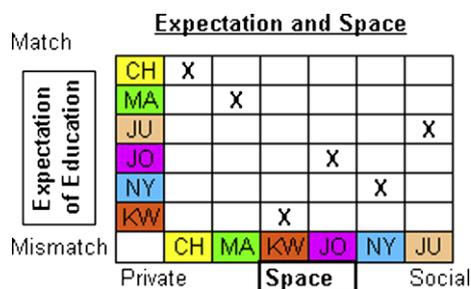


Fig. 2. Expectation of educational experience mapped against home space.

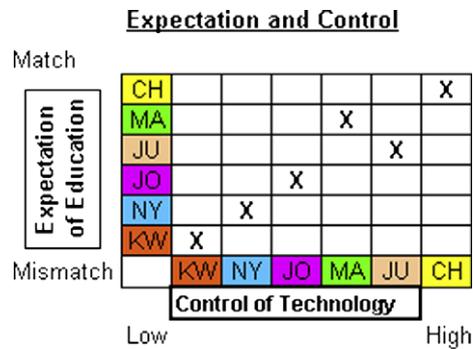


Fig. 3. Expectation of educational experience mapped against control of technology.

7. Discussion

What student cases of this kind can offer when mapped against the axes above is the conceptualisation of one component of a complex set of factors influencing student expectations of their higher education experiences. Students bring their own life experiences to academic study, and arguably those better prepared by work and previous positive educational advantage will more easily 'match' the learning needs of a module offering some elements of blended learning. The converse is also the case: those poorly equipped in terms of previous life skills and educational experiences are most likely to experience a mismatch with the course. For example Kwame really wants to perform well but finds barriers to his learning extremely difficult to overcome. The selection of the Internet tools for private, individual study or social networking is not the issue.

Fig. 3 would be extremely useful as a tool for plotting students 'at risk' of not being able to engage with a blended learning course. This would be particularly useful for tutors faced with pressures from management to take advantage of Virtual Learning Environments and move elements of their teaching online. A way of mapping potential students and customising learning within a module, and working out ways of encouraging and enabling all students to participate fully without being judgemental, is arguably a valuable aid to curriculum design.

The polarisation of the student experience demonstrated in Fig. 4 is potentially a useful representation for mapping students who could benefit most from discretionary bursaries to purchase/lease IT equipment and be provided with fast track coaching to enable them to maximise their chances of success on a degree course. As in Fig. 3, the ranking for the use of home space expresses a student's personal preference for using their home space and internet use for learning between private and individual work at one end, to an expressed preference for social uses of learning space at the other. Students with poorer IT awareness can be mapped towards the middle of the axis (as they are unable to enact a preference towards either extreme).

The conclusions above arise from the study of particular students; it would be inappropriate to treat them as true for 'typical' students. However, contrasting these individual accounts shows how varied students' experiences can be. This demonstration of variety in students' accounts, and the subsequent formalisation of this variation in terms of the concepts used in Figs. 2–4, provides a way of interpreting other students' experiences in relation to this existing set of data.

To apply the concepts discussed above to a new set of students, their accounts could be located on the axes using ordinal categories. For plotting subsequent case studies, or for clustering groups of students for analysis, applying a simple grid to the model offers nine possible options, simplifying the process of representing students' experiences, whilst still allowing teachers to identify students that are at low/high risk of success or failure on the course. So a blank template could be devised and prospective students clustered within the appropriate cells on grid. The advantage of the grid is that high student numbers can be catered for, and broad categories applied, rather than very specific categories drawn from a set of rich case analyses.

The grid squares could be labeled as low, medium and high risk, as show in the diagrams below. Students in the 'low risk of failure' squares would have a propensity to show characteristics of a good match between their expectation of education and the courses they select, especially if any have a blended learning component. Similarly they would typically have a high degree of control over their home environment, or the confidence to negotiate successfully with those they share the home with. They would also show a high degree of control over their use of technology, and this could be expressed as an identifiable preference towards using technology for private study in isolation, or for using technology to replicate some of the social networks usually found in the classroom.

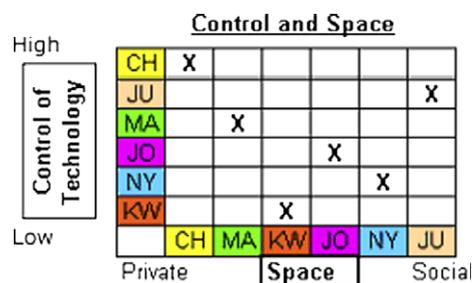


Fig. 4. Confidence and control of technology mapped against (home) space.

The students placed in the high-risk squares are at risk of struggling to use technology effectively, since their expectations of the course and the teaching approaches used are unlikely to be met. Based on this classification, it would be possible for tutors to develop appropriate, discipline specific, interventions based on their knowledge of local practice and opportunities; it would also allow them to target these interventions in a responsive and appropriate way, based on students' own accounts of their experience.

8. Conclusions: implications for practice

Close analysis of students' narratives about their learning experiences reflected many of the key themes from the literature. Power, the changing role of the tutor and the relationship between technology and flexibility all feature strongly in the student narratives presented here. What was novel, however, was the importance of controlling spaces for learning. These accounts showed how easily Charles was able to colonise new spaces for study (at home and online) using principles from his work in industry. Further, Charles presented himself as a work-oriented character being competitive in his approach to group tasks with 'others'. Marco has echoes of Charles in his narrative; this confident man draws very clear distinctions between what he sees as university supported materials and undue interference, for example with tutor contact via his mobile phone. Kwame, by contrast, felt powerless even to operate in the online environment, let alone to bypass it. It was not until a friend supported him in learning how to use this resource that he began to feel able to contribute his voice to the ongoing module discussions. Nyela offers us an understanding of the ways in which she can manage what she perceives as a hostile world: she manages overwhelming space by dividing her learning into bite-sized chunks, and negotiating with her family to access IT in her own bedroom, rather than the shared living space.

The irony here is that the online learning materials had been created to support the widening participation agenda, yet in these cases, it was the traditional 'good' student who thrived. Kwame, with his unconventional background, simply experienced this well-intended development as another set of barriers that delayed his participation in the course. Nyela found similar barriers to access. Joanna found barriers with the expectation of teamwork for student presentations, and was unable to reconcile the demands of the module with the demands of her family. She would have preferred to negotiate a different time for lectures and for meeting other students, and this proved to be impossible. It was only because Kwame established a friendship and explained his needs to this friend that his engagement with the module altered. Nyela found it difficult to make friends, and subsequently dropped out of university.

Despite government strategies encouraging recruitment of widening participation students and of utilising e-learning in creative ways, and despite extensive internal audit systems and paper trails, when students arrived (late) there were no practices in place to take account of them or their needs. Despite the fact that Kwame has a very clear, articulated motivation for engaging with new technology – for himself, for his wider community, for his country as a whole – the university was unprepared to take account of his specific wants and needs. His identity is lost within the institution, the course and the online spaces that were created.

Simply providing e-learning – no matter how well intentioned – is insufficient to address the problems that students are experiencing. Further studies are needed that can reveal more about how individuals experience and cope with their engagement in formal education. With such accounts, it will begin to be possible to develop new pedagogical approaches, and perhaps new policies, which respond to students' needs in a better-informed way. Hearing the student voice clearly is a starting point.

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