

Authenticity and student engagement: Experiences of using myeLearning in a Journalism programme

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From September 2011 to August 2012, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, mounted a one year Certificate in Journalism programme for 22 students who were being prepared to enter into the field of journalism. One feature of the programme was that it was delivered in a blended mode, with courses being delivered both face to face and using the University's online learning platform, myeLearning. This paper describes the experiences of the programme coordinator who taught one course, *Fundamentals of Journalism*, and oversaw the delivery of another course, *Introduction to New Media*. The decision was made to make this programme blended for various reasons, chief among them being to create a social space that would support the students' engagement in the course by providing them with authentic learning experiences. It was observed, however, that students used the online element of the course primarily to access required readings and to upload assignments. At the same time, they developed and interacted extensively with a Facebook page dedicated to their class activities for the *Introduction to New Media* course, developed their own blogs, responded to blogs created by their colleagues, and interacted with each other on Twitter. They used these social media to fulfil many of the purposes for which the myeLearning site was established. The paper describes student interactions at the different sites, explores possible reasons for the patterns of interaction, and suggests implications for planning blended programmes.

Key words: authenticity, online learning platform, Facebook, blogs, journalism

Introduction

In September 2011, at the request of representatives of the media industry, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, launched a Certificate in Journalism programme. The programme was intended to prepare journalists for entry into the industry, and to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to practise journalism in a 21st century media environment. It was also intended to provide opportunities for journalists in training to form a community of learners which would equip them to gain deeper understandings of the challenges and available tools for practising their chosen careers in the Caribbean context. The Certificate programme was a full time programme, and was designed to be delivered over a period of one year.

Students ranged widely in age, in journalism experience, and in the experience of academic programmes. When the programme was launched, 24 students were enrolled, ranging in age from 18 – 44 years. Four male students and 18 female students formed the first cohort. They came from all over Trinidad, including Siparia, Sangre Grande, Port of Spain and along the East-West Corridor. One student who had been living and practising journalism in Tobago had also returned to Trinidad to participate in the programme. Two students were practising journalists, and three more had been working at various media houses and had left just before applying to join the programme. The highest level of qualification for three of the students was an undergraduate degree, for 14 it was the Caribbean Examination Council's Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examination (CAPE) and for five the Council's Secondary Education Certificate (CSEC).

It was intended that the programme should eventually cater for journalists from all over the Caribbean. Inquiries had also come from persons living as far away as Botswana. The programme had, however, been largely financed by the local media industry to serve the needs of Trinidad and Tobago media, and in the early stages of implementation a prime concern was on how to meet the needs of practising journalists who wanted to be able to work in the new technological environment, but who might not be able to take a year off to attend the programme which was to be delivered on-campus. The representatives of the media industry had made it clear that while they supported the programme, most were not prepared to give staff a year off their jobs to attend the programme. By the end of the second week, in fact, one of the practising journalists had dropped out, having been pressured by her employers to do so when it was felt that she was unable to keep up with her expected work load. At the end of the first month another student dropped out when a parent fell ill.

The way the programme was financed meant that although teaching started in September, money for the necessary equipment was not made available until the end of the first semester, and although the students were eventually provided with a classroom which was equipped with the technology to allow them to do online work, students enrolled in the new programme did not have a physical space of their own until late October and had to make do with temporary rooming. Until the assigned space was provided, students had no fixed place where they could establish bonds with each other and with The University of the West Indies (UWI) community. They entered classrooms when class started and had to leave promptly at the end, when other classes were scheduled. The great majority of their lecturers were practising journalists and worked part time on the programme. At the end of their classes, lecturers returned to their work places and students dispersed to their homes or to the UWI library to do assignments. Under such conditions, it would have been difficult in a purely physical environment, to establish a perception in the students of themselves as a social unit, or as forming an effective learning community. It would also have been difficult to provide them with the sorts of real world experiences that would enable them to do competent work in media environments in the digital world.

In this context, the decision was made to put a number of courses online through the UWT's myeLearning online platform. Applicants had been told, when the programme was advertised, that they should have access to computers with internet connections. Thus, they would all have the ability to access courses online. It was felt that myeLearning could provide a virtual space where students would be able to interact after classes were over. This online platform would also allow working journalists access to programme resources, even if their professional commitments did not allow them to stay on and use the library after class. Moreover, by requiring students to interact online and post assignments (including news stories as well as more academic assignments), it was expected that they would be acclimatised to a situation where they worked extensively online. The myeLearning resources available to lecturers included a programme blog, 'bytesdog,' which was linked to the site; and provisions for discussion forums; ejournals; blogs; and readings, videos and slide presentations, as well as provision to upload assignments for individual courses.

From the beginning, however, all the part time lecturers but one made it clear that they were not prepared to interact on myeLearning after putting in their scheduled teaching and script marking time. Some said that online interactions were time consuming, and one lecturer, a retired professor in journalism who had emigrated to another country, indicated that her previous experiences of online teaching and learning had led her to believe that students were more inclined to cheat and have less interaction with course materials if they were asked to interact online than if they only interacted face to face.

Thus, only two courses, the *Fundamentals of Journalism* course which was taught by the programme coordinator, a full time lecturer at the University, and the *Media Law and Ethics* course, actually used the myeLearning facility. The *Media Law and Ethics* lecturer used the facility primarily to provide reading material and other learning resources, and to allow students to upload their assignments. Towards the end of the academic year, the lecturer for the course *Introduction to New Media Technologies*, while he was not prepared to use myeLearning, asked students to develop a Facebook page where they could interact to discuss topics initiated in class, and personal blogs, where they were expected to cover an identified beat, posting stories and discussions of relevant issues.

The programme also provided an opportunity for students to have a six week internship in a media house, which would ensure that students had a brief authentic work experience, but given that many of the courses were based in the University classroom, the teaching intention behind all these planned online activities was to provide students with as authentic an experience of the field, and of themselves as a social unit, as possible during their programme, and also to foster as great a level of engagement in the learning experiences provided as possible.

Authenticity and engagement

The literature suggests that authentic learning experiences help to support student engagement in learning and generally reports that authenticity will help to promote student engagement. Bialystok (2013) notes that authenticity is invoked in general discussions of pedagogy and learning, sometimes referred to as ‘authentic learning’, ‘authentic intellectual achievement’, or ‘authentic pedagogy’. These applications take seriously the meaning of authenticity as a type of truthful correspondence, where the things that are supposed to converge in this case are the classroom/learning environment/student experience and some version of the ‘real world’. The ‘real world’ may refer to students’ own experiences or to events from which the students are removed. Authentic learning can also be predicated on an overlap between how a subject is studied in the classroom and how it is approached by ‘real world’ practitioners: science students may work on problems that affect contemporary scientists, business students may deal with cases drawn from the actual business world and so on. In reflecting on the characteristics of activities described by researchers, ten broad design characteristics of authentic activities have been identified by Reeves, Herrington and Oliver (2002). These characteristics include:

- Real world relevance
- Tasks that are ill-defined, requiring students to define the tasks and sub-tasks needed to complete the activity
- Authentic activities comprising complex tasks to be investigated by students over a sustained period of time
- Authentic activities providing the opportunity for students to examine the task from different perspectives, using a variety of resources
- Activities providing opportunities for authentic collaboration
- Authentic activities providing the opportunity to reflect, both individually and socially
- Authentic activities that can be integrated and applied across different subject areas and lead beyond domain specific outcomes
- Authentic activities that are seamlessly integrated with assessment
- Authentic activities that create polished products valuable in their own right rather than as preparation for something else
- Authentic activities that allow competing solutions and diversity of outcome

Lombardi (2007, p.2) notes that, “The [authentic] learning event essentially encourages students to compare their personal interests with those of a working disciplinary community” and suggests that with access to online research communities, learners are able to gain a deeper sense of a discipline as a special ‘culture’ shaped by specific ways of seeing and interpreting the world. They begin to grasp the subtle, interpersonal, and unwritten knowledge that members in a community of practice use (often unconsciously) on a daily basis. Learning

becomes as much social as cognitive, as much concrete as abstract, and becomes intertwined with judgment and exploration, just as it is in an actual workplace. Barab, Squire and Dueber (2000, p. 38) have argued that authenticity occurs “not in the learner, the task, or the environment, but in the dynamic interactions among these various components ... authenticity is manifest in the flow itself, and is not an objective feature of any one component in isolation”.

According to Skinner and Pitzer (2012) engagement is a necessary condition for students to learn and that “engagement refers to energized, directed, and sustained action, or the observable qualities of students’ actual interactions with academic tasks” (p.24). For Skinner and Pitzer, student engagement entails constructive, enthusiastic, willing, emotionally positive, and cognitively focused participation with learning activities. Further to this, Jones (2009) suggests that three dimensions of engagement can be used to measure progress in increasing student engagement: intensity, breadth and consistency. Intensity refers to the level of engagement of each student; breadth refers to how broadly the class as a whole is engaged, and consistency refers to how long students are engaged at peak levels.

The question remains, however, whether what is deemed to be ‘authentic’ from a curriculum planner’s perspective will be experienced as being so by the students for whom the curriculum is planned. From this consideration, another question arises – if students do not perceive planned learning experiences as being authentic, will they demonstrate the level of engagement which such experiences are planned to stimulate? The myeLearning component in the first semester of the programme sought to create an authentic social unit out of a diverse group of individuals who at the outset had no real stable space of their own. It was hoped that they would begin to see themselves as a cohesive community of learning, based on their position as novices in an area of professional practice. The Facebook activities planned by the *Introduction to New Media* lecturer had this as their primary aim – to give the students a forum for discussing and reflecting on a series of authentic tasks that they needed to perform as journalists.

Experiences in two courses

The *Fundamentals of Journalism* course was offered in the first semester, when students did not yet have a dedicated space, or much of the equipment necessary to carry out the activities in which journalists engage. They were only just coming to know one another. Moreover, the structure of the programme meant that the great majority of their work was still fairly theoretical – students were learning about principles of journalistic practice, media law and ethics and how journalism interacted with society in the Caribbean. Only one course conducted during the first semester had even allowed students to do actual reporting. Therefore, it cannot be said that *Fundamentals of Journalism* provided an authentic work experience.

However, the investment of time and effort in putting the course on myeLearning was an attempt to encourage students to experience the programme as participation in a learning community focused on real issues that affected the

practice of journalism. It was hoped that this would lead students to invest in the activities and efforts that would bring them to more in-depth learning about the practice of journalism, and cause them to have more confidence in their ability to perform competently in their chosen field of practice.

While the course was running, other efforts were made to create such a community as well. The programme blog, BytesDog, which was linked to Twitter, was followed by a number of the students, who started to interact on Twitter, and who continued to follow @bytesdog, even after the semester ended. As a result of the Twitter interactions, the lecturer herself started 'following' a number of journalists who work in Trinidad and Tobago, and also internationally, including one CNN reporter and a South African journalist. Consequently, the students were given the opportunities to interact with experienced journalists practising in Trinidad and Tobago, and, through Skype, with the journalist from South Africa. Some also forged limited mentor/mentee relationships, as they asked these journalists for advice about the technical challenges they experienced in developing and maintaining their blogs and Twitter feeds, and also joined in discussions about media issues that were of interest to the media community at that time. For example, at one point a local television personality was carrying out a number of activities on his show which a large number of professional journalists felt were unethical and demonstrated bad journalistic practice. The students who were on Twitter joined in eagerly with these discussions, tweeting their own opinions, and responding to the tweets of journalists who were concerned about the host's behaviour, and of members of the public who either condemned or supported him.

myeLearning activities

Online interactions started with an introductory activity, *Introducing Me*, where the students were asked to talk about themselves; why they were interested in the programme, and what they hoped to gain from it. They were also asked to respond to their classmates' postings. In their first face to face session, in the time allotted for 'social talk' (as opposed to discussion of course requirements) the informal opening interactions moved smoothly, with students telling each other about their interest in journalism, and sharing their opinions about the state of journalism in Trinidad and Tobago at that time. However, when they were asked to respond further online, the conversation trickled off and, from the original class of 22, only 15 responded. Further, almost none of the respondees bothered to respond to anyone else. Thus no real breadth of engagement (as described by Jones, 2009) in the form of verbal participation, took place at all. The following excerpts from students' posts illustrate some of the responses to the introductory activity:

A key question in all of our introductions, mine being no exception is, why have we chosen to subject ourselves to an entire year of studying Journalism? Without hesitation I'd say "because it's worth it", but my immediate afterthought is "I certainly hope it is worth it". Beyond my desire to be a better contributor

and editor ... and more than strengthening my writing and oral presentation skills; my choice to pursue this one year Journalism Programme is driven by three key factors: a sincere desire for social justice (in my community and country); collective consciousness raising and the development of my own profound ideas! [N]

I usually made an attempt to respond briefly to all posts, but I was the only one to respond to N, who answered all my questions about how she saw the course helping her to do this, and included in each new response some extra information, leading to this final entry on 11th October. Another entry by DVoice illustrates the students' initial attempts to introduce themselves:

i was offered a job at.....as a Copywriter, this to was relatively new to me seeing that i had no knowledge of it.. mind you they wanted me to formulate the entire department because it never existed there, but it was cool i worked on my time...lol... But my time ended there when i thought the course at U.W.I was going to start in January so i told them i would not be able to serve anymore .Apart from having a passion everyone that i come in contact or who knows me would be like "yu kno yu hav a nice voice for radio" or like "you'd do great in d media" so all this contributed or is contributing to me wanting to pursue my education in this field. What i hope to get in doing this course at u.w.i is to strengthen my writing skills i HATE writing its something i definitely have to work on as well as sharpen the lil edges that needs to be sharpened so i can be the best at what i do as well as respected. So here i am. [DVoice]

Again, no-one but myself responded to that post. A brief posting by M, however, elicited seven responses from her peers as the following excerpt shows:

I live in the east Trinidad. I was thrust into a media setting with a religious group who aspire to put on a 24 hour television programme. Since I know very little about the art of gathering information, relating or presenting I wanted to gain exposure, so here I am. Not forgetting that I like it . [M]

I gather that 'being thrust into a media setting', you had to learn by trial and error. Having little knowledge in media, what aspect are you most interested in? Do you have other aspirations outside of this religious group? If yes, in what form of media and why. [P]

Well of course, first we are about spreading good news. This means exposing things that happen in any part of the country that can impact people positively. Unfortunately ,it will be a catholic channel ,thereby limited to people of this persuasion or those who look at such. Nevertheless I want to focus on journalism on a bigger/wider forum. It could be behind a camera, travelling

to get information or any related field. Then I may prefer a particular position. I am a person who love challenges and anything I undertake I entwine myself in it. [M]

M, why does your group want to create a separate channel when there is already Trinity Communications Network (TCN), channel 10 on Flow? In a recent interview I had with former Archbishop Edward Gilbert he said they were always looking for new and creative ways of reaching out via that network. I think it is great idea, but I honestly think your energies would be better spent creating a programme that can be aired on TCN. And perhaps this course might be able to facilitate how you and your group can get into. Who knows, you all might be the Catholic version to Crime Watch with proper training, that's not to say you are going to report on crime eh, I just mean that you will report on community activities that affect Catholics like Ian does with his crime reporting - or whatever he calls it. [A]

The responses to M were by far the most numerous of the 14 original posts. In most cases, I had to lead the responses to individual students, and only one or two students joined in the discussion. It should be noted however that in an informal discussion with the class representative, N, on another issue, she informed me that the class felt that M (who rarely took part in class discussions) was struggling, and 'needed encouragement.' On the whole, however, more students were willing to participate in this more personal discussion than in the other discussion forums. The students who responded to M seemed engaged with the issue of her religious group's proposed channel, and with the implications for the group and for the practice of journalism generally. People obviously felt confident enough to voice their opinions on the need for religious reporting, and for new media for such reporting. M's own responses also became more expansive as she received feedback from the other students, as she explained what was entailed, and located her own hopes for the course within her perceptions of how her career within her group might progress.

N's responses online were generally thoughtful, she was always confident in expressing her ideas on issues, and she constantly made connections between discussions in class and her 'real world' experiences. Throughout most of the programme, she remained fully engaged. However, it should be noted that she behaved in the same manner in face to face interactions in class. Interestingly, while she always elicited enthusiastic responses from the class to her ideas during the face to face sessions, students rarely responded in the same way to her posts. DVoice demonstrated another type of student response: he answered the question about himself fully and promptly, never responded to the second forum discussion, and responded to the third only when the class was reminded, toward the end of the semester, that their forum responses were being graded. For the other two forum topics, 14 students responded to the second, and only three to the third.

The second forum topic was posted after a class on the topic during which students had been required to read an article on 'Journalism in the Digital Millennium,' and after an enthusiastic class discussion in response to the article, in which the practising journalists had described their own experiences in the field, and the non-journalists had shared their own ideas about why they no longer bothered to read local newspapers, or to listen to the nightly news on television. The online discussion was supposed to allow them to think further on the topic - which in the classroom had remained, in spite of my probing, at the level of descriptions of personal experiences. The responses that followed included the following:

One major reason why journalism is changing, what it is changing into and why is because of the people that read the news, or watch or hear it. The advent of new media calls for media houses, and by extension journalists, to get stories done quicker and even flashier, stressing journalists to always be on the cutting edge when it comes to finding and producing stories. New media incidentally had taught its users that less is more, though. This means that journalists need to find ways to make deep and important stories short and impacting without being sensationalist, or forces them to ask themselves how important anti-sensationalist virtues really are. All this and much more has made for a journalist that is constantly on the move for significant stories, ready to produce those stories on site, is forcibly competent in all aspects of a story's completion, and some that are willing to bend some of the rules to be on the cutting edge of this now much more fast-paced job. In short, journalism is becoming faster, less specialized and runs the risk of becoming less virtuous if this evolution of the industry is not mapped and paced. [B]

the new century journalist (1) has more avenues to relate to the public. More stations, bb's etc. I also think they feel that citizens are in an era where the public has a right to information especially if they see it as factual(2)it is a thought that no one is above law,as in the readings not even a sitting prime minister. [M]

If the pen is mightier than the sword, what does that make a microphone, camcorder and laptop... in a wifi hotspot? Video really took off in 2006 – suddenly crumpled hacks had to worry about their appearance and diction. Now print journalists are learning about white balance, and broadcast journalists are learning about local news. The reader is only a click away from something else. This has created major opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, journalists can now link to full documents, previous reports, and raw material. On the other, so can the readers. Material culled from second-hand copy is more easily spotted; holes in your story can be quickly highlighted and discussed. [D Voice]

Generally, there were no responses to initial posts for this topic. The post that follows, by one of the practising journalists, elicited the most prolonged responses:

There is no doubt about it; digital technology and modern marketing are changing journalism. In fact, journalism has been going through several major technological changes during the past few decades. The pace of these changes is quickening now with the widespread use of social networks and blogs and these are altering the practice of the profession as never before. They are affecting the news gathering process to the dissemination process, and while there are many benefits, at the same time, the profession faces some negative impacts too. Take for example the news gathering process, today; most newspapers receive press releases and statements over fax. [A]

I am a proponent of decentralised news dissemination, such that news isn't only news (or only reliable) when it comes from a corporate source, but non-corporate and legitimate sources and citizens producing their own news. This is not only refreshing but empowering. The audience taking control of producing its own media has proven in recent time to be more accurate than the so-called reliable and trust-worthy corporate media who pride themselves on being fair, accurate, independent yadda yadda yadda...An examination of the coverage of the Occupy Wall Street Movement speaks volumes. From its inception there appeared to me to be limited coverage of the movement's activities on main street corporate American media. The only places where constant and up-to-date images and news were available was so called alternative media outlets, directly from the Occupy Wall Street site or on Al Jazeera.. Go figure! [N]

Am...as you mentioned news room getting getting their information via press releases and fax reminds me of my work experience and to some extent now, after learning what exactly journalism is about, I have concluded that I did not fully function as a journalist but just a messenger of news and I think there may be many other 'practitioners of journalism' like what I was doing at the radio station who really are not journalist though they consider themselves to be one.

Again, the rising of new technology and mainly the internet, allowed me to create a several full newscasts, comprised of our 5 local stories, a regional story, an international story, two sports and a weather forecast without ever leaving my newsroom. Several decades ago, this would have been impossible as the only way to get information was to go out and cover events and actually give a report. This 'sitting in a newsroom' journalism, which is being practiced by several media houses in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean shows how the process of gathering information has drastically changed. I do not want to entirely say that it is not valid 'journalism

exercising' because then I would have eliminated my 9 months experience of work, however I think it is compromising the practice of journalism because it does not challenge journalist with their reporting skills. [K]

By and large, the students' posts reflected neither a sense that the issue was an authentic one, nor much substantive engagement with the topic. They did not treat it as authentic when they discussed it online, in that in their initial responses to the topic, most made no further attempt to identify perceived connections between the more generalised conclusions they arrived at in their discussions and the personal or professional real world experiences they had described in class. There seemed to be little engagement with the topic, in that they simply repeated their interpretations of what they had encountered in the class readings, and provided little or no personal input. Thus, they also seemed to have too little confidence in their own opinions to communicate them in the forum. B seemed to have the greatest investment in the topic, as he not only looked at the technological changes, but hinted that he had drawn conclusions about ethical implications, when he referred to more or less 'virtuous' practices that resulted. The only attempt at 'substantive conversation' came in response to A's initial post, where both K and N responded to the issues raised, and made links with their own personal readings and experiences, while N also questioned some of A's assertions, such as that news is more reliable when it comes from a centralised source.

Facebook interactions

Students were required to develop a Facebook page for the course, *Introduction to New Media*. They were also required to maintain a blog. Many of their interactions revolved around assigned tasks, as they sought and provided help from and for each other to enable them to master the more technical requirements for their class assignments. The Facebook interactions seemed to reveal a greater understanding by most students that the tasks posed were authentic, and also a greater level of engagement in the process. In the first place, all students participated on the Facebook page – after having to be pointedly nudged by the lecturer to do so in the first week. I noted something that had not happened in the *Fundamentals of Journalism* discussions on myeLearning: the ease with which roles were adopted and discarded. Thus, for example, when D wanted help with her blog, she posted a plea to the class, and B assumed the position of expert, provided advice and suggested solutions. In short, substantive conversations could be said to have taken place on the Facebook page.

Help needed. When you try to read my blog you are taken to the login page. How to fix this? [D]

I just accessed the blog from a mobile device. I was able to view the main page as well. It might be that you fixed the problem and didn't know, or you have

a web application that might be trying to communicate with WordPress that requires a login. Just try it again, and see if it comes back up, and whether it is a WordPress login or something else. [B]

D later responded thanking B and informing the class that she had solved the problem. It was clear that students saw the issues they raised as constituting authentic challenges, and demonstrated engagement with those issues when they sought to present helpful suggestions based on their own knowledge and experiences.

Does anyone know how to change the Uncategorized thingy? [Am.]

There was no posted response to A's request – she had posted her query on the day before the assignment was due, and students were expected to complete the blog by the next afternoon. At lunchtime on the next day, however, I went into the classroom to speak to another student and saw B and K hurriedly helping Am to 'change the thingy' before the lecturer came to class.

The Facebook page has continued to be used one year after these students graduated from the programme, and it is interesting to note that it is now used for students to initiate discussion of their professional concerns about media issues that were then, and are now, occupying the industry's attention, as well as to post notices about available jobs, record career highlights and provide support to their former classmates. Of course, the way myeLearning is set up, such continued interaction is not possible, even if students were so inclined. The interaction on the page suggests that some of these students do see themselves as having formed a cohesive social unit. The following provide examples of interactions that came even after students had completed the programme:

Is it just me, or is anyone else disturbed by the increasing threats for journalists to be muzzled and the use of the media for 'local programming' to be created to highlight the government's performance? [K]

D...thought of you when I came across this piece...may you become as famous a fashion journalist...but with a little more swagggg! [N]

Hey folks! Anyone saw the Guardian today? All the shots on page 12 were mine. No credits though. I suppose next time. I may have to recommend them to Mark's next class. LOL. [N]

Hey you guys! M election will be on August 24th. I'm running for [P]

Good luck, P. I hope you get it, girl! [N]

Well, you'd better come out and vote, then! [P]

Discussion

Academic courses and programmes that aim to foster authenticity and student engagement in any field must include discussions about issues that are important to the field. Students must work in communities and use social tools in order to prepare them for the sorts of public debates about issues that they will need to conduct as professionals. myeLearning clearly provides an avenue for such discussions, with the resources it affords course planners for conducting discussions, working in groups etc. However, asking students to discuss topics that they are not invested in understanding may not foster authentic engagement. Moreover, most students already use a number of established social media and technologies to interact in meaningful ways with friends and colleagues in just the sorts of ways that a formal online learning platform hopes to replicate. However, myeLearning may not be an adequate tool in itself if the intention is to build learning communities and promote a sense of authenticity and student engagement. It may well be that a range of different avenues for student interaction must be provided, each serving a different purpose. In the *Fundamentals of Journalism* course, for example, students responded well, prepared more, and engaged in more substantive conversations with professionals in their field when they held Skype discussions with professionals in different countries than they did in the myeLearning discussion forums. Many students also engaged extensively in discussions of current media issues on Twitter. While this medium does not permit extensive in-depth analysis, students enrolled in the course demonstrated willingness to address issues that would affect them as practising journalists. Twitter also allows students more choice as to the content and focus of their interactions, and consequently, an experience of community which may be seen as more authentic.

One of the issues with online learning platforms such as myeLearning is that students' behaviour is more passive (Esteves, 2012), with the teacher having the main control over which resources to share with the class, what activities would be done and what discussion topics should have a forum. As a result, students may not feel empowered to raise important issues, or to contribute to discussions drawing on materials and narratives from their real-world experiences. Esteves (2012) suggests that Facebook is one example of a possible complement to an online learning platform because Facebook "affords the students to choose the contents that they need and want to see in the Group's page. They can contribute significantly towards the building of contents for the site and decide in what form their information will be by tapping into the rich media resources that are readily sharable in FB" (p. 10). My own experiences suggest that this may indeed be one major dimension of the challenge of using myeLearning to create experiences which students will perceive as authentic, and which will help to promote the creation of learning communities that can support their engagement in their own learning.

It should also be noted, however, that in a context where most lecturers clearly did not value the myeLearning facility – and this included the *Introduction to New Media Technologies* lecturer – a non-verbal message may have been

communicated to students about the low level of esteem in which myeLearning was held by most of the lecturers on their programme. Under such conditions, it is not surprising that the students themselves set such a low value on myeLearning, and turned to channels of communication which were already established. Thus, conditions were not ideal for them to see the myeLearning experience as in any way authentic, or to become optimally engaged in learning activities presented on the system.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, myeLearning is potentially a useful tool to support student engagement in learning activities; however, its present format militates against its being perceived as authentic by students. Perhaps a later version of the system may present a more engaging format. Moreover, given current established communication practices among students, if authentic social interactions are desired to support learning, other social media may be more useful, and have a greater chance of success. In addition, if myeLearning is to experience optimal success, it will be necessary to ensure that it forms an established practice among a critical mass of faculty on any programme - possibly by formulating policy, and planning other dimensions of a strategy to promote effective implementation.

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