Peter Bryant, Antony Coombs and Monika Pazio

Are we having fun yet? Institutional resistance and the introduction of play and experimentation into learning innovation through social media

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Peter Bryant - London School of Economics and Political Science

p.j.bryant@lse.ac.uk

Antony Coombs and Monika Pazio - University of Greenwich, London

a.coombs@gre.ac.uk, *m.pazio@gre.ac.uk*

Abstract

The notions and patterns of resistance are critical to the successful implementation of technology enhanced learning strategies at higher education institutions. At institutional, academic and student levels, resistance manifests itself in a variety of forms, at best supporting a critical culture and at worst creating inertia and active disquiet. Through the lens of an institutional wide strategic learning innovation vision at the University of Greenwich designed to enhance connectivity and collaboration, this paper will explore the modes and pathways of resistance extant in the process of implementing and embedding an openness agenda. Through supporting experimentation and play with social media creation and sharing as a mechanism of curricula transformation we identified a number of patterns of resistance to sharing and openness. Using a grounded theory informed approach we have attempted to represent these patterns in the form a model of institutional resistance to technology-led change.

Keywords

Technology enhanced learning, openness, social media, institutional resistance

Introduction

In the increasingly frantic, impossible and contrary debate around higher education pedagogy, social media (which conceptually includes notions of self-presentation, production, openness, critiquing and consumption of media positioned in the wider context of an open 'social presence' (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010)) is hailed by various protagonists as being both hero and villain. Some assert that it can offer a mechanism that may help the institution realise the potential of technology enhanced learning (TEL) (Green & Hannon, 2007; Siemens & Weller, 2011) but alternately, might entwine the academy or its staff and students in a web of perceived (or real) risks and dangers (Hughes, 2009; Ralph & Ralph, 2013; Towner & Muñoz, 2011). This paradoxical understanding of the role of social media exposes disconnects in the way TEL strategies and practices are implemented and subsequently evaluated within higher education. Sitting at the heart of this disconnect is the notion of institutional resistance to TEL change, which can manifest itself at macro, mezzo and micro within higher education institutions implementing TEL strategies. Whilst institutional resistance is not unique to higher education, it is especially prevalent in social systems such as universities which structurally are resistant to change and 'designed to neutralise the impact of attempts to bring about change' (Kavanagh & Ashkanasy, 2006; Macfadyen & Dawson, 2012).

This paper will look at potential reasons for institutional resistance, through the lens of data collected through the consultation and implementation phases of Greenwich Connect, a university wide vision for Learning Innovation at the University of Greenwich, United Kingdom. We argue that in the context of implementing a strategy of open and student-led production and sharing of content through social media, there was not a single point or mode of institutional resistance but a number of critical pressure points that manifest themselves at an institutional (macro), academic (mezzo) and student (micro) level. These pressure points were particularly visible where we encouraged and supported staff and students to experiment and play with content, sharing and collaborating (which are key tenants, according to Jenkins (2009), of participating in a digital world).

The nature of institutional resistance to openness

There has been significant debate around the role of technology in facilitating change within higher education teaching and learning, arguing at one end of the scale that it represents the end of the university as we know it and at the other, it is the medium by which there will be re-birth of the university as an information hub for the digital, open community (Baer, 1998; Grosseck, 2009; Pearce, Weller, Scanlon, & Kinsley, 2011; Taylor, 2010). However, the pace of change within institutions globally has traditionally been slow. Davidson and Goldberg (2009) argue that;

> *'…institutions of learning have changed far more slowly than the modes of inventive, collaborative, participatory learning offered by the Internet and an array of contemporary mobile technologies'.*
> *(Davidson & Goldberg, 2009, p. 3)*

There have been a number of studies that attempted to identify reasons for this latency and resistance. Critically, they point to issues of organisational culture and structure, including the impact of innovation diffusion arising from variable rates of staff acceptance of technology (Wilson & Stacey, 2011) and the development of cultural practices and policies that support openness, trust and participation (Rollett, Lux, Strohmaier, & Dosinger, 2007). Selim (2007) argues that these cultural and organisational factors have significant flow-on effects to the acceptance of technology amongst students, noting issues such as the teachers attitudes to technology and the ease with which the university infrastructure facilitated access as critical. Garcia, Annansingh, & Elbeltagi (2011) argue that in the context of social media adoption, resistance comes from the perceived appropriateness of social media tools for higher education.

The use and integration of social media into teaching and learning presents unique challenges to strategies built on encouraging institutional acceptance. At an institutional level, concerns around appropriate usage (Garcia, et al., 2011), the rules governing IT (Somekh, 2007) and a diversity of understandings around privacy and data security (McGee & Begg, 2008) have impacted significantly on not just the use of social media, but on the way academics and students understand and communicate how others could use social media. Madge et al (2009) point to resistance from students when social spaces like Facebook are 'invaded' by institutions which leads to what is referred to as the 'creepy treehouse' phenomenon (Stein, 2008) '…when authority is seen to try and invade a young person's social space.'(Siemens & Weller, 2011) This collision between personal and educational space manifests itself clearly where the practices of play and experimentation are key to overcoming staff and student resistance, especially where there is a perception that social media, despite its commercial foundations, is primarily a social or fun tool for use outside of professional contexts like academia (Mihailidis, 2014).

Institutional resistance to play and experimentation

In the specific context of TEL implementation at an institutional level, there has been a need to develop specific strategies to win the 'hearts and minds' of staff and students in order to positively encourage the trialling of new pedagogies and innovative technology-led approaches to teaching and learning and to move away from the idea of education as simply the '…the transfer of information from one database or brain to another' (Macfadyen & Dawson, 2012; Raschke, 2002).

Play is at the heart of human behaviour, encouraging healthy relationships, enhanced literacy and creativity (Saracho & Spodek, 1998) and a better developed approach to work and career (Hartung, 2002). Play is not risk free, with some arguing that the best learning should hurt (Mann, 1996). Margitay-Becht and Herrera (2010) note that 'fun is learning' and observed little resistance by staff to engaging in fun activities such as virtual worlds and gaming but much higher resistance from the students, who wanted their experiences rooted in reality and play for the times after learning. The connection between experimentation and fun is less concrete. There is an explicit link between the safety to experiment and credible academic activity and identity in the context of what Whitchurch (2008) describes as third space professionals, which is a descriptor appropriate for many experimental and technology-engaged academic staff (Whitchurch, 2008) .

The Greenwich Connect Seed Fund

In June 2013 the University of Greenwich Educational Development Unit advertised a call for projects that could utilise technology to enhance the production, sharing and remixing of student generated content, facilitated through social media (seed fund projects). This is a critical aspect of the University Learning Innovation strategy called Greenwich Connect, whose primary intent is to support the formation and growth of networks and connections between learners, graduates, faculty, peers, disciplines, research, community and industry. The seed fund projects were the first activity within Greenwich Connect to receive funding.

Project teams made a bid for predetermined kits of equipment, selected with a particular pedagogical purpose in mind (making user generated content, digital storytelling, sharing and critiquing, or connecting with other learners). Each kit was also designed to be appropriate for use by the student, using existing skills that could be extended/repurposed for slightly more 'professional' contexts. This call resulted in the allocation of nearly 150 pieces of technology (e.g. tablets, cameras, recorders and software) to twelve programme teams across the university. Fundamental to our rationale for engaging in this project was the notion that each team had to be responsible for how they would integrate the use of technology into their teaching practice and most importantly, to have fun and play with the boundaries of the equipment and the learning that potentially could take place. The 'steer' came from what we saw as potential uses for the equipment by the learners, linked to the connectivist agenda of Greenwich Connect (Downes, 2006, 2009). Each seed fund project required the team to integrate collaborative practices into their learning, teaching and assessment (encouraged through the allocation of less pieces of equipment than the number of students involved, thereby encouraging them to take partnership roles in the production of content). Successful teams were expected to undertake critical reflection and peer evaluation at all stages of their project as part of the curriculum and teaching design process.

It was important to us that the projects engaged with the openness agenda, not simply at an abstract or theoretical level and especially not through the academics making an in/out decision on behalf of the students. Rather, we wanted this engagement to operate through the *practice* of openness, experimentation with its methods and a switched-on exploration of its ramifications. Through our early focus groups and the handed down oral traditions of the organisation, we knew there was considerable resistance to the concept of openness,

especially around the use of social media as a way of sharing and then critiquing student work. This was both at an institutional level (in the form of regulation and policy development) and from individual academics who, in our initial consultative interviews, argued issues around privacy, ownership, bullying and control, generally on behalf of the students. Learners are in the main comfortable with and competent in sharing content they had made themselves (Duggan, 2013) although there were serious disconnects between this and the institution's perception of student competence and confidence in this area. The use of the kits therefore needed to address these concerns head-on, challenging the organisation through learner-led innovations, through visible, acknowledged practice (rather than "under-the-radar" and peripheral innovation) and by using the idea of play to undermine the high-risk status which becomes attached to social media usage because of the hero/villain discourse surrounding it.

From our initial research prior to the implementation of Greenwich Connect it was clear that whilst there was a significant gap between where the institution currently sat and where it both wanted and needed to be in terms of learning innovation, simply providing the technology and capacity to integrate it into curriculum was not enough to guarantee 'success in learning processes', due to issues such as institutional resistance to change and the impacts of digital literacy gaps (Conde, García, Rodríguez-Conde, Alier, & García-Holgado, 2013; Hinrichsen & Coombs, 2014). We were aware of a number of instances where both students and staff appropriated a DIY mentality to technology as a reaction to having neither the institutional or infrastructure support for their technological experimentation. This manifested itself in a plethora of 'off-piste' practices, unofficial networks and content and self-managed and curated communities of content. The practices we were aware of varied in terms of success but all occurred as a reaction, either to the inability of the student to access an institutionally supported approach or to its inappropriateness for their purposes. This DIY engagement was very clearly demonstrated around the institutional reaction to the internet meme 'Harlem Shake'. There were discussions about making an 'official' University video (as many other institutions had). In the relatively short time these discussions were occurring, the students themselves had made five videos before the craze burnt out. Whilst this is a relatively ephemeral example, it has been replicated across a number of programme areas and learning and teaching contexts.

Methodology

The evaluation of the seed fund projects is being undertaken using a primarily qualitative mixed methods approach drawing on rolling student evaluation data, focus groups, interviews with staff and some limited benchmarking of student satisfaction, achievement and output. This process started in June 2013, and will roll out continually until the end of the 2013-14 academic year. The data being presented here is a subset of the wider data set and is centred primarily on the role of experimentation in both the allocation and impact of the seed funds. As the data collection is not complete, we have been informed by the constructivist grounded approach (the ability of the methodology to inductively construct a theory to explain behaviours within a context) (Charmaz, 2003, 2006). This affords us the ability to draw on the interactions and relations that exist between the individuals under study and the theory being developed (Creswell, 1998; Dey, 1999). It should be noted that we have not rigorously applied a grounded theory approach, we have used it more as a way of interrogating, interpreting and understanding what we have observed as part of the wider evaluative approach (Rowlands, 2005).

Results and Discussion

The project is still in its early stage hence this discussion will focus primarily on initial findings. The diagram below (Figure 1) attempts to model the specific types of resistance we

observed within the seed fund projects, starting at the points before the project was conceived and running through its immediate implementation into the early stages of evaluation.

Prior to the start of the project, our research and consultation process identified that there was clear evidence to suggest that there was significant, complex and widespread individual engagement with technology, in both personal and professional (academic) contexts, although the cross pollination between these fields was not especially widespread or free of tensions. Staff in the first instance when asked for the reasons why their personal uses of technology had not influenced their teaching practices as fundamentally as their personal practices pointed to a lack of institutional commitment to technology in terms of support, resources, time and space to experiment. Some staff identified that there were no real mechanisms in place to share best practice or engage in technology in a strategic way. The Greenwich Connect strategy was in part designed to overcome many of these resistance factors and provide a strategic approach to TEL that was (adequately) resourced. The seed fund was the largest component of this resourcing, and linked closely to the strategic vision of Greenwich Connect.
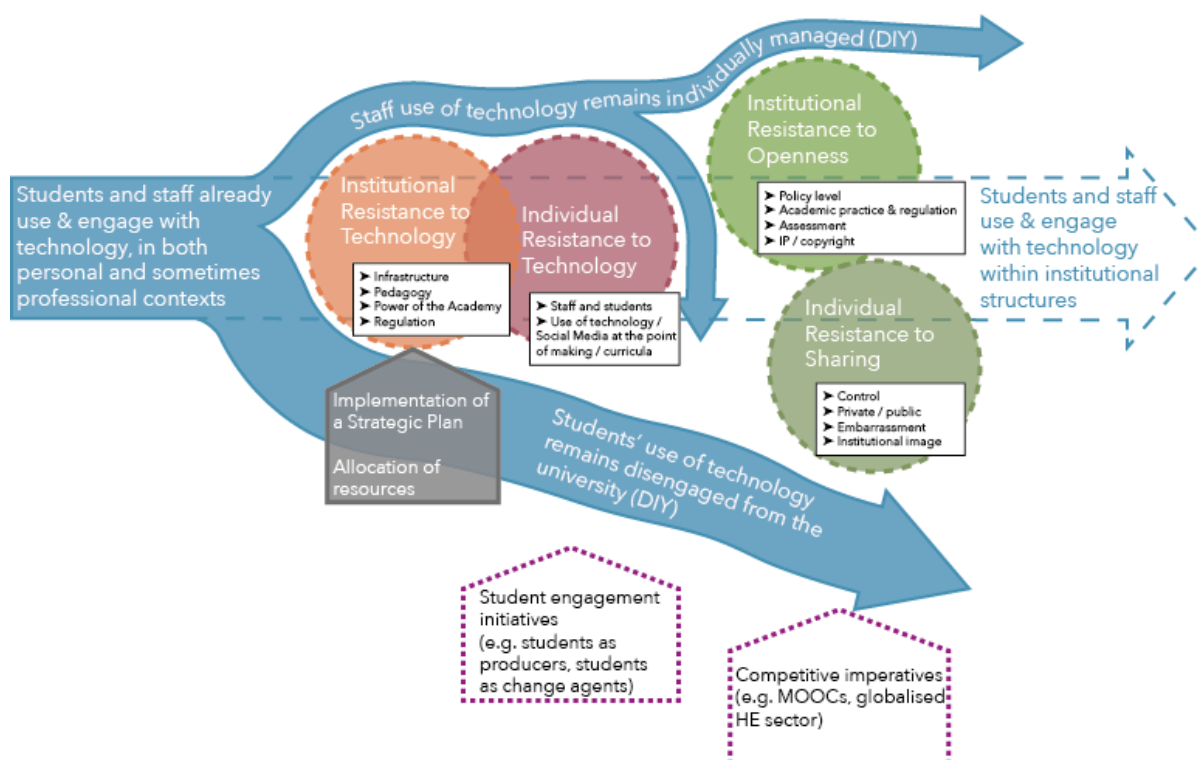
Individual resistance to technology

The project received generally positive feedback from the students who were engaged actively with the equipment and were open to experimentation and to varying degrees, with content creation and curation. Staff experiences with the equipment have been more varied, ranging from replicating existing behaviours and methods to evaluating and challenging their pedagogical practice.

Different attitudes were observed in relation to the type of equipment. Generally, iPads and tablets were well received and innovatively used by both staff and students; however when it came to more advanced equipment for video production, the students preferred to use their own less complex devices. There were a variety of perceptions amongst staff about the video and audio equipment, ranging from active support to the belief that the complexity of the equipment represented overkill.

As the technical capacity of the equipment was critical to the projects' ability to encourage experimentation (and learning through transforming and repurposing existing content creation skills), the use of semi-pro or high end consumer technology was not an encouraging factor in the success of a number of projects, contrary to what was hoped. This however does not indicate that the enjoyment factor was not present; in fact, the students enjoyed the activities and the content produced was quite often "playful".

Figure 1. *Institutional resistance to openness and experimentation.*

Institutional resistance to technology (pedagogy)

The ability to experiment with pedagogy, observed mostly from the academic point of view, was equally varied. It ranged between finding one's 'safe space' in habit or finding experimentation and fun in doing something different from established practice. In the case of the former, this was despite realising that the seed fund project provided a protected space within which to experiment and that there were little consequences from failure. This is a crucial issue as the freedom to experiment was clearly identified as point of institutional resistance in our initial research. The early career academics involved in the project were typically more inclined to try new things and acknowledge the fact they were still learning to teach. The more experienced academics sought to replicate existing, successful practice through the technology or experiment at the margins of formative or class-based activity, as opposed to summative or curricula activity.

Individual resistance to openness and sharing

One of the key aims of the project was to encourage students to make and share content, creating an environment where students and staff might engage in critiquing, remixing and connecting. However from the initial evaluations, there were a number of disconnects at the early stages of each project around producing and sharing the content, thus limiting the opportunities later in the project. There were some instances where a lack of clear instructions or linkages to assessment led to student confusion as to the lecturer's expectations, the real purpose of the task and also the role and purpose of technology provided. This (to some extent) explained both the staff and students individual resistance to the technology itself (demonstrated by students using their own instead of the provided kit or not using the equipment at all). The lack of instruction, structure and boundaries for students, which was seen by academics as demonstrating flexibility, creativity or freedom, resulted in the production of content that was perceived as inadequate or in some cases 'inappropriate' for academic settings. This in turn resulted in lecturers acting as a censor,

trying to control or approve the final work and taking upon themselves the responsibility to publish and share it. It is important to note, however, that the problems with freedom were not as common with postgraduate students who tended to respond better in those circumstances and were able to take ownership of their learning, even with minimal instructions. Amongst undergraduate students, even in cases where task fulfilment criteria were clear and adhered to, there was still a general individual resistance to sharing the final product of the work. The overall tendency towards control by academics restricted students' autonomy and as a result there was a deficit of openness.

There were, however, a number of examples where sharing and the subsequent evaluation and critiquing did occur as a result of the project. A few projects established processes that deemed edited content as 'appropriate' and shared the content on the VLE, as opposed to a more open source platform via social media. In at least two projects, this reflected the preference of both staff and students. The staff interviewed preferred the closed VLE space for a number of reasons, including a limitation of scope and ambition in their project design, a lack of trust in students' judgment, fear of ridicule and to some extent their belief that they needed to comply with or be responsible to institutional reputation or practices. For the students there was a sometimes stated, sometimes tacit clash between the notions of private and academic space. Some of the social media platforms used (notably Twitter and Facebook) did not align with students' perceptions of what academic study entails, whereas Moodle was seen as more appropriate for that purpose.

Critical to the seed fund projects' role within Greenwich Connect was the notion of staff being encouraged to create networks through sharing good practice. We found that this process was hindered in some instances by a reluctance to share the outcome and methodology of innovative practice. There were a number of reasons suggested for this ranging from embarrassment at the results through to a studied and passionate defence of intellectual property. The latter was especially true in cases where the outcome was considered to have the potential to become a cross-institutional innovation or result in publishable findings.

What became clear from a majority of the projects was that the notion of students owning their own learning disrupts and transforms the traditional distribution of power in teaching and learning. There was a resistance to sharing content and the broader challenging of the concept of openness by both staff and students that could be at least partially linked to a disconnect between doing and learning. This distinction between activity (doing something) and action (effecting change through doing something) is an interesting one in that, in the context of the projects, there was significant engagement with technology simply because it was there, as opposed to the identification of a clear pedagogical purpose, either beforehand or else arising from the experience of using the technology.

The seed fund project was designed in part to overcome these potential resistances and support the enhancement of teaching and learning through providing a safe space to experiment and play with equipment and the connected pedagogical practice. However, the perspectives presented at the start of our consultation around not putting your head 'above the parapet' in terms of experimentation and only engaging in something you knew would be a success in terms of student achievement, retention and employability (all key university strategic objectives) significantly impacted on the enthusiasm of staff to allow students to share user generated content and then on the students developing a coherent and learning-informed rationale for engaging in the sharing of content.

Conclusion

This analysis represents a tiny slice of the experiences, evaluations and outcomes of the seed fund projects. The study is limited in that it is based entirely in one institution and

represents only a small proportion of staff (around fifty-two staff participated in twelve seed fund projects). What we have attempted to do with this preliminary research is to explore the notions of resistance to an institutional strategy seen through the lens of openness, social media and experimentation. Whilst we recognise the limitations of the study, it is clear from the literature and our practice that resistance to technology enhanced learning is an ever present and complex point of tension. The interplay between providing a safe space to experiment, have fun and play and the continued impact of resistance was critical to this study. It is important to note that a number of seed fund projects identified examples where the idea of integrating technology into a new learning and teaching approach was not fun at all, but plainly frightening. Equally, there were some examples of where staff were not resistant to the technology or the sharing of content, but to the notions of play and experimentation itself, arising from staff performance management, time poverty and aversion to risk. It is arguable that these fears contributed to the relatively low uptake of the seed fund itself (less than 5% of permanent academic staff applied for a project) as well as the equally conservative approach to some of the project scoping and ambitions.

However, as discussed above, our primary observations were around the levels and types of resistance to the open sharing and experimental behaviours of engaging with and on social media platforms. It became clear that whilst there was a significant gap between where the institution was and wanted (and needed) to be in terms of learning innovation, simply providing the technology and support capacity to integrate it into curriculum was not enough to guarantee 'success in learning processes' and that gaps in digital literacy, risk taking and other manifestations of passive and active institutional resistance slowed or even reversed the pace and success of change. One of the flaws in the implementation of the seed fund was that there was not an explicit or tacit expectation that the mode of learning and teaching needed to adapt to the new technology and student-led learning, nor was there any strategic or operational way to ensure the kits went to people who wanted to engage in at least evaluating the appropriateness of existing pedagogical practice. The strategies and instruments we used to transform practice, encourage and motivate staff to experiment and seed a step change in terms of openness were flawed in that we focused on the production of content and not on the methods that facilitated, encouraged, rewarded and most importantly developed the capacity for sharing, critiquing and remixing content. We assumed that if the context was made, that it would be shared, however our study has clearly seen behaviours opposite to that.

It would be incorrect to represent the seed fund as the entirety of technological experimentation at the university. There are a number of other projects stemming from Greenwich Connect and there are a multitude of smaller, grassroots engagements with technology at both student and academic level, many innovative and highly effective. But as the institution is exposed to increasing pressures to engage in debates around MOOCs, openness, globalized education, mobile learning and BYOD, and graduates are entering industries demanding networking and connectivity skills, content making and creativity-led adaptivity, as well as high-level digital literacy, the small pockets of innovation need to find a place in the wider institution. We argue that one of the most effective ways to do that is to encourage staff to experiment and play, take risks and make learning and teaching fun. This is only part of a broader strategic process, but critical to the on-going ability of the institution to adapt its core teaching and learning practice to a changing digital world.

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