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Engagement before Ownership: Reflections on Participatory Radio as a Learning Intervention with Disenfranchised Groups

What does it mean to own learning? Who owns learning? And perhaps most importantly – Why own learning? This brief paper considers the latter question in order to then throw light upon the others, and then also considers ‘how’ to own learning. In considering these questions technology appears to offer a practical solution. Surely, ownership can now be tracked to who ‘owns’ the repository containing the learning content and related metrics, and ownership may be personal or shared. But on deeper examination, and from a more psychosocial perspective on learning, this conceptualisation is far too shallow. Ownership of learning is, fundamentally, more about how our minds acquire, process and articulate knowledge about the world in order to have agency within it, in ways that are meaningful to us. We can expand upon and clarify this notion by considering the work of education theorists who had little to say about technology – John Dewey (1916, 1938) and Paulo Freire (1970). Although there is insufficient space in this paper to discuss their theories, we could safely speculate that one of their answers to “Why own learning”, would be “To enable us to change our lives for the better”, whilst also acting with a sense of civic responsibility and social justice.

If we consider this broader and psychosocial framing of the ownership of learning, this means that such ‘true ownership’ will rely upon authentic engagement in learning processes and practices. Similarly, the notion of ‘engagement’ is also often considered too superficially, as technology can only provide a trace of psychosocial and learning activity that can often direct us to the practice and outcomes and not the pre-conditions. If we shift our attention to how to achieve engaging learning that results in the authentic and socially relevant ownership of it – we need to also consider how to set up the conditions, individually and collaboratively, that allow us to get truly absorbed in learning. These conditions need to connect the learner - practically, socially and psychologically – with learning experiences. One approach that we have found effective in doing this is to transform the ‘whole performative space’ of participatory radio into a ‘pedagogical space’ supporting disenfranchised learners through a Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) project called RadioActive101.

RadioActive101 is a broad and robust international research and development initiative in Technology Enhanced Learning for Social Innovation that is described in details in Ravenscroft et al., (2014). It has performed pioneering work, funded through UK and EC agencies, that uses the whole 'space' of Participatory Radio as an intervention for the inclusion, engagement, non-formal learning and employability of disenfranchised groups across Europe. In recent years, RadioActive101 has extended the role of its platform, particularly in the UK, where it is now being adapted as a specialist psychoeducation intervention with Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and for substance misuse and related mental health with 'at-risk' youth (see radioactive101.org). This paper and presentation will describe how this initiative is currently implemented through cross-disciplinary collaborations, summarise key evaluation findings and insights, and, highlight the necessity to consider 'real engagement' in learning as a key precursor to the sort of ownership of learning that then leads to other educational and psychoeducational benefits.

Our resulting radio programmes have thus far attracted tens of thousands of listeners, from China to the USA, as well as those closer to the UK, and within the EU, with 75,538 page views and 29,451 unique visitors, curious to listen to "Voices that are Usually Unheard". Thus far the non-formal learning of our included groups has been recognised through the award of 176 electronic badges that map the RadioActive101 activities to the EU Key Competencies for Lifelong Learning. These key competences are: **communication in the mother tongue; communication in foreign languages; mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology; digital competence; learning to learn; social and civic competences; sense of initiative and entrepreneurship; and cultural awareness and expression.**

One lens of our EU evaluation focused on the impact of the RadioActive101 on direct beneficiaries (the disenfranchised groups), their organisations, and the wider community. The findings were strikingly positive with the highest level of impact reported for the direct beneficiaries (92.1%), followed by project staff (86.8%), the organisations (84.2%) and the community (76.3%). The highest reported impact was on psychosocial dimensions such as self-confidence and motivation (90.8%), followed by creative skills and abilities (88.2%) and then specific employability and communication skills (both 85.5%). In the words of one young person we provided a "sense of freedom, sense of self-value, sense of co-creation".

One of our most striking reflections on these evaluation findings and where the greatest impact occurs is as follows. RadioActive101, through positively influencing psychosocial dimensions within highly relevant 'real life' narratives and activities, realises an effective pathway for inclusion that involves the authentic and continued 'engagement' of groups, for whom traditional education pathways and mental health services are inaccessible, unsuitable, unattractive or simply perceived as 'another world'. And this is a dimension that is often ignored, misunderstood or simply avoided in the TEL literature. In contrast, RadioActive101 initiates, cultivates and publicly presents new discourses that are engaging, inclusive, empowering and 'learning rich'. For our disenfranchised groups, and possibly all learners, our insights suggest that 'ownership' of learning is not just a dimension of an institution or a technical platform. The ownership of learning also has cognitive, psychosocial and contextual dimensions. These emerge when learning content, processes and contexts have sufficient relevance and value to engage the learners in activities which can genuinely and directly influence their lives for the better.

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