Case Study 7, Brunei: Learners as Educators in the Virtual Absence of Authority

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Chapter 12
Case Study 7, Brunei: Learners as Educators in the Virtual Absence of Authority

Mayyer Ling and Deyuan He

1 Background

1.1 Introduction

Learner-centric approaches and student-centred learning are desirable traits in twenty-first-century education. However, as much as teachers try to emulate the facilitator's role, there is still a tendency for them to take control of the lesson, perhaps so that the desired outcome of the lesson is achieved. This is perhaps the consequence of the overt significance placed on pen-and-paper-based examination results, deeming the *process* of learning secondary, and also often in tertiary, level education. The situation is exacerbated in the Asian setting where Asian students generally have high regard for authorities (Xu & Carless, 2017), so much so that the content of the speech delivered by teachers is often regarded as universal truths. In many cases, when conflicting evidence is presented by students and there are difficulties in resolving them, teachers are included as a move to seek affirmation (Hewings, 2012). This observation cements the perception of learners' difficulties in becoming autonomous in their learning journey (Mısır et al., 2018).

It is wrong to regard all Asians as a monolithic ethnicity as there are over 4.6 billion people that can be categorised as Asian. The geographic span of China accounts for more than 30% of the Asian population compared with Brunei Darussalam contributing to only 0.01% of the population. Therefore, the current study should be interpreted as a bridge towards attaining an inclusive perspective, rather than a contrasting one, on the use of the internet in promoting the growth of engaging and meaningful Asian learner experiences.

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Fortunately, in a technology-driven learning environment, norms of learning are constantly negotiated. Lee (2015) claimed that non-traditional platforms for learning such as blogs can be used to develop authority and authorship. In addition, Wu and Miller (2020) found that peer pressure within the online learning context is beneficial as students feel the need to meet the expectations of their peers. This drives the students to be strategic and thoughtful in their online contributions. After all, new generations of students entering universities today are often described as digital natives (Prensky, 2001). It then follows, e-learning technologies such as online management systems like Canvas can act as a quasi-academic platform to breed the next generation of studentship who are able to assume proactive roles in their own digital learning. Generally, previous studies have reported favourably towards the use of online learning as an additional source of interaction channel between learners and the educators, as well as their peers (Hew & Cheung, 2014; Wu, 2018), also between the learners and the content knowledge, and its importance (Jung, 2001). Therefore, the current research further investigates interactions in the e-learning platform, Canvas, to map the variables that contribute towards quality discussions that promote engagement and meaningful online learning.

1.2 Framework for Analysis

The framework chosen for the analysis in this study is Garrison's Model of self-directed learning (SDL) (1997). This model is comprehensive in order to explain the phenomenon observed in the data collected. There are three dimensions to this model, which are self-management, self-monitoring and motivation. Each of these dimensions constitutes several variables, as demonstrated in the visual adaptation of Garrison's Model of SDL (1997) in Fig. 1:

Engaging and meaningful learner experience is key to the academic success of students as it brings about purposeful knowledge applications and enhancement of learner autonomy in their learning process. Hence, the objective of the current study is to apply Garrison's Model of SDL to Canvas discussions in order to account for variables found in interactions between learners. We then use this model in order to investigate: *To what extent can Garrison's SDL model encourage engaging and meaningful learning on Canvas discussions?*

2 Case Study

2.1 Participants

The participants were 30 final year undergraduates on the Professional Communications and the Media programme at the University of Brunei Darussalam (officially

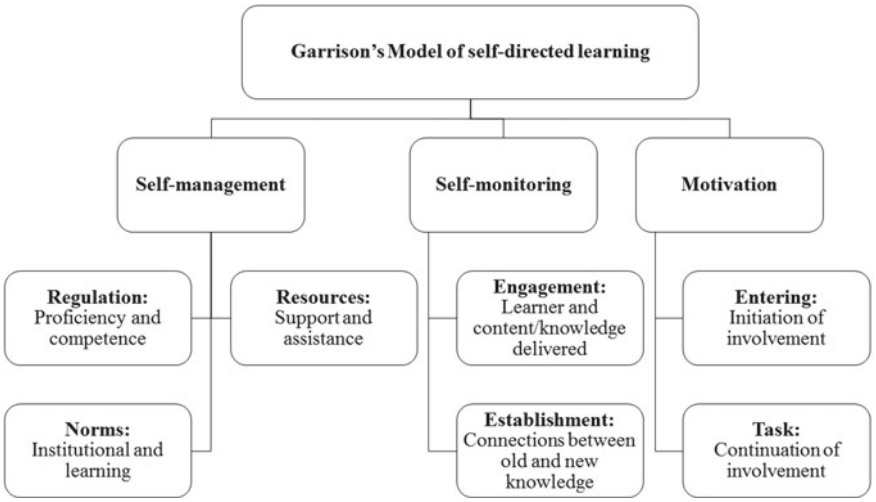

Fig. 1 Adaptation of Garrison's model of self-directed learning (1997)

named as Universiti Brunei Darussalam). As an entry requirement for university-level study, all the participants had to obtain at least a C6 grade (O-level *pass* grade) in their Cambridge GCE English O Level examination, or equivalent (an IELTS score of 6.0 or a TOEFL minimum overall score of 550), to enter the university. Due to this entry requirement, and that the participants are in their final year as undergraduates, they are assumed to have adequate specialised knowledge and skills in their major disciplinary field and a reasonably good level of proficiency in English to take part in most discussions.

2.2 Task Description

In one of the final year courses that the students had the option to take as part of the major requirements (AC-4303: Film Studies), Canvas discussion was a voluntary additional activity that the students can participate in. The instructor of this course posted weekly instructions on Canvas and allowed students to discuss the topic for one week. The weekly instruction to the students was similar: 'To take part, for Week 1 you are expected to post ONE discussion post, and leave at least ONE comment on your peer's discussion post'. Then, students were informed that they were expected to post more on a weekly basis (i.e. at least two comments in Week 2, at least seven comments in Week 7). The rationale for the increase in comments was to push the students to interact more with the other participants over the length of the course. In order to create space for learners to express themselves freely, there were no specific instructions on what exactly the participants should include in their discussion posts.

Students are all familiar with Canvas as it is the e-learning platform that the university subscribes to and all students must use during their university programmes.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

226 posts were received throughout the period of the study: 96 discussions and 130 comments. Extracts of the discussions are included in this case study verbatim, where both language and contents were left unaltered. Each of the comments found on Canvas was allocated numbers (#1 to #130) to ease the process of cross-checking the content during data analysis. Names and identifying features were removed from the dataset, and were replaced with ANON (for anonymous) to ensure the participants' and their referents' anonymity.

Textual analysis was performed on all discussion and comment posts to identify if they matched with the three dimensions and the subsequent variables of Garrison's Model of SDL.

3 Results

In reality, these dimensions are intertwined and it is not always possible to have a divisive perspective, as is presented in this case study. It is important to remember, however, that we should be able to identify all three dimensions in order to demonstrate that the aims of encouraging self-directed learning are accomplished.

3.1 Dimension 1: Self-Management

There were five types of textual indicators that reflect the dimension of self-management in the dataset. First, the acknowledgement of content, or lack of, on the subject matter as a form of the conscious regulation of a learner's proficiency. It was found that learners use Canvas as a platform to explain the relevant concepts to others, and this is often subsequent to a discussion contribution that was seen as incorrect, for instance:

> *ID is related to primal desires that breaks all boundaries for a need and the need to protect that need, somehow I'm not too sure if it's really a primal desire to actually 'run from shame'. Something to give thought about*. (#73)

The learner who supplied #73 was emulating an authoritative, teacher's role and demonstrated the process of regulating his/her knowledge level in order to provide the required assistance in the comment section.

Second, the recognition of competence was also demonstrated in the dataset when the comment provider added value to the current discussion:

> *In addition, I'd like to add that the location of this film was in France (from the newspaper). By hearing France, people automatically thinks it is a romantic country and people would relate France with Paris, which is the city of love.* (#3).

In many instances, this was found when the comment providers agree with what is being included in the discussion post, and that the content does not require correction. Instead of simply stating that the discussion post was good, additional thoughts and ideas are presented that complement the fellow contributor's train of thought. This demonstrates that the comment provider not only understands the subject matter, but also has the ability to add value to the discussion. Interestingly, what often follows posts that demonstrate the regulation of learner's competence are acceptance of corrections and critiques, appreciation of the contents/perspectives added which further supplies the literature of having respect for authority, where learners largely 'show positive reactions even when their work is critiqued' (Magno, 2010, p. 72). In these cases, however, the person (or persons) in authority are among the learners themselves. The subsequent types of textual indicators are reference resources, which include the more knowledgeable other or online/offline resources outside of the current discussions (resources to support and/or assist in learning). In the current research, support resources carry the connotation of being extra material which adds value to the learning process, such support includes reference to YouTube videos that offer further explanation of a concept, research papers that provide empirical evidence and demonstrations of application of theories learnt. These kinds of resources are essentially learner-obtained, and they are very likely to be different between learners. In the dataset, it was found that some learners provided a link or links in the discussion that his/her peer may not have access to had he/she not provide it:

> *Well that is what I've found through my readings and if you want to read more of it please check this link*
>
> https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/what-really-makes-a-film-feminist/281402/. (#12)

Assisted resources, on the other hand, carry the connotation of having been given or provided by another, and thus in the current study the assist resources will refer to materials provided by the more knowledgeable other (i.e. lecture notes from tutors, mentorship advice from senior students). It should be emphasised that such distinction (i.e. support and assist) may not be seamlessly done in reality, but it is worth distinguishing them for research purposes. In the dataset, references to a class previously attended: *I think your idea…is totally different from what we learned in class…*(#69), and to a more knowledgeable other: *I remember ANON telling us that mise en scene only includes these three. You don't really see sound or the lighting equipment, so that is my understanding* (#107) were found. These resources are seemingly available to the learners partaking in the discussions as the pronouns 'we' and 'us' were used, respectively. In such cases, the resources are provided to the learners, and all learners would have the same access to them. This contrasts with the

support resources discussed earlier. Assisted resources are probably used to establish some form of authority prior to assuming the responsibility in correcting peers, with the use of explicit reference to the 'reality' that happened in class. In fact, the action of referring to the class can be interpreted as a move to seek affirmation of 'new' application or direction taken by the discussion post's contributor. This serves as an establishment and differentiation between truths and non-truths. The move of seeking affirmation is consistent with Hewings' (2012) findings that such move is used 'to strengthen a claim by linking it to a wider group such as teachers, thus giving greater authority to anecdotal evidence' (p. 191). Perhaps the participants were not entirely comfortable in correcting their peers, or were unsure of whether or not the new application would be acceptable. Irrespective of the motivation that leads to the employment of assisted resources, the resource is certainly accessible to all learners should they see the need to resort to it.

The fifth and final type of textual indicator found for the self-management dimension was the demonstration of norms in the learning environment. Supposedly the learning process takes place online, such as the case from which the dataset was collected, and the expectations would be included in the instructions provided at the beginning of each task. The expectations for this particular dataset were twofold, increase in the rate of interactions and provision of comments on posts by others week by week. Learners were free to choose the nature of their interactive practices. One of the most common practice is the critique of discussion content:

> *I liked your explanation of queer theory … However, I felt that referring to Alex as a lesbian did not seemed accurate since it is also entirely plausible that she is bisexual or pansexual … or whatever it is that this fictional character may have chosen to identify with, if anything at all*. (#13)

In reference to #13, the comment provider critiqued the lack of accuracy of the discussion post. This practice is often followed by suggesting other possible conclusions. The practices of providing valuable critique and adding values to the discussion (use of support and assist resources) are some of the norms expected in a learning process. These practices are authoritative traits and hence it was consistent with what Bloch (2007) found when examining blogs: that they inculcate authoritative characteristics in learners.

3.2 Dimension 2: Self-Monitoring

This dimension was found to be represented by two types of textual indicators. First, textual indicators that demonstrate the engagement of learners with the content delivered. A common feature is the reiteration of theories or concepts learned: *I surely can understand fully the film you analyse…* (#43), and its subsequent application for others to evaluate. This is seen to be a bold practice as the learners are basically allowing others to criticise them openly, both in interpretation and application. This practice allows learners to monitor their progress of learning, hence exercising their

autonomy in the learning process. The learners may have received assistance in their initiation of knowledge application from their peers, but they chose to take charge of their learning after receiving sufficient knowledge to initiate their knowledge application. The learners are taking that risk, despite the fact that there is still a possibility that their interpretation of their knowledge may be wrong.

The second type of textual indicator establishes connections between knowledge. Learners may start their post by clearly acknowledging a new application of a certain concept or theory after enlightenment presumably found in a discussion post by their peer: *Now that you've mentioned it, I think this could also be related to…* (#111). This is a conscious process of development in the learner. In such a case, the comment post altered thoughts previously established. Normally, in a four-walled classroom there is not enough time for learners to react and thus recalibrate their learning, which demonstrates the interactive significance of online platforms for quality learning (Roulston & Halpin, 2020).

New applications of knowledge can also come in the form of criticism for other's work: *As for your opinion in regards to the editing being sloppy…I believe the editing style suits it as it is…* (#114). Often, such a comment provider does not just argue against the discussion provider, but also supplies evidence to prove his/her point that would hopefully make the latter change his/her mind about his/her conclusion. This certainly is a beneficial practice that can be afforded in online interactions as an additional resource to learning (Picciano, 2019). We could even argue that learners could go through this lengthy process of proving his/her case due to the nature of online learning where there are no restrictions in time, space or even cultural expectations (e.g. politeness).

There were instances where old–new knowledge connections were polished when a learner tries to clarify his/her position in the discussion: *…but what I am trying to say is that…* (#47). The clarification of ideas and position is usually the outcome of two situations, first after a discussion post was seen to have reached a conclusion that may not have been what was intended, or second, when part(s) of the discussion was unclear and the comment providers seek clarifications on quoted extracts. Either way, the learner will use Canvas to respond to these demands by reiterating their ideas for clarity. This variable is exceptionally important especially as it enhances flexibility, and suggests that learners are not adamant about the absolute correctness of current thoughts or delivery. Evidence supplied so far is certainly in agreement with what was found previously by Jung (2001) where interaction between learners is key in building academic competencies, maintaining social relations and, of course, creating a space for self-growth in the learners themselves.

3.3 Dimension 3: Motivation

Textual indicators for this dimension include positive reinforcements and other encouraging practices by or for other learners to initiate (entering) or sustain (task) the participation in a learning process. Entering motivations have a range of variations of indicators. On one hand, it is from a positive comment on the discussion presented by his/her peers: *That's an interesting perspective…* (#40)—for contributions that made sense, or is interesting, that it attracts other learners to contribute as well. On the other hand, it stems from the discussion posts that do not make sense, or need further elaboration to reach the learner's expectations: *…could you elaborate further on what you mean by…* (#60). It appears that the current results correspond with Littlewood and colleague's (1997) findings where comfortable learners lead to quality contributions, as Canvas provides ample space and time for learners to think, plan and construct their contributions prior to providing comments. This leads to an arguably braver approach to learning, which even includes the questioning of peers' contributions.

Perhaps complimenting the discussion post provider would be just as easy to perform online or face-to-face, which explains the abundance of cases for positive reinforcements in the dataset. Learners express appreciation for good quality contributions: *I love how poetic your synopsis is* (#96) and provide elaboration of the agreement: *thanks to your [contribution] I am able to … relate to the film* (#65). It does seem peculiar that thanking peers for their assistance in improving the understanding of the learner to be categorised as a task motivation. However, such function adds to the gratification factor wherein learners feel appreciated for their effort in supplying a high-quality contribution. The learners are essentially adhering to the expectations of the other learners (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2020), or, arguably, their own. To demonstrate, when a learner has taken some time to plan, construct and deliver a well-written response, it is undeniable that the learners would expect some form of appreciation for such effort. In truth, the two functions of positive reinforcement and thanking peers are valuable to improve the self-esteem of the learners as they possibly sustain the involvement of the learners throughout the learning process.

4 Pedagogical Principles

Canvas discussion can be an effective tool to distance learners from 'the educator's way' and allow them to assume responsibilities and independence to become self-directed learners. Teachers can consider the following prior to the implementation of online discussions, such as the use of Canvas, as a pedagogical tool.

(a) *Students' perception of the online platform*: before using the platform, instructors need to briefly introduce the many uses of Canvas to students, with the emphasis that this learning platform is a free space for them to interact with each other. This can be done briefly in the first lecture of a module. This is an

important step as Canvas is most likely seen as an educational management system and not a regular social media platform, thus they may see it only as a pedagogical tool, i.e. formal, restrictive, bound by norms. In reality, those perceptions may be true, but Canvas can also be used by these digital natives to interact with each other in a less formal manner about issues related to their lessons.

(b) *Teacher's preparation of Canvas discussion*: to arrive at a fruitful discussion, teachers need to have a clear content knowledge goal for the specific task, expectations of application for this knowledge, and, perhaps most important, real, meaningful and engaging context to which the content knowledge can be applied to. For example, choose one main content theme to focus on in the weekly discussion, prepare a simple rubric to gauge and guide the quality of the discussion, and include real-life examples as a point of reference. This planning process for Canvas is relatively time-consuming, but is also useful to enable the simultaneous learning of content knowledge and its application. Engaging with peer's discussions on Canvas may simply act as an extra platform for learner interaction and knowledge acquisition or it could even become a form of extra credit for the students.

(c) *Teacher's retrospection of Canvas discussion*: the efficiency of the application of Canvas as a learning platform, as with any other pedagogical tool, will be realised in retrospect. As mentioned above, preparation is key. However, teachers can extend the application of the online discussions by gauging their own performance, the level of engagement of students and how much of the lesson was understood from the online discussions. Such feedback allows teachers to grow as educators, and keep up with the perspectives of new generations of learners. To confirm the results of one's retrospective reflection, instructors may also discuss with students or peer instructors on how to improve future Canvas discussion.

This case study has demonstrated that there is a promising potential for online management systems like Canvas when used as a platform to exercise self-directed learning, in accordance with the three dimensions in Garrison's (1997) Model of SDL. In the final years of their university, students are getting ready to enter the workforce and become part of a community of practice, such online platforms allow the honing of traits for the development of independence, accountability and authority in specialised knowledge applications.

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