Why should I use this?
Adopting a social network site in tertiary education

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This paper reports an ethnographic study in which I investigated how students made sense of, and in their turn shaped, a social network site in intensive courses in film and media production. Broadly based on a sensemaking approach, the study aimed to reveal how students' expectations, strategies, 'knowledge gaps' and other perceptions of the situation and digital affordances shaped the use of a social networking space. Results showed that students brought expectations that were sometimes met and sometimes not. The paper suggests that while preserving students' freedom of choice, the institution should aim to clarify how online tools fit into the larger environment of learning and offer strategies in their use. Learning design should an ongoing process of students' and online designers' collaborative sensemaking.

Keywords: social network site, sensemaking, affordances, film, media.

Background

When confronted by a new online environment for learning, students are asked to make sense of it and fit it into their existing online life and study routines. How we expect or hope students will act in that environment does not always line up with what they do in reality (Goodyear & Retalis, 2010)—especially if the environment is informal. As Halverson (2011) suggests, there is a trade-off between freedom of choice in a site and promoting its use for achieving specific learning goals; this may be addressed by 'attending to which features users already see as interesting and important' (p.65) and co-opting them to serve learning goals. It will take less persuasion to encourage students along a path they are predisposed to follow. Understanding how students make sense of their learning situations and affordances could inform the design of better learning spaces and support.

In this ethnographic study, I researched a social network site that I as an online learning designer set up for all award course students at an Australian media school (Spence, 2011). The site used Ning software and services that provide user profiles, media sharing, events, blogs, forums and groups. Several teachers used the site for informal information sharing, but overall the site was not formally integrated into curriculum and students were free to use it or not. The reliance on often numerous crew members requires media production students to network for projects; and it was hoped that students would use the site, with a membership of over 400, to share information and communicate within and between disciplines and courses. My study aimed to investigate students' actions, experiences and perspectives with an aim to inform further development of the learning environment.

Conceptual Framework

This research employed the concepts of sensemaking and affordances. These concepts share a common foundation in the interdependence of the human (perceptions, experience, actions, goals, etc.) and the environment (tools, design, structure, etc.). While sensemaking is more associated with deliberately working out action, the notion of affordances assumes a more natural or spontaneous recognition of possibilities.

'Sensemaking' comes into play when organisations and individuals have to work out ways of operating and communicating in unclear or novel situations; such as the adaptation of new collaborative software to local circumstances (Weick, 1995; Bansler & Havn, 2005). Sensemaking is characterised by 'extracting' cues from the familiar in a novel situation, focused on doing only what is needed to get the job done and is realised through action (Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is highly contextual and ongoing and changes with time and circumstances (Dervin, Foreman-Wernet & Lauterbach, 2003). For example, a student who avoids Facebook in their private life may happily post on an online class wall, recognising its unique affordances, and vice versa.

Technology does not provide an affordance independently of the person perceiving it: 'An affordance points both ways, to the environment and to the observer.' (Gibson, 1986, p. 129). An affordance arises out of the needs of the person, their experiences and history acting within the environment to recognise a useful function or benefit. Observing sensemaking in action offers a way to understand student experiences and practices for design of better, more 'visible', learning affordances.

In my research I observed and investigated how students made sense of the new site, the cues they took from the environment and how they applied their own experiences and goals to their actions.

Methodology

My study broadly followed an ethnographic approach and combined a range of ethnographic data collection techniques: observation, interviewing and analysis of digital artefacts and student online interactions. My notes consisted of observations of unfolding activities, the level, type and tenor of participation across the site. These notes then formed the basis for selecting some individual students and one group's online interaction records for detailed analysis. The selected group was particularly active. Their communication was analysed broadly using the categories of 'social', 'procedural', 'expository' and 'cognitive' interaction (Oliver, Omari, Herrington, 1998). The ten students selected for interviews included two members of the target group and eight students who engaged at different levels in the site from a number of disciplines. Interview questions were based on the sense-making methodology (Dervin, Foreman-Wernet & Lauterbach, 2003). I started interviews with questions about current concepts of and actions on the site, such as 'How would you describe the site to someone who is new to it?' I then moved to questions that were retrospective and attuned to Dervin's area of helps and hindrances, gaps in understanding and sensemaking processes. For example, 'When you started, what did you think the site would be useful for?' and 'What was an obstacle to you doing what you wanted to?'

Results

Results showed that while the site was student-led, it was used for course-related information and activities rather than for social interaction. The lack of 'off-topic' content pleasantly surprised some students: 'people would just add information rather than people commenting about friends' (Student 8). Many students were only marginally active, but others found a variety of ways of using the site to serve individual and group needs. Summarised below are some insights into how students made sense of the site and its affordances in their learning.

The selected study group of students shared quick snippets of information, support and affirmations on their common wall; 'we didn't want to use [the site] as a learning tool outside of very short, sharp bits and pieces' (Student 10). The way the group wall was used echoed a wall on Facebook, in the brevity and sociability of the messages and visibility of the conversation. The group mainly helped its part-time students connect to each other: it 'allowed me to relax a lot quicker and ... disclose my passions' (Student 2). Students often compared Ning—'I thought it might have been more active' (Student 5)—to the familiar busy Facebook, but also noted

positive differences, such as: focus on subject, 'Facebook is for friends but [the site] is more professional' (Student 5); the implied permission to contact teachers informally; access to trusted members with common interests; and a private publishing space—'a safer place to put [video]' that YouTube or Facebook (Student 4).

The study group chose to use Ning over a space set up in the learning management system (LMS). Students noted differences between social interaction and activity in the LMS (Moodle) and the social network site (Ning): the LMS 'just feels more lonely. It's just you in there' (Student 10). Being able to see what others in the site were doing 'made us feel part of the wider [School] community' (Student 11). Within the wider community, however, the smaller group was valued for its trusted, known membership. This was brought into focus in the course of the interviews when the two group members were surprised, if not shocked, to be told that the group was not actually private as they had assumed. Lack of clear instructions for setting up groups and lack of visual clues in Ning led the group to assume you needed to be a member to see group content. The conversations within the group were candid and occasionally personally revealing, so this was a case of a sort of 'false affordance' inspiring communications that would have differed if the actuality was known.

Gaining help on projects was the most strongly chased affordance, through networking with likely collaborators. Profiles and public discussions were generally not seen as particularly relevant in creating connections and collaboration; 'You establish yourself [in the site] and it is more of a forum to lead to interaction, rather than a place for interaction itself' (Student 5). The degree to which this applied, and the mix of activities, differed between individuals. For example, Student 9 networked extensively, participating in online discussions and privately messaging other members before arriving in semester two. On arrival, he met those people in person and worked on an astonishing 32 productions, generated from initial online contacts. He had not used a social network site before.

Students' had differing expectations of how Ning could be used in their learning. For example, many especially full-time students, after joining and setting up a profile did not see the point of 'coming to' Ning, seeing it as yet one more password to remember for little payback. Comments included: 'it doesn't have a mission statement' (Student 6) and 'I didn't see the point of it at first… because they go home and they have to get onto Facebook and onto [the Ning site]' (Student 8, who did end up seeing a point in it).

The site was new and took some time to build up content and activity. By the time a group of part-time students had started in second semester, many of the full-time students were no longer visiting the site. Part-timers, less plugged in to the network on campus, were eager to find collaborators for their projects and were responsible for close to 90% of the 91 project callouts posted in second semester. However, 'the problem is that people didn't use it early in term, and so now when people are trying to conduct crew callouts on it, there isn't an attentive audience' (Student A).

Other students had expectations that were not met, noting unexploited opportunities for professional collaboration and learning. For example, one interviewed student expected that 'there would be a great deal of film discussion, across all areas' (Student 1). Another student suggested that there is potential for peer review and critique of student projects. She noted 'there was a big leap from what we initially presented… to what we presented at the end', and the opportunity, rather than be unaware of what each other was doing, to 'offer each other feedback during the process' (Student 10). One example showed the link between course design and students' use of the learning affordances. After this study was completed, the full-time courses introduced an assessment task that used the Ning site to blog about film-related subjects. The number of posts tripled from the previous year's total within two months, providing some of the hoped-for deeper exploration and film discussion.

Discussion

Questions around students' expectations and obstacles led to interesting descriptions of what social learning space *should* be in an institutionalised learning space. By asking what they expected to be able to do or expected to see happen, students' predispositions and preferences became evident. The questions elicited 'aspirational narratives' (Wenger et al., 2011). While students had some ideas at the beginning of the course of what the site might afford them, it was after using the site that much of the considered ideas were formed: sensemaking is clear only in retrospect.

What the interviews revealed were the 'hidden paths' (hidden at least from me as an administrator of this site) that the students trekked in their daily lives, both within and beyond the target site. Student preferences and predilections such as those in the findings might be incorporated into the design of a learning environment. For example, by considering ways that a course or unit could be located within a visible wider online community or publishing a wall of student contributions on unit home pages. There should be sweet places where students are predisposed to an activity, but need the 'sanction' of instructions or assessment to inspire action. There will also be instances of limited experience and stretched sensemaking skills, where guidance in the affordances for learning is needed before students are prepared to jump into online activities. There is striking tension between the needs of particular learning situations, affordances and institutionalised eLearning infrastructures. An approach that focuses on the specifics of a particular situation and group of students poses the question of how to balance ease of administration with targeted design and agency. The sense-making methodology offers a way of incorporating students as co-designers (Collis & Moonen, 2008) of the learning environment, particularly after they have had some time using the online tools for their purposes. Further research could consider how the sense-making methodology could incorporate student perspectives into an ongoing design plan for learning environments.

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