Student technology ambassador schemes: exploring ‘blended learning’ and third spaces

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This presentation is going to explore some ideas

- What does Potter and McDougall’s definition of blended learning mean?
- How useful is the concept of Third Spaces to understanding staff/student partnership working? In particular to projects that focus on technology?
- How does that lead us back to blended learning?
John Potter and Julian McDougall argue (amongst many other things) that non-hierarchical, non-expert approaches to learning about technology are redefining blended learning.

“best practice in blended learning is more about those relationship shifts than the fusion of on and offline/ physical and virtual engagements” p. 93

We will return to this idea....
THIRD SPACES
Homi Bhabha

A post-colonial critique of culture. Third Space is defined as a hybrid space where colonizer’s control of colonized people’s culture could be subverted.

Key things:
• It’s about cultures
• It’s about transformation of identities
• It’s about power
Third Spaces in Education:

- Are informal learning environments like libraries, museums and online spaces, and places which in some ways resemble aspects of them
- Encourage participants to bring their backgrounds, histories and experiences
- Are non-hierarchical
- Are sites of meaning making and contestation

Third Spaces are (mostly) where people learn digital skills
- “an evolving semantic which takes in metaphorical, virtual and physical spaces which are all interstitially located between larger institutional organisations: home, school, work and so on. These spaces are locations for thinking, working, negotiating, playing and more, in the context of digital media, education and culture” Potter & McDougall p16.
Partnerships as de-stabilising relationships

- Research into Students as Partners (SaP) suggests:
  - Productive shifts in identity and relationships, increasing participants’ understanding of other perspectives and roles. Potential for student-staff partnerships to destabilize repressive power structures and dominant discourses

- Marquis, E. Black, C. and M. Healey 2017 Responding to the challenges of student-staff partnership: the reflections of participants at an international summer institute, Teaching in Higher Education 22:6, 720-735
Liminal zones and thresholds

- Liminal zones are areas of transition and transformation – reinvention and novel experiences, but also troublesome and challenging.

- Identified as sites for **collaborative learning and teaching development**


- The **transformative potential of SaP**, is that it moves from beyond the margins by providing practitioners “a space within which to try out this collaborative way of being ‘as if’ it were a way of life.” p. 187

What qualities are we exploring when considering Third Spaces?

- Spaces where people can recreate themselves
- Spaces which are transient
- Emphasis on transformation of relationships and identities
- Shaped by participants
- Projects that subvert norms
- Spaces that embrace individual life stories
- Playfulness and creativity
- Troublesome and challenging
Research Project
Research project

- To consider the impact of student technology ambassador projects
- A study contrasting the approaches of 6 HEIs that run schemes where students support staff (professional services and/or academic staff) and students in technology use
- In particular, focusing on the changing relationships in teaching and learning spaces that these schemes may engender
- Taking a practice view – what people say they do, what they do and how this relates to what other people do (Kemmis’ 2009 ‘sayings’, ‘doings’ and ‘relatings’ drawn from Schatzki’s *The Site of the Social*)
These kinds of projects are messy

Continuously evolving projects

New funding models, new staff, new systems are routine.

Amorphous and blurred roles – e.g. academic developers, learning developers, student interns, student ambassadors, graduate interns etc.

Space open to continuous reinterpretation which presents opportunities
What evidence is there for shifts in relationships?
‘Professional services’ and other staff

- Strategic driver behind projects is **increased technology use**, achievement mostly measured in those terms
- A big focus on **positive experience of working with students**
  - Contact with students
  - Seeing students succeed
  - **Importance of using student perspective**
  
    - Paul, academic developer “students were able to give us insights into probably how best to manage that communication from the central service to the student”
    
    - Gerri, learning technologist “I need students desperately to validate the information as being relevant to students”
Mentoring

– Several projects align to mentoring or reverse mentoring schemes
– Some individuals call on concepts of mentoring to conceptualise partnership
  – Gerri, learning technologist. “one of the most valuable parts was having the opportunity to work with students in work capacity and being able to offer mentorship to them”
  – Neil, PhD student “a big part of my life and a big part of my calling is mentorship”
Students

– Engaging with other students in new ways
– Making a difference
– Being a teacher
– Being a better teacher than their teachers
– Engaging externally
– Presenting in public at conferences

– Jean student, “I just wanted to be involved in to benefit other people with their learning”
– Finn, student, “100 and ten percent absolutely I think learning from a student and leaning from a teacher are miles different”
– Carl, student, “the professor approached me and asked me if I could collect feedback from the other students. Yeah it was just the fact that I could approach them as friends”
Students teaching staff: crossing a threshold?

– Engaging with academic staff in new ways
– Connecting with senior academics
– Asking academic staff questions, telling staff what to do
– Working with academic staff conceptualised as an extension to being confident enough to ask them questions without feeling self-conscious
– A threshold i.e. problematic but self-evident when crossed

– Finn, student “[students] think do I want to ask this question, will this look bad on me? And it took a lot of time for me to realise that you can’t really look bad at uni if you’re asking a question
– Jean student “it was quite an odd role reversal to be teaching them about technology” “it obviously became quite normal”, “they have always been very approachable people anyway. If you’ve got a question it didn’t feel awkward or anything,”
Academic staff

- Generally a transactional relationship to solve a problem
- Student participants sometimes indistinguishable from other student workers or professional services staff
- They judge success on whether job gets done

- Hannah, academic staff “I would have welcomed anything at the time probably, the number of emails that I was getting about, you know, ‘I can’t upload this’”

- Ella, learning technologist reporting an academic saying “I’ve got an issue about a module is there anything we can do, and I would say oh I know where we can bring a student in”

- Gerri, Learning technologist on students: “it’s been more they’ve been almost like sub contractors, working with student groups where there’s been an identified need”

- Kate academic staff “I think the one you’re asking me about is that we hired two students to assist us”
– They acknowledge the benefit of bringing a student in

– Some moments of connection

– Some disconnection

– Kate, academic staff. “There’s nothing quite like having a student involved in that testing because they bring a student’s set of assumptions to that thing”.

– Hannah, academic staff about a student looking overwhelmed in a session “So, I kind of buddied up with him and just sort of said ‘oh it’s great that you could come along and that we have these difficulties and we’re all in the same boat’ you know, and to try and put him at ease really”.

– Carl, student “it turns out some academics aren’t really that interested”
Role of technology

The key driver for most projects

Projects have a small impact on technology use, with more where student participants are creating a legacy of technology use in a course

Some evidence that students can bring their previous (Third Space) experiences of technology into projects

Familiar mechanisms to encourage digital skills use, even when generated by students.

Draws on another relationship – age
Paul, academic developer “students have a perception I think that they are technologically better than some staff … but actually what we have seen is that when staff and students work really well together the staff bring kind of the critical thinking approach”

Kate, academic “I’ve learnt that students are not quite as good at technology as I thought they were”.

Lou, librarian “I kind of know the students just because they are younger they don’t necessarily want to use technology all the time to do things, but… I think I was thinking they would come up with lots of whizzy ideas and lots of high tech things would be happening”

Finn, student, “Just because experts, using really loose terms here, to have an expert that’s half your age it doesn’t matter, take the knowledge”

Ollie, student. “those students... were already working ... so they were older and I don’t think that that makes a difference for them, if you’re speaking about undergrads perhaps they would be more comfortable with [younger] students”
Transformations?

- Professional services and other staff
  - Student input valued – but focus on *individual’s identities as a ‘student’ or ‘young’*
  - Attraction to *mentoring / reverse mentoring* as a model of partnership

- Students
  - Often have a sense of partnership based on equality with professional services staff
  - Feel that their relationship with academic staff has changed, maybe crossing a threshold
  - Enjoying making a difference and being the teacher – a shift in relationship to other students

- Academic staff
  - Hard to identify any transformation
  - They acknowledge the usefulness of student view
  - Making interventions, never mind transformations, in relationships with academic staff seen as challenging
Equality? Diversity?

- ‘Equality’ is used to signal that this is a partnership rather than staff/student employer/employee relationship.

- Equality is more problematic in the Third Space, particularly combined with focus on ‘student’ and ‘age’ identities, as transformation relies on embracing individuals’ unique life stories that sit outside these straightforward categorisations.

- Ella, learning technologist, “it’s partnership in that we don’t treat them like they’re inferior to us”.

- Jean student “we were seen as equals and it was a partnership so all our ideas were valid”.

- Paul, academic developer “they feel as if that when they are working with staff the staff are actually seeing them as being equal in the partnership”.

Evidence for Third Spaces

– In continual reinvention of projects and the roles of the people involved
– In changes to students’ identities around confidence in working with academic staff. This came through much more strongly than changes to technology use.
– Concept of partnership based around equality and mentorship, but not a concept shared between all participants or even formally recognized in evaluation of projects.
New blends? Could students as partners in technology projects offer opportunities for new forms of blended learning?

- There is some evidence for relationship shifts.
- Approaches to technology, even when devised by students, are non-challenging and familiar.
- The key relationship trope around student involvement in technology projects, and the value of students as partners is age – with the presumption (sometimes challenged) that ‘students’ are better with technology.
- A over-reliance on sole aspect of students’ identity may allow students access to partnerships, but will hinder transformative approaches to learning about technology.