

# The Tyranny of Participation and Collaboration in Networked Learning

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## Abstract

As it has evolved, networked learning has come to emphasise the importance of the collaborative learning aspects and possibilities of online learning (c.f. McConnell 2000, Steeples and Jones 2002). The importance assumed for collaboration based forms of participation within NL has almost become ubiquitous and is frequently seen as an unquestionable good aspect – a utopian view of participation which does not acknowledge the ‘dark side’ of participation in learning

In the paper we examine more closely some of the darker sides of collaborative participation which in its extreme manifestations can be experienced as normative and, we suggest, as a form of tyranny of the dominant and which instead of having a liberating effect, reinforces a form of oppression and control. We argue this is most likely to be the case in the absence of reflexivity and understanding of different ways and approaches to participation. We go on to suggest an alternative and potentially more productive perspective which, after Foucault, is a heterotopian one. A perspective that acknowledges and assumes disruption and which disturbs our customary notion of ourselves. Participation in heterotopian spaces is disturbing and ambiguous, but it offers a space in which to imagine, to desire and act differently.

## Keywords

Networked learning, collaborative learning, participation, heterotopia, learning communities.

## Introduction

Ideas underpinning the concept and theory of networked learning (NL) have moved on from the ‘original’ definition to one that assumes a major benefit offered by NL from a learning perspective is the opportunity for collaboration and participation in the learning process. Mynatt et al (1998) observed, for example, ‘the promise of networked computational devices for collaboration and community-building is compelling’. The importance assumed for collaboration within NL has almost become ubiquitous and is frequently seen as unquestionably desirable. This can result in a view of participation that sees it as an utopian ideal and which does not acknowledge what some authors have referred to as the ‘dark side’ of critical pedagogy and participation (Reynolds 1999, Brookfield, 1994). Earlier, Ellsworth (1989) showed that on closer examination, ‘emancipatory’ education approaches that incorporate participation and collaborative dialogue revealed another dimension. One that is not always liberating and beneficial, as a more utopian perspective would assume, but rather an education approach that can as easily be experienced as oppressive. These authors suggest that participative learning can involve unintended domination and control, especially if it is adopted unreflexively by tutors and/or participants.

In the paper we take the analysis of the dark side of participation a step further in exploring how participation without reflexivity has the potential to be tyrannical. In doing this we do not want to suggest that collaboration and participation are either unhelpful or ineffective approaches to learning. Quite the reverse we think participation in learning is pedagogically very effective. However it is not without its potential dangers and/or problems. In this paper we want to examine in more depth how in requiring students to engage in participation we are putting demands on them and ourselves that are complex and which in itself demands a degree of circumspection and reflexivity on the parts of both staff and students.

## The 'dark side' of Participation

Reynolds, referring to Brookfield's notion of the 'dark side' of critical pedagogy, writes on the consequences awaiting those who *do* throw themselves into the process of critical reflection. This process, he writes, can be 'unsettling, mentally or emotionally ... a source of disruption at home or at work', and could cause risk to employment and even to life itself (1999: 178). This, for Reynolds, illustrates Brookfield's notion of the 'dark side' of reflexivity and participation.

In his 1994 study of this phenomenon, Brookfield argues that in learning to question assumptions widely accepted as 'common-sense,' to take alternative positions on social and political structures, and to pay attention to 'hegemonic aspects of .. theory and practice, the students experienced what they reported as a sense of liberation and empowerment' (1994: 204 – 205). However, in the course of his phenomenographic study, it emerged that they also experienced powerful feelings of alienation both within their learning community and outside it. Brookfield identified five themes that exemplify what he terms the 'dark side' of critical reflection: impostorship (feeling unworthy to participate in critical thinking), roadrunning (incremental struggles with new modes of thought), community (support for those engaged in the critical process); and also 'cultural suicide' and a sense of 'lost innocence' resulting from the multiplicity of new ideas that replaces old certainties, and the resulting sense of isolation and exclusion within existing communities whose value systems remain untroubled by critical thought.

Whilst Reynolds and Brookfield illustrate well the potential for individuals to experience the dark side of critical pedagogy they tend not to focus on the micro social dynamics and often unquestioned assumptions embedded within participatory approaches. For this we draw on Cooke and Kothari's notion of participation as tyranny to demonstrate that, again without reflexivity on the processes of participation enacted, it is easy to find examples of participation that are for some participants anything but emancipatory and are, however unintended, experienced as an unjust/unfair exercise of domination and power.

We go on to adopt an alternative perspective to the one that sees online participation in networked learning in terms of some implicit utopian space for learning; a perspective that instead sees NL more in terms of, after Foucault, heterotopian spaces. We suggest that online spaces are not utopian sites of collaboration and participation but spaces where disruption should be acknowledged and assumed and that such disruption disturbs our customary notion of ourselves. Participation in such a heterotopian space is disturbing and ambiguous, but it offers a space in which to imagine, to desire and ultimately to act differently.

### MAMLL as a Case Study

We examine the potential for tyranny of participation through reference to and discussion of a part-time MA in Management Learning and Leadership (MAMLL). The MA is designed and run on the principles of a learning community approach. The design of the programme is one that requires participation by the students. Participation is integral to the programme and this is explained to students who apply to the course. A current student recently wrote for example that in his interview for the programme he was told;

*"we take the view that the programme offers applicants an opportunity to examine and consider their practice and current ideas and to do this with the assistance and help of others on the programme"*

On MAMLL the expectation of participation underpins the pedagogy of the programme and as part of the approach participants are encouraged to engage in participative and collaborative online support of one another during the two years of their studies.

The MAMLL programme has six residential workshops spaced throughout the two years. Between workshops, participants work in tutorial groups or 'learning sets' usually comprising 4-5 students plus one tutor. Participants choose during each workshop which group of people they will work with for the following period of the programme. The purpose of the learning set is intended to provide a supportive environment in which participants plan and write their course assignments as well as discuss matters of interest arising from either the programme itself or from their work/life experience. The sets are also part

of the assessment process of the programme, which is consultative and involves peer, self and tutor assessment of each assignment. All the learning sets have an online space where they can conduct asynchronous discussions. In addition the whole learning community has the opportunity to communicate and interact in a general conference which is open to every one on the programme (hereafter called general group conference). It is participation in these online learning sets and in the general group conferences that we consider in this paper.

In examining the issue of participation in the online discussions it is important to bear in mind that the design of the MAMLL programme has built in this expectation of a commitment from all members of the learning community to participate in their learning set's discussions about each others work and also, crucially, in discussions about the feedback and marks for each learning set member's assignments/dissertations. To this extent it is fair to say that the programme would not be able to operate effectively if this commitment was not forthcoming from participants – which in a sense is the nub of the issue discussed in the paper.

It is also important to comment that participants frequently state that participating in the online environment contributes significantly to their learning during MAMLL.

## **The Tyranny of Participation**

In *Participation: The New Tyranny*, Cooke and Kothari (2001) focus on participatory development within marginalised underprivileged communities; where the broad aim is to increase the involvement of socially or economically marginalised people/stakeholders in decision making over their own lives, to show how acts and processes of participation (such as sharing knowledge and negotiating power relationships) can both conceal and reinforce oppression and injustices in their various manifestations. For us, Cooke and Kothari's analysis and ideas resonated with our experience of the MAMLL programme (and its participatory design) around, for example, their references to operational constraints of the institutional context; the failure to recognise the impact of different, changing and multiple identities of individuals on their choices about how (and whether) to participate; and failure to reflect on the ways in which ideals of participation result in the adoption of largely unrecognized practices of inclusion and exclusion. Their analysis starkly illustrates how problematic a naïvely and seemingly utopian model of participation can be in practice. In particular, Cooke and Kothari's show the frequency with which there is often a pervasive naivety with regard to the complexities of power and power relations in participation. They define 'tyranny' as 'the illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power' (2001), and they identify three forms this can take in practice, namely tyranny of decision making and control - existing legitimate decision making methods are overridden; tyranny of the group, where the group dynamic leads to participatory decisions that reinforce the interests of the powerful; and tyranny of method, where participatory method can be at the expense of other potentially also productive methods (2001: 7-8)

## **The Potential for the Tyranny of Participation within MAMLL**

The notion of tyranny is exemplified for us within MAMLL in relation to a not uncommon situation of where particular students become positioned as unsupportive. Experience of MAMLL suggests that in most cohorts there are a few students who are regarded as in some way different and/or unsupportive by other members of the group. It is not uncommon towards the end of the programme when participants choose dissertation learning sets for other participants on the programme to try to avoid these individuals who consequently end up in the same set. Whilst the resultant set often feels victimised, excluded or misunderstood, in practice, they often work well and report feeling that their set operated more 'in the spirit of MAMLL' – an important (and contested) category, as we shall see – than the supposedly more dominant and self proclaimed more supportive participants who, they frequently feel, treated them unsympathetically.

This does not always happen however and in some cohorts the minority of students that have come to be seen over a period of time by the majority as different or unsupportive are nonetheless accepted into learning sets that are otherwise comprised of members who are seen to be active and supportive participants. In this section, we will focus on this minority of students who become seen as unsupportive to discuss how attention can become focussed on them as set members. We will claim that this attention

can be interpreted as an illegitimate or unjust exercise of power towards them and that such practices thus fits with the notion of ‘the tyranny of participation’ as outlined above.

A disclaimer feels necessary at this point in that one of the dangers of online discussions is that none of us can deny we said what we said as it is there in black and white. However nothing we say is black and white in terms of what was intended or the meaning and construction put on what is being said. In fact we have to say that in writing this paper this became a contentious issue in that some MAMLL participants felt the interpretation of their words and intentions were being used inappropriately and casting them in a role and position that they were not comfortable with and not willing to be placed in. What we were seeing as the tyranny of participation they were seeing as us taking their words and actions to describe them as tyrannical. Especially when done in the context of a programme that required participation and particularly for their work to be read and assessed this was experienced by some as offensive. Not least when they had throughout willingly participated and supported each other and felt they had gone out of their way to support those members who were seen as consistently not participating.

Labelling some participants as tyrannical was never what we intended as we recognise that the course is untenable without participation and it is an issue for everyone when it is not forthcoming. And further this is why ultimately the need for participation can become experienced as a tyranny in which everyone gets caught up in. This is why it is an important issue to explore. That the expectation for participation can become to be experienced as a tyranny is typified in the following comment from a MAMLL participant who read a draft of this paper;

*The idea of the “tyranny of participation” has helped me understand my reactions to that – that I was aware of it at the time and of a chronic feeling of guilt and failure at not participating more (and a recognition that if I could only do so I would get more as well as give more) but the very process of others being “understanding” and seeking to be more “supportive” towards me was experienced by me as profoundly uncomfortable and ultimately threatening – aggressive even. The reaction it provoked in me was to further distance myself from the group/set and disincline me to any interaction as this was always uncomfortable and only sometimes useful. Whilst I did not respond, I did read the postings and a number of comments were clearly barbed, designed (and effective) to provoke guilt and a sense of failure. I was also conscious that my lack of response infuriated other set members, even though this fury was cloaked in concern (possibly even from themselves).*

As this quote illustrates this is not an easy issue to explore as it places everyone involved in a difficult position. Another MAMLL participant recently examined some of the issues associated with support and supportive behaviours in her dissertation, (Ormand, 2007). What Ormand found in her study was that the notion of support was a central organising concept of the learning community. For the participants, she writes, ‘the recognition that one could not get through this alone was striking’ (2007: 46). She argues there was a shared understanding of what ‘support’ should look like. This she explains consisted of five main principles: giving feedback, promoting discussion, challenging ideas, making regular contributions, and staying in contact. Since support and reciprocity were central to the notion of community and self as mutually independent, she points out, ‘behavioural congruence was important,’ and this became a site of debate and tension within the community (2007: 46). Frustration and tension occurred ‘when the effort exerted by individuals was not reciprocated by others, or congruence with what was being said and done was not evident’ (2007: 59). This produced narratives of ‘working with unsupportive behaviours’ in which participants who, for whatever reason, did not engage in discussions were seen as threatening the ideal of the learning community. Failure to be supportive was not just seen as an individual failure, but as threatening to the entire community, which ‘failed’ at the points where the expected supportive behaviours failed to materialise. This tended to be attributed to participants who ‘failed’ in three predominant ways: ‘not contributing, not being accessible and not responding to a call for a change in behaviour’, and as a result were described as denying other participants the opportunity to learn. This reinforces a model in which community is seen as ‘good’, and the individual as ‘bad’ (2007: 59).

What is not considered so far is why some individuals were failing to be supportive. Cooke and Kothari make the point that failure to reflect on the ideals of participation result in the adoption of largely unrecognized practices of inclusion and exclusion. How this happens within the context of a NL community through the tyranny of participation is what this paper is seeking to explore. Cooke and Kothari also point out that a failure to recognise the impact of different, changing and multiple identities

of individuals on their choices about how (and whether) to participate is often not given sufficient attention. On a programme like MAMLL it is common for students to experience difficulties in balancing the identity of learner with other commitments and identities, including that of being a spouse, becoming or being a parent, taking a new job, moving country etc. The impact of changing and multiple identities is not always considered in respect to choices some make about how to participate in the sets. Arguably it is something that is even more problematic for those few participants on the programme who, in addition to experiencing all of the above, originate from outside the EU, and consequently by their geographic/ethnic/cultural identity already inhabit a marginal subject position on a course which is predominantly composed of British students together with one or two from EU countries.

In those cases where participants positioned as 'different' in terms of for example national and cultural identity it may also not be easy for them to access support for dealing with this in the same way as the other students on the programme who are able to occasionally meet and to more easily maintain contact through other means.

In one such instance in recent times one student made the decision to fly in from her Middle Eastern home country, accompanied by her husband, so that she could participate in a five hour set meeting with her dissertation set. She did not want to miss the support she otherwise felt she would have full access to if she participated in the meeting on the same terms as the rest of her set members. For these students, the question of identity management can be a central and recurring concern throughout the programme, as it can be of course also for other students who come to be categorised either as unsupportive or not participating in the way that is expected.

The potential for the tyranny of participation can reveal itself starkly in the case of any students who become seen or positioned in this way. Whilst they might clearly recognise they are not meeting others expectations for participation they don't necessarily have the capacity, understanding or, as explained by the student quoted above, the inclination to conform to a normative and inflexible view of participation. They are aware of the issues associated with their lack of participation and respond with such online comments as;

*Apologies for not being around, but I spent that last part of last year overseas uncontactable. Over xmas had some interesting personal dramas to contend with so MAML has not featured in my life. As from this week end I will be back in the land of the living.*

Another explains;

*It is quite obvious that my participation during this set was very poor. This is due to several reasons but mainly due to work and travel requirements*

This student continues to go on to say;

*Considering my level of participation during the previous period I don't think it is fair to expect any contribution from any set member during the preparation stage other than reading and commenting on the final draft. This may make it very hard for me to proceed with my dissertation but it is just fair. At the same time I should be able to be more active and responsive to the online discussions and posting*

What is interesting in this last comment and which helps us see how the tyranny of participation can occur is that in this instance the student's own notion of fairness in dealing with his none participation was not accepted. It was seen as not fitting with the dominant view of participation within the programme and 'the spirit of the MAMLL community'. It did not fit with the prevailing and normative view of participation that the student was seen to have persistently failed to adhere to throughout the course of the programme. The frustration and tensions that this failure can provoke in other students can almost imperceptibly easily turn into a dogmatic insistence on the inherent rightness of the form of participation expected and thus lead to some participants becoming marginalised, or expected to conform and/or overcome their personal preferences and/or difficulties and perform to a normative view of participation.

In such instances support and participation is not expressed or seen in terms of a general notion of fair play, but is instead intertwined with a notion of privileging the community over the individual: one's

individual emotions have to be overcome in the interests of the group. As already mentioned in relation to Ormand's study participants who, for whatever reason, did not engage in discussion were seen as threatening the ideal of the learning community. In these sorts of exchanges a form of tyranny of participation emerges through the rigid invocation of community norms, especially around the notion of support.

### **Non-Tyrannical Participation in MAMML: the '5 Minute Social' thread**

The expectation for participation does not have to be tyrannical however. An example of non-tyrannical participation is illustrated below. It occurred when a discussion thread was started as part of a general discussion forum, which is open to every member of the group regardless of learning set. Since it was some time since the last residential workshop, one member suggested that participants needed to catch up with one another. In its themes of dislocation, alienation and exhaustion emerged as part of the discussion thread which was initially intended to be purely social. It was suggested that;

*It feels like a very long time since we were all last together - and a very long time until we will be again.*

*Can we take 5 minutes out of academia for a social thread?*

*I mean no offence to my current set in any way shape or form, but I'm missing my last set and news from everyone else - on life in general...*

It is interesting to consider the responses generated by this posting. This initial posting can be read as delineating a space which, whilst positioned within the wider online learning space, is articulated as 'outside' it (i.e. 'out of academia'). The definition of this space as non-academic further works to suggest that it may become a site of resistance, especially given the tensions that exist around the notion of 'academic' language (or 'jargon'), which we had already identified in an earlier study (Ferreday and Hodgson, 2006). In that study we found academic language was frequently assumed to address a different audience from the students themselves and one from which they could feel implicitly excluded. Postings were also figuratively limited to five minutes, further reinforcing a reassuring tone (in contrast to the lengthy and arduous process of dissertation writing). Furthermore, the general discussion space is delineated as one that allows participants to cross the boundaries of learning sets: whilst this is arguably always a function of the group discussion, here it was stated explicitly.

Having given some context to the range of responses to this posting it should first be noted that all of the responses obeyed in some respect the imperative to be purely social and about 'life in general'. This is manifested in various ways. Many of the posts included jokes or comic anecdotes; included details about family life, social events and travel plans; or used informal language and punctuation (such as repeated use of exclamation marks/double exclamation marks in nine of the eleven responses; use of emoticons to express emotion; and signs of speedy typing such as not spell checking messages and typing in all lower case). However, despite these signifiers of 'non-academic' sociality, the postings largely shared one common focus. As one participant summed up, 'In common with most people I guess, life these last few months has really been a case of trying to achieve a balance'. The need to balance academic study with other aspects of life quickly became a dominant theme of the discussion.

The first respondent was one of the tutors, who gave some positive information about the course having been praised in a teaching assessment exercise. Her post concluded, 'other than that life goes on and things keep piling on and up. Hope things are mostly okay for you all'.

The first participant to respond thanked the initiator for starting the topic, but signalled her inability to respond in what she felt to be the requisite light tone:

*Its a shame I can't be full of fun and sunny stuff just yet. If you have been following [learning set], you'll know things have been a bit rough of late. I don't know if its the 'stress' of MAMML but my usual coping mechanisms seem to have deserted me*

*Why is picking up the phone such a hard thing to do? I am sure we all feel the same. I had to say to my poor mum not call after 2100 or she would get no sense out of me! Just soooo tired*

Others wrote of the tension between MAMLL and family life, and their different ways of resolving this:

*On the home front I am feeling the MAML pinch a bit - and did something I have never done before which was to be away for one of my children's birthdays as a result of booking some work in Dublin - I am in big debt to my 17yr old - I do not recommend it!*

*In common with most people I guess, life these last few months has really been a case of trying to achieve a balance. Personally this has invariably resulted in me prioritising time with [family members] over everything else!*

All of the above speak to Brookfield's notion of 'the dark side' of critical pedagogy: whilst the posts are (to varying degrees) light hearted in tone, they are precisely concerned with participants' difficulty in managing their identity as learners alongside other social identities, and the often demanding and challenging emotional and interpersonal consequences of this. Certainly the sense of guilt that arises from missing a child's birthday could be read as a concrete example of the 'social suicide' that can result from juggling priorities. Similarly, one posting seems to resonate with the themes of social isolation and 'lost innocence' that Brookfield describes:

*On the private front I have to admit, that I have found it difficult to really share with my wife and friends, what the programme means to me, does to me and challenges me on. Seems a bit like a lonely and remote experience in that sense, especially when we do not see each other that often. Feel that I am on an exciting learning journey, not always able to express to my surroundings*

The potential difference for online learning spaces, however, is precisely that they allow such feelings to be shared, potentially resulting in support. By opening up a more heterotopic space it allows this to be incorporated into ongoing processes of critical reflection – not simple opposition between 'dark' and 'light' sides but part of a learning process which is understood as a 'journey' – one that is inseparable from offline lived experience.

## Heterotopia

We would argue that the exchange above illustrates how networked learning offers the possibility of opening up spaces for critical reflection. Such spaces refuse the tyranny of the search for utopianism: instead, they might be seen as heterotopian spaces. As Peter Johnson cites "'Space" is much more abstract than "place:"' for example, it can refer to 'an area, a distance and, significantly in relation to Foucault's concept of heterotopia, a temporal period ("The space of two days")'. The term 'place', for Johnson, is more tangible; although it too is used metaphorically it refers to a fixed event or a history, which may be mythical or real (Johnson 2006: 76-77). Place has apparent boundaries, space does not. Arguably without boundaries there are no limits on what is appropriate, sayable, etc. The first posting in the above example thus works to create what might be termed a heterotopian space. This contrasts with attempts to 'fix' the learning community in place through the invocation of inflexible rules and norms (albeit ironically rules about the importance of flexibility and mutual support). Heterotopia is never a space that provides promise it contrasts and disrupts utopia in deed Johnson claims that in all examples of heterotopia given by Foucault in some way or another they refer to a relational disruption of time and space. Johnson emphasises the potential offered by the disruptive and disturbing aspects of heterotopian spaces, that draw us out of ourselves and produce a disruption that forms a 'reservoir of imagination,' embracing 'temporal discontinuities' to the space where we feel at home.

Whilst heterotopian spaces might feel safe, participation in such a space is always going to be disturbing and ambiguous – 'they offer no resolution or consolation, but disrupt and test our customary notions of ourselves – they hold no promise ... of liberation' (2006: 87). There is no right way to act and behave in such spaces but they offer a place which is not separate from dominant structures and ideology but rather go against the grain and offer lines of flight. We suggest that a non-tyrannical space for networked learning embraces these contradictions and ambiguities. In doing so, it has the potential to create a heterotopian space: a space in which imagination and reflectivity are focussed on as part of a NL philosophy and approach to learning. Unlike utopian projects, with their emphasis on creating the perfect community, such spaces are open, multiple, and diverse. As Johnson puts it, '[w]ith different degrees of

relational intensity, heterotopias glitter and clash in their incongruous variety, illuminating a passage for our imagination' (Johnson, 2006)

## Conclusions

We have attempted to illustrate through different descriptions of NL experiences how, on the one hand, participative processes can be experienced as tyrannical when participation is demanded by course designs, tutors and ultimately by participants in an unreflective and normative way. Alternatively, we have shown the potential of NL to offer the opportunity for critical reflectivity leading to seeing things differently and acting differently. We suggest that instead of expecting or pursuing participation as a kind of utopian ideal, a less tyrannical alternative is to anticipate that participation will be disruptive and encompass difference and variety, in a way that reflects a heterotopian rather than utopian view of participation. Such heterotopian view of participation acknowledges that it may well and often does test customary notions of ourselves and of participation but at the same time offers spaces to imagine and desire differently, not in a utopian, normative or comfortable sense but in a heterotopian, often disturbing and disruptive sense.

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