ONLINE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT PROMOTING ENGAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

JOHANNA ANNALA, MARITA MÄKINEN, PÄIVI SVÄRD
University of Tampere, Finland

KIRSI SILIUS, THUMAS MIILUMÄKI
Tampere University of Technology, Finland

ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates how university students describe the benefits and challenges of online community environment (OCE) in promoting engagement in university studies. The sociocultural framework allows gaining understanding of the engagement in learning processes as well as the collaborative dimensions of OCE in developing higher education in the 21th century. The study was conducted by using the method of empathy-based stories. The data were collected from two student groups representing samples of presumed forerunners of online and offline environments. The results revealed the importance of multidimensionality of engagement, with interaction among and between students and staff. OCE was seen beneficial in strengthening the sense of belonging to the university, in networking and in enhancing active citizenship. The students saw the academic and social world overlapping. OCE was not seen as an alternative but supplementary to offline community, being beneficial for learning and extracurricular activities. The results represent four overlapping spheres that reflect the potentials of OCE in enhancing engagement in studies: supportive reciprocity, collegial contribution, growth of expertise and shared direction. In order to enhance engagement in university studies via OCE, the results suggest that the focus should be on the sociocultural practices and pedagogical processes.

Keywords: engagement, higher education, online community environment, social software

INTRODUCTION

Understanding students' engagement has become the focus of much research in recent years, in part because it lies at the heart of phenomena of student retention, persistence, and completion of qualifica-

---

JOHANNA ANNALA PhD, is senior lecturer at School of Education, University of Tampere. Research interests include personal development planning, curriculum studies and guidance in higher education.

MARITA MÄKINEN PhD, is research director at School of Education, University of Tampere. Research interests include literacy education, special education, curriculum studies, and higher education.

PÄIVI SVÄRD MA, is researcher at School of Education, University of Tampere. Interests include online pedagogy and social media in education.

KIRSI SILIUS M.Ed, is researcher at Tampere University of Technology. She is carrying out her doctoral thesis in hypermedia. The topic is modelling pedagogically personalized and adaptive hypermedia content production and web services.

THUMAS MIILUMÄKI is researcher in at Tampere University of Technology. His Master of Science thesis concerns social network analysis (SNA) methods and applications.

tions. Definitions of engagement vary. An individual-constructive perspective on student engagement has its origin in the processes involving the quality and time of effort students devote to educationally purposeful activities (e.g. Astin 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991). This view pays attention to students as agentic and constructivist individuals. For instance, motivation, willingness (Ainley 2006; Purnell, McCarthy & McLeod 2010), and self-belief (Yorke & Knight 2004) are important factors explaining engagement. The challenge of this perspective is that students are perceived as solely responsible for achieving success and as anonymous participants in disciplinary communities.

In turn, an interactional perspective in engagement research literature emphasizes that personal investment, by both students and university staff appears to be the key to engagement (Kuh 2009). Tinto (1993) describes student engagement as a result of successful academic and social integration within the university. Consequently, ongoing dialogue between students, teachers and other faculty staff is perceived as a crucial factor of engagement (Hu & Kuh 2002; Spiller 2005; Umbach & Wawrzynski 2005). Krause (2005) emphasizes the importance of sensitiveness to students' needs by allowing students to be continually acknowledged, accepted, affirmed and heard. Therefore, it is important how institutions adapt their organizational structures and cultures to enable students to be part of learning communities (Zhao & Kuh 2004).

This article places student engagement in a broad and socially aware frame. A sociocultural engagement theory by Haworth and Conrad (1997) accentuates a comprehensive approach to engagement: students and staff ought to engage in mutually supportive academic community, investing significant amount of time and energy in building participatory, dialogical environment which leads, as Barnett and Coate (2005) state, to ontological engagement. Ontological engagement focuses on an active citizenship with students committing themselves, becoming aware of themselves and their potentials in the world of uncertainty. How universities handle diversity is also significant. Haworth and Conrad (1997) stress high-quality academic programme attributes as follows: diverse and engaged participants, participatory culture, interactive teaching and learning, connected programme requirements, and adequate resources. Each of them contributes to engagement by enhancing students' personal, intellectual, collegial and professional development.

Krause (2007) has identified three environments in which students may become engaged in their studies: while conducting study-related activities; while participating in out-of-class, i.e. extracurricular activities, located either on campus or off campus; or in the workplace. In this paper we expand the conceptualisation and the role of the environment towards online community environments (OCEs). With OCE we refer to an environment entailing various possible social software applications for official and unofficial use, and community members who study or work in the same institution, who may be known or unknown to each other, having a set of social relationships and interaction (cf. Cranefield & Yoong 2009; Preece 2001). In this paper we approach OCE as a fictional, not yet created environment.

Social software enables users to get information, interact, share, exchange opinions, contribute content and create communities for diverse needs and activities (Minocha 2009). OCE could be a place and space for promoting engagement (Cranefield & Yoong 2009). The challenge is how to build a beneficial OCE with the users being unknown to each other and not necessarily seeking networking as an aim in itself (cf. boyd & Ellison 2007; Silius et al. 2010).

The aim of this paper is to discuss the benefits and challenges of OCE in enhancing engagement in university studies. The paper is conducted in order to develop and design university specific OCEs. The research questions are:

1. What kind of OCE students consider beneficial for the official and unofficial interaction and collaboration in their studying community?

2. What kind of meanings do students give to OCE in enhancing engagement in the university studies?

ONLINE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT AND ENGAGEMENT

The information and communication technology (ICT) services and social software used by students and staff may be official or unofficial, related to curricular or extracurricular activities. The existing social software used in universities is often varied and fragmented, but may play an important role in university studies. It has been suggested that one reason for students' disengagement with university life in general might be their exploitation of ICT but not in ways that enhance their engagement in studying (Lea & Jones 2010). In many cases social aspects are not utilized at all in official systems designed to support studying (Silius et al. 2010). On the other hand, online communities have been noticed to enhance a sense of belonging (Zhao & Kuh 2004) and strengthen social contacts, community engagement and learning (Kavanaugh et al. 2005; Minocha 2009). When comparing read-only web systems to the potentials of OCE,

the characteristics of social software – sharing, interacting and influencing – are promising qualities in enhancing engagement.

Communities in university may have parallel online and offline manifestations. Preece (2001) defines an online community as consisting of people who interact with each other, who share a purpose providing a reason for the community, whose interaction is guided by mutual policies, rituals and rules and whose social interaction takes place via computer systems. Following this definition, we understand offline community the same way except for the use of computer systems, i.e. signifying physical communities (cf. boyd & Ellison 2007; Kavanaugh et al. 2005).

Online communities usually make those social networks visible that already exist in offline contexts (boyd & Ellison 2007; Ellison et al. 2007). The special benefits of social media have been noticed in strenghtening the weak ties, i.e. loose connections between individuals (Donath & boyd 2004; Ellison et al. 2007). Students could employ beneficial collaboration in their studies if there was a way to strengthen the weak ties, to get to know each other, and to make friends outside classes. Wellman (2002) refers to this phenomenon as "glocalization"; the ability of the Internet to both expand user's social contacts and bind them more closely to the local context.

Joining an OCE and being active there requires motivation: why would I want to be a part of this particular community? According to Silius and colleagues (2010), a university-specific OCE motivates students if it produces a surplus value and benefits in combining studies and extracurricular activities. To deepen the understanding of potentials of OCE it is significant to expand the discussion towards engagement in university studies.

Coates (2007) found four diverse engagement styles in online and campus-based settings, namely intense, independent, collaborative and passive. Intensive and passive represent the polar extremes in engagement styles, i.e. one-dimensional engaged-disengaged views. An independent style is characterized by a more academically and less socially oriented approach, while the collaborative tend to favour social aspects of university work. The latter ones point out the multidimensionality of engagement: a student may be very engaged in studies but neither socially active nor interested in communality with peers, or vice versa, emphasizing social aspects may turn the focus from studies to social life.

Different engagement styles indicate students' habits of mind which refer to patterns of intellectual behavior that lead to productive actions. According to Shulman (2002), students who are involved in educationally productive activities are developing habits of mind that enlarge their capacity for continuous learning and personal growth. Habits of mind are features of what intelligent people do when they are confronted with problems, and are making decisions to which there are no immediately apparent solutions (Costa 1991). Habits of mind are not performed in isolation; rather they are drawn forth in various situations through interaction with others that leads to productive actions. Thereby university has the responsibility to create sociocultural environments which encourage engaging and developing students' habits of mind towards the development of academic expertise.

METHOD

Data

The data were collected using the method of empathy-based stories (MEBS) (Eskola 1988; 1998). MEBS is based on a role-playing method emphasizing its passive, verbal and scripted approach[1] (Cohen et al. 2007; Ginsburg 1978). In MEBS the informants write short essays, using their imagination, on the basis of a frame story given by researchers. Usually there are at least two different versions of the frame story which vary with regard to a certain central matter (Eskola 1998). MEBS has features of scenario-based design in which the use of future system is described at an early point of development process (e.g. Rosson & Carrol 2002). As research data the MEBS produces alternative scenarios and it enables to reach qualitative information, constructions and meanings which may not have been anticipated (Eskola 1998). This methodological approach was chosen because, firstly, we did not study any specific, existing OCE, and secondly, the users' perspective is essential in designing one. The frame stories were the following:

It is 2015. Among students at [xx] university an online community environment that helps students to collaborate in the different groups and communities of the university has become very popular. The environment has thousands of users. The information about it has already spread to other universities interested in having a similar environment in their universities. Why has this environment become so popular? What are students using if for?

---

[1] Opposed to the active, performed and behavioral application of role-playing in research, which has been controversial because of the ethical questions, for example deception of the informants (e.g. Ginsburg 1978).

It is 2015. Among students at [xx] university an on-line community environment that supposedly should help students to collaborate in the different groups and communities of the university is generally disliked. Although (or precisely because) participating is voluntary the environment lacks users. Why is this environment not considered beneficial? What is wrong with it?

The data were collected from two student groups in two universities representing samples of presumed forerunners of online and offline communities. The first group with 39 informants was hypermedia students from a university of technology. The data were collected in a class during a course where the development and evaluation of web services were under discussion. This group was named *advanced students* referring to their supposed knowledge of online communities. All the students present in the class participated in the study.

The other group with 49 informants represented the students in offline communities. The data were collected via web forms sent by email to the mailing lists of student union in a multidisciplinary university. In these lists there were altogether 615 students who were student tutors, spokespersons in university administration and student clubs, representing official and unofficial activities of all sorts from choirs to political clubs. This group was named *active students*. Collecting the data via web form was expected to have low response rate (cf. Cohen et al. 2007). According to previous studies, the saturation in role playing data is reached in 10-15 stories from each of the frame stories (Eskola 1998). Being aware of the selective and biased sampling we consider the data to meet the case of this study.

The informants were randomly asked to continue either a favourable or an unfavourable frame story regardless of the informant's own view. The data informed in this article were composed of 53 favourable scenarios from 26 active students and 27 advanced students, and 35 unfavourable scenarios from 23 active students and 12 advanced students.

Analysis

The strategy for organizing and making sense of the data was based on the content analysis. Through the content analysis it was possible to articulate variations in the informants' ways of experiencing online communities (cf. Krippendorff 2004; Kondracki et al. 2002). The analysis was conducted in progressive cycles by combing data and theory driven content analysis which consisted of twofold categorising, and summarising. During the analysis ATLAS.ti software was used.

In the categorising stage, we first conducted the data driven coding procedure to organise the data with the first research question. The basic unit of categorising was either a longer segment containing complete view, or a shorter segment, such as notional expression. Despite of the given favourable or unfavourable frame story, some informants suggested qualifications for the opposite view; these suggestions were coded as well. The themes were reduced and labeled, encapsulating the emerged qualities. The categorized three themes with subthemes are represented in Table I.

Next we conducted the theory driven coding procedure to organise the data with the second research question. In this process we relied on a conceptual

Table I. BENEFICIAL OCE IN A UNIVERSITY – DATA ORGANIZED IN THEMES AND SUBTHEMES

| Themes	Subthemes
Properties	▪ comparisons
	▪ functionalities
	▪ characterizations
Purposes (of use and users)	▪ studying & learning
	▪ extracurricular activities
	▪ student activities
	▪ networking
	▪ encountering fellow students
Key issues	▪ usage needs and benefits
	▪ cultural preconditions and attitudes
	▪ reputation and marketing
	▪ usability, technical sustainability and security
	▪ time related issues
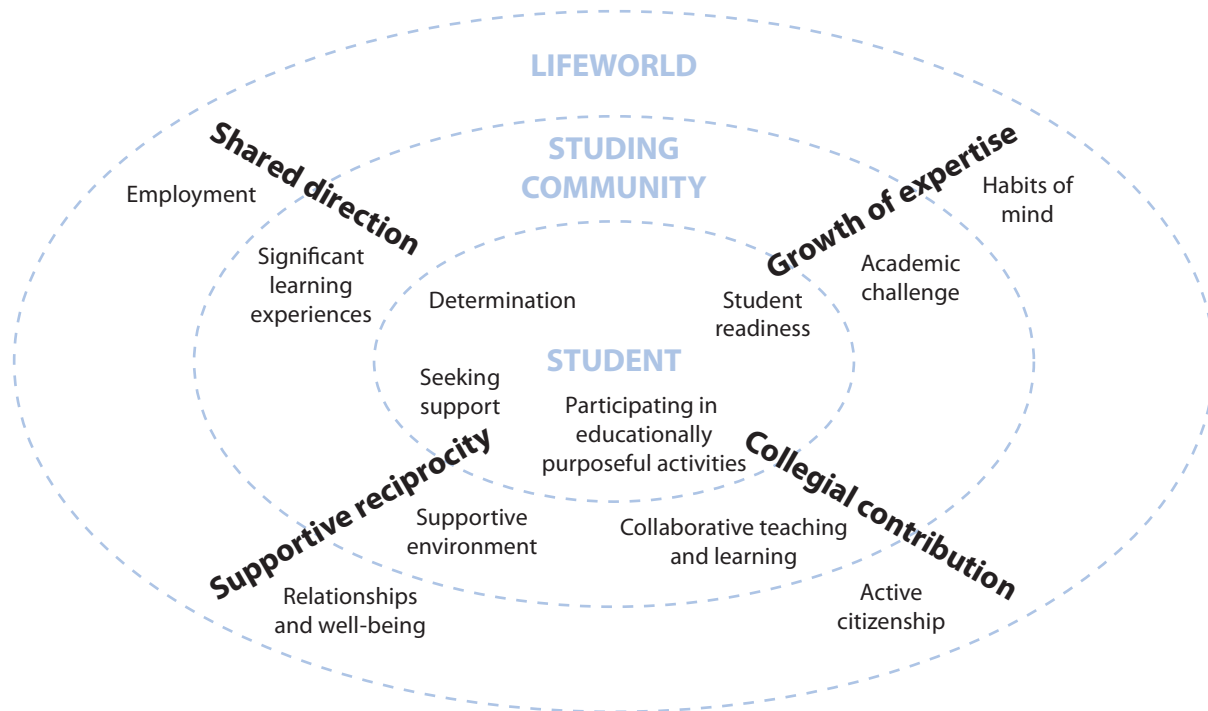
Figure 1. THE POTENTIALS OF OCE IN ENHANCING ENGAGEMENT IN STUDIES

schema of engagement, composed of three complementary zones (Figure 1):

1) the students' individual orientation to studies, in accordance with individual-constructive approach to engagement (Ainley 2006; Yorke & Knight 2004; Purnell et al. 2010)

2) the initiatives of studying community, in accordance with interactional perspective on engagement and the benchmarks of effective educational activities (Haworth & Conrad 1997; Kuh 2009; Spiller 2005) and

3) the consideration of students' lifeworld, referring to the views on higher education's relationship with society and its relation to engagement (Barnett & Coate 2005; Krause 2005).

The conceptual schema on constructing a sociocultural approach to students' engagement was based on a comprehensive literature review on previous studies (Mäkinen & Annala 2011).

In the summarising stage of the content analysis, the relevance of the conceptual schema was explored, scrutinised and developed from the point of view of the present research aim. The consistency of categories was assessed by rechecking the basic units and transcription excerpts in their original contexts in the data and by researcher triangulation.

The final categories revealed four spheres within the three zones as follows: growth of expertise, collegial contribution, supportive reciprocity and shared direction (Figure 1). These four spheres, though partly overlapping, encapsulate the benefits and challenges of online communities in enhancing engagement in university studies.

SCENARIOS FOR ONLINE COMMUNITY ENVIRONMENT IN UNIVERSITY

The students characterized the ideal OCE as integrating all the prevailing ICT services that students are expected to use, plus social and interactive tools enabling student initiatives. It was characterized as a combination of a course enrolment and study attainment service, an e-mail service, a learning environment, an information platform for curricula, studies and extracurricular activities, and university-specific social software which was often compared to Facebook. The key elements in this environment were single sign-on, ease of use and extensive nature, unifying academic and social spheres of life.

The cultural and attitudinal preconditions related to the benefits and need to use the environment, as well as marketing and reputation were seen as key questions for success: if the majority of students or staff does not take an active role in the online community, the benefits were seen to remain marginal. Added to these, technical sustainability, security and usability were considered important: if there are too many problems in the start-up situation, the bad reputation

caused by it may bring down all the advantageous intentions.

Against assumptions, the scenarios were of the same kind in the stories by advanced and active students. In unfavourable scenarios the social online and offline environments were seen mutually exclusive connoting a threat which was often dramatised. However, a concluding idea was that an OCE would be a welcome adjunct to the offline community environment in both universities' settings.

In the following paragraphs, we focus on the emerged features of OCE and their relation to the potential of OCE to support the engagement in university studies. The quotes from scenarios substantiating the findings disclose the informant's background (AC active, AD advanced) and scenario (F favourable, U unfavourable).

Online community environment promoting the growth of expertise

In the sphere entitled the growth of expertise the students described the diverse ways to foster students' intellectual development through the use of OCE. The students reflected the strengths and weaknesses of OCE to promote their academic readiness and habits of mind for the discipline specific discourses, and to facilitate engagement in academic challenges facing them at the university as well as in the future's working environments.

In the favourable scenarios the students argued that to gain readiness and to succeed in the university studies they are required to enter academic discourses of particular disciplines. The possibility to hide one's identity came out. The students pointed out that in online settings it was easier to anonymously ask 'stupid questions' about study practices, difficult theories or other academic challenges, like in the following:

That kind of a section would be especially popular, where people could go and write details about the scientific theories of their discipline etc. in layman's terms. In other words, what it's really about with some laboriously learned theories. (ACF05.)

In other kinds of online interaction the visibility of identity was considered important, for example in getting feedback. In these situations, the support for enhancing student readiness widened from peers to the staff. Purnell's research group (2010) found it beneficial to offer students information on their learning profiles, directions for further information, and recommendations to access particular university services to support their learning needs. Lea and Jones (2010) have found that any changing pedagogi-

cal perspective of knowledge construction comes primarily not from students' own web-based activity but from the activity of the regenerated teaching strategies. Following this, engagement does not concern only students but teachers and other staff, as well; how engaged they are to promote students' expertise.

According to Kuh (2009), setting high expectations for students' performance engage them into studying. In favourable scenarios OCE was considered a place where it was easy to engage in challenging academic discourse. Especially the active students saw the potentials of OCE in scientific discussions and debates on theories, lectures or books, and in creating shared knowledge like in the following: "The environment promotes collaborative knowledge accumulation, and doesn't include serious competition. Scientific debate is rewarding and educative." (ACF03.)

The preceding characterizes the students' habits of mind (Costa 1991; Shulman 2002). Habits of mind and engagement are accompanied by positive emotions such as curiosity, interest, daring, and participation in intellectual practices (e.g. Schroeder et al. 2011). These views of engagement include cognitive involvement and high level of personal persistence. They are predicated upon students' ability to critical thinking, for instance, by conveying their ideas clearly and by listening and responding to divergent views respectfully. Consequently, habits of mind are developing in various situations through online interaction with others. Students brought up this negotiated and intrinsic nature of engagement in the studies as following:

The environment was very adaptable and gave the students a chance to create new contents in it. It has been great to see how study circles have become more common and how much the themes of regular lectures are discussed there in the environment. (ACF09.)

In unfavourable scenarios the potentials of OCE in developing the academic readiness and learning were questioned and the development of the habits of mind was not suggested. Although today's students are perceived more technologically savvy than before (cf. Brown et al. 2003), the students accentuated that readiness in ICT skills and digital literacies cannot be taken for granted among university students, as the following extract raises:

A computer in itself may not be a natural choice for a learning tool, people may prefer the good old way in their studying, like doing exams with pen and paper or being present at physical lectures (ACU03.)

The quote reflected the finding that the ICT skills of university students might be overestimated. Purnell et al. (2010) point out that while some students are

familiar with social software, there are a number of students who are not. Likewise, van den Beemt et al. (2011) have criticized the generalizations over the so called Netgeneration and the presumed homogeneity in students' motives and use of interactive media. As well as the ICT skills, the academic literacy skills are often overestimated (cf. Lea & Jones 2010; Price et al. 2011). Some of our informants did not consider OCE beneficial in supporting learning; conversely it was characterized as an extra burden:

Even though it is possible to publish your thoughts about the contents of different courses and you could discuss your thoughts with others, people tend to think it is extra work. You can discuss during the lectures and classes as much as you like. (ADU38.)

Previous contradictory scenarios project the different engagement styles depicted by Coates (2007). They also demonstrate the heterogeneity of university students and diverse readiness in academic skills and literacies, revealing various academic cultures which is crystallised in the following: "Without creation of a culture, voluntary intellectual activities will remain marginal" (ACU18). The creating, sharing and maintaining of the intellectually stimulating learning cultures is a one of the key questions in enhancing engagement.

Online community environment promoting collegial contribution

The second sphere – collegial contribution – arose mainly in the favourable scenarios. The students raised questions of OCE's potential to prepare them to engage in collaborative teaching and learning, as well as active citizenship and community involvement in general. The central focus of these students' scenarios was on the benefits of OCE enhancing collaborative learning instead of the usages for extracurricular activities (cf. Silius et al. 2010). Nevertheless, extracurricular activities may also have an important role in student engagement and in developing active citizenship.

In favourable scenarios, the students characterized tools and functionalities which would increase contribution of individuals by promoting collegial practices in studying. The useful functionalities mentioned were perceived practicable for *curricular activities*, e.g. curricula, personal study plan, library services, creating, sharing and uploading documents and assignments; for *extracurricular activities*, e.g. profiles, notice board, quiz and entertainment, and for *personal time management*, e.g. calendar, teaching schedules and a contact center to coordinate meetings. For interaction within all these activities they suggested wikis, blogs, chat and forums. Compared to the active students, the advanced students suggested more sophisticated technical solutions, like personalisation, mobile OCE and considerations concerning security issues. Though 'read only' solutions emerged, the 'read/write' qualities were emphasized and presented as a self-evident feature in OCE, exemplified in the following: "The degree programme wikis are useful for example when working on your thesis or preparing for an exam" (ADF06).

Students considered OCE particularly useful in time management. They described ways of saving time, planning and acting in flexible ways compared to offline settings, much in line with Minocha's (2009) findings. In students' varied life situations OCE was seen beneficial especially in distributing time between studies, student activities, work, family and civic life in general.

OCE was expected to break the mould of the traditional learning environments to a more extended experience of learning. Thus, the educational experiences might become more negotiated, co-constructed, and systematically reflected with both students and teachers engaged in pedagogical acts, as the next excerpt describes:

This site has become popular because it supports the students' self-motivated peer learning and breaks down the traditional learning methods of the university: storaging a grey mass of knowledge. Once students have grasped the peer learning opportunities, they are going deeper and deeper into topics, because learning is becoming more meaningful and shared. (ACF13.)

OCE was suggested to make it easy to find study circles or research projects to apply for. The prerequisite for this was that the "university staff have also got involved in the online community environment" (ACF23). The staff is expected to become more collegial, with less hierarchical relations with students. Staff and students would not only construct online communities, but in- and out-of-class teaching and learning experiences to facilitate and sustain colearning among all participants, which is close to Haworth's and Conrad's (1997) perspective. This would support the overall respect and sense of community (Zhao & Kuh 2004). In the data, this was characterized as "enabling the fulfillment of the idea of university, i.e. being a student and a researcher at the same time" (ACF13).

The globalized and 'glocalized' networks of university students enable students contribute to a diverse range of forums and contexts. Some informants pondered that if OCE was solely for studies and 'school business' it would not have the same kind of success as it would as an all-inclusive environment. A special benefit of OCE was presented in a scenario combining civic and university life, the present and the future:

All university services are centralized in this online environment, since in university it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between the academic world and the social world, them being an integral part of each other (ACF23).

In the scenarios, OCE was also supposed to motivate and facilitate participation in students' extracurricular activities, especially among those who cannot or will not participate in person, exemplified as follows: "The students get a chance to be in touch with communities for which they would otherwise not have the time or opportunity" (ADF02).

Kahn (2009) has stated that interventions designed to widen participation are essential, if higher education is to assist in the transformation of both individuals and societies. Also Healey and colleagues (2010) have stressed the importance of involving students in academic development, pointing out the significance of cogeneration. Via online environment it seems to be possible to encourage students to perceive a sociocultural approach to body of learning as a partnership. Resuming previous, while enhancing collegial contribution we are enhancing collaborative learning and active citizenship (cf. Barnett & Coate 2005).

The idea of active, autonomous and enthusiastic university students – and staff - who are contributing collegially, is partly an ideal. As Coates (2007) notices, besides some students' intense style, there are also passive, independent and collaborative engagement styles. Some students outlined borders between the academic and other priorities, like: "in my spare time I do not want to have anything to do with studies, I have other life, too" (ACU16). There were also doubts concerning the staff's willingness to revise their pedagogical thinking. The renewed focus on students' learning emphasises those processes that are in place to support accessible, flexible and collaborative learning experiences that promote critical inquiry and active citizenship (Goedegebuure et al. 2008). Truly supporting students learning by OCE needs to go beyond the creation of knowledge, skills and abilities, requiring a paradigm shift in pedagogical approach.

Online community environment promoting supportive reciprocity

The scenarios described OCE as a sphere of activating supportive reciprocity. This became evident when the students described the forms of interaction, relationships and assistance enabled or suppressed by OCE. From the point of view of engagement the potentials of OCE were seen in facilitating the development of reciprocal qualities, dispositions and practices. This could benefit the accumulation of well-being in university and more widely in society.

In the favourable scenarios OCE was considered beneficial in getting in contact with peers and staff, finding friends and in networking, but also in seeking and accepting support in different questions concerning studies, student life and future prospects. The agency moved from given roles towards free-floating reciprocal sharing, exemplified in the following:

This way one wouldn't think that there is someone, who is responsible and who knows everything. Instead of getting the answer from a tutor, who started their studies a year earlier, the answer could come from a fourth year student, who has spent more time at the university and knows more about the practicalities. (ACF02.)

OCE as a university specific application was supposed to motivate and facilitate especially the participation of those who were less extroverts or not so familiar with social network sites – especially if the users would enter the OCE through single sign-on as a matter of routine when entering the university web services. Locally orientated OCE was considered easier to approach compared to worldwide applications, and helpful in finding one's own community, feeding the sense of belonging. The online and offline environments were seen as a possibility to get to know people from the same courses, but also across disciplines:

The online environment also provides an opportunity to find friends. This is a great advantage, when new students come to university. Web environment can ensure that students do not remain alone. (ADF28.)

The parallel environments were described as a two-way potential: meeting during a course could have a continuation in online environment, or meeting online with similar interests would have a face-to-face continuation. It was considered easier to get in contact with others if there were alternative environments available. This view is in line with the previous findings about social media's power to strengthen the weak ties between people, characterized as accumulation of social capital and well-being (Ellison et al. 2007). Ellison and colleagues (2007) have noticed the significance of social media in lowering barriers especially for those who might otherwise shy away from initiating communication.

The students argued favorably for getting support early, quickly, free of time and location in online environment as evidenced by several studies (e.g. Bradshaw et al. 2005; Minocha 2009; Purnell et al. 2010). In seeking support OCE was considered informal, lowering barriers and reducing fear of making questions to supervisors or advanced students, exemplified in the following: "Since the thesis supervision moved online it is less formal and frightening. Teacher and student tutors have answered my ques-

tions quickly so I don't need to lose time wondering" (ACF07). According to Haworth and Conrad (1997), a supportive risk-taking environment is an important attribute of engagement. Here the initiatives and activeness of studying community is vital. When the students feel safe enough, they dare to take risks in their activities.

Opposite views were presented in the unfavourable scenarios. To begin with, the online environment was considered exclusionary to offline services, often ignoring the possibilities of personal online interaction, like in the following: "Probably people will still want to get the information they need from people, rather than digitally via a web page " (ACU11). The informants reflected how the active ones would find support both in online and offline environments, but there would always be some students who do not participate at all. One informant envisioned how the only benefit of an online environment would be as follows:

The quiet, unsociable or inefficient students can benefit from the discussions by the active ones in the online environment, because they don't have to ask or comment anything themselves, but they can read what the others think (ACU20).

Some informants questioned the possibility of gaining a sense of belonging to a community, or getting support and answers to personal questions only by lurking the discussions. Scott (2005) has noted that students' judgment of quality of university studies is basically based on the support they receive. His findings emphasize the primacy of personal contact over technology. According to Purnell et al's (2010) current findings, one of the most crucial points in implementing support services is that students actively seek help, and are willing to accept assistance. McKavanagh and Purnell (2007) have found that the reluctance to seek help is one of the main reasons among students 'at risk' for disengagement. In case of OCE, students need to possess confidence in using online support mechanisms. Particularly, it is significant that students actively seek assistance when they need it, and advocate for their own learning in diverse situations. The challenge is how to create cultural and social preconditions to encourage the participation in reciprocal activities.

Online community environment promoting shared direction

In the sphere of the shared direction we positioned the views which focused on reflecting the potential to provide students with meaningful learning processes through OCE. Currently the employment and other extrinsic motivations are even more emphasized than the intrinsic values of studying in higher education (Mäkinen & Annala 2010). Whatever the

students' goals are, significant learning experiences and determination are vital to maintain motivation, engagement and to promote academic success (Purnell et al. 2010).

In favourable scenarios students depicted OCE helpful in understanding the general idea of university studies, like one student put it: "it helps to understand what studying is all about and what kind of choices one should make so that the studies would progress OK" (ACF15). A useful aid for choosing a minor would be, for example, 'spotlight courses' with a video and blog introducing disciplines, entailing the views and comments of the organizers and more experienced students. The role of the latter ones was considered beneficial especially for the fresher in discussions of the priorities between studies and students' lifeworld in general:

There the older students can tell you for example what to do differently at the beginning of your studies, but also in relation to life choices, such as, what it means to have a job during studies (ACF15).

As mentioned above, OCE can offer a forum for sharing ideas, negotiating views and improving students' self-awareness. Diverse practices of online networking, and online delivery of knowledge were mentioned as effective means of developing shared direction. OCE was considered beneficial in preparing students to the current shift from individual to more team-based academic work, and in strengthening the multitude of career management skills needed in working life in the future.

Besides lowering the barriers between students and staff, this was hoped to happen between university and the outer world, too. Especially the advanced students pointed out the use of OCE in target-oriented networking. Connections between the university specific OCE and world-wide webservices, like Facebook, was called for, through which "we could find new contacts in the business world, too" (ADF15). These connections may have strong payoffs in terms of jobs and internships (cf. Ellison et al. 2007). In the scenarios also Web links to recruitment services and job sites were hoped for.

According to Haworth and Conrad (1997), it is important that faculty and administration invite alumni and employers to participate in the university activities. They point out that in order to enhance engagement in university studies, staff, students and employers should work together to build shared direction which provides a common thread that might help to knit together students' learning experiences in ways that enrich their professional development.

However, a noteworthy feature in the scenarios was that shared direction as a curricular aim and learning

processes as especially organized e-learning courses were almost non-existent. OCE was primarily considered to support learning and direction as a non-formal environment with various positive potentials, but facing challenges within a university, characterized in the following:

Departments, or rather whole schools, have been reluctant to take the effort to integrate these a bit more informal learning environments into the formal educational programs and to build incentives to use these as environments for learning (ACU18).

By this kind of views students raised the traditions in teaching and curriculum design in universities. In order to create shared curricular aims and a favourable breeding ground for new pedagogical ideas, like OCE, there should be evident needs and benefits – both for staff and students.

DISCUSSION

A common view to online environments sees its benefits in collegial contribution for which there are plenty of tools available. The present study presented three more spheres that reflect the potentials of OCE in enhancing engagement in studies.

The results propose that in addition to collegial contribution supportive reciprocity is a major prerequisite for expanding the interaction and collaboration beyond the bounds of traditional offline groups. A key difference compared to offline environment was seen in the ease of access and low threshold to participate. Online communities were seen beneficial in strengthening the sense of belonging to the university, in networking and in enhancing active citizenship especially among those who cannot participate in offline student activities. Haworth and Conrad (1997) raise that a community of learners is one significant attribute of engagement in studies. The idea of collegial contribution requires that staff and students create a partnership.

The prerequisite is that besides students the staff is present in online environment and that both are will-ing to interact reciprocally, students actively seeking assistance when needed and staff providing it. In a supportively designed OCE the students are encouraged to explore alternative viewpoints and learn from their mistakes. It is important that the staff also dares to take risks and encourages students to follow their lead in challenging themselves to stretch in new ways. Following this, OCE enlarges means for reciprocal actions and collegial contribution.

Growth of expertise and shared direction reflect the potentials of the nature of learning during studies. The subjects and objects of learning processes are mixed when the intellectual discussions move over to social media. This kind of participation enriches students' learning experiences and positively affects their growth as experts and active citizens. In order to enhance student readiness to face academic challenges and to develop the habits of mind, the focus should be in the sociocultural practices and pedagogical processes in promoting engagement. An interesting view here comes from Van den Beemt and colleagues (2011) who characterized affinity spaces, i.e. the virtual spaces where people meet, as a modern counter-culture. They are asking, if affinity spaces can be institutionalized at all. Same question arises in the development of habits of mind. This is a fundamental issue when developing OCE in a university setting.

In this study, we focused on the views of so called forerunners: advanced students in hypermedia and active students in extracurricular pursuits. Despite of the limited sampling the scenarios indicated the potentials and challenges concerning the introduction of OCE and diverse views of engagement. The diversity and sociocultural view are important to keep in mind when considering the potentials of OCEs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

REFERENCES

Ainley, M. (2006). Connecting with learning: Motivation, affects and cognition in interest processes. *Educational Psychology Review,* 24(1), 5–20.

Astin, A.W. (1993). *What matters in college: four critical years revisited.* San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Barnett, R. & Coate, K. (2005) *Engaging the curriculum in higher education*, Berkshire, GBR: McGraw-Hill Education.

boyd, d. & Ellison, N. (2007). Social network sites: definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), article 11. Retrieved September 30, 2010 from http://jcmc.indiana.edu./vol13/issue1/boyd.ellison.html

Bradshaw, P., Powell, S. & Terrell, I. (2005). Developing engagement in Ultralab's online communities of enquiry. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International,* 42(3), 205–215.

Brown, C., Murphy, T.J. & Nanny, M. (2003). Turning techno-savvy into info-savvy: Authentically integrating information literacy into the college curriculum. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 29(6), 386–398.

Coates, H. (2007). A model of online and general campus-based student engagement. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 32(2), 121–141.

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2007). *Research methods in education.* 6th edition. London: Routledge.

Costa, A. (1991). The search for intelligent life. In A. Costa (Ed.) *Developing minds: A resource book for teaching thinking.* Vol. 1, 100–106. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Cranefield, J. & Yoong, P. (2009) Crossings. Embedding personal professional knowledge in a complex online community environment. *Online Infromation Review*, 33(2), 257–275.

Donath, J. & boyd, d. (2004). Public displays of connection. *BT Technology Journal*, 22(4), 71.

Ellison, N.B., Steinfield, C. & Lampe, C. (2007). The benefits of facebook "friends": Social capital and college students' use of online social network sites. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4), article 1. http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol12/issue4/ellison.html

Eskola, A. (1988). Non-active role-playing: some experiences. In A. Eskola in collaboration with A. Khilström, D. Kivinen, K. Weckroth & O. Ylijoki (Eds.) *Blind alleys in social psychology: a search for ways out.* Amsterdam: Elsevier, 239–308.

Eskola, J. (1998). *Eläytymismenetelmä sosiaalitutkimuksen tiedonhankintamenetelmänä.* [The method of empathy-based stories as a method of acquiring data in social research]. Tampere: TAJU.

Ginsburg, G.P. (1978). Role-playing and role performance in social psychological research. In M. Brenner, P. Marsh & M. Brenner (eds.) *The social contexts of method.* London: Groomhelm, 91–121.

Haworth, J. & Conrad, C. (1997). *Emblems of quality in higher education: developing and sustaining high-quality programs.* Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Healey, M., Mason O'Connor, K. & Broadfoot, P. (2010). Reflections on engaging students in the process and product of strategy development for learning, teaching, and assessment: an institutional case study. *International Journal of Academic Development,* 15(1), 19–32.

Hu, S. & Kuh, G.D. (2002). Being (dis)engaged in educationally purposeful activities: the influences of student and institutional characteristics. *Research in Higher Education*, 43(5), 555–575.

Kahn, P. (2009). On establishing a modus vivendi: the exercise of agency in decisions to participate or not to participate in higher education. *London Review of Education*, 7(3), 261–270.

Kavanaugh, A., Carroll, J. M., Rosson, M. B., Zin, T. T., & Reese, D. D. (2005). Community networks: Where offline communities meet online. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 10(4), article 3. http://jcmc.indiana.edu/vol10/issue4/kavanaugh.html

Kondracki, N., Wellman, N. & Amundson, D. (2002). Content analysis: review of methods and their applications in nutrition education, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, 34(4), 224–230.

Krause, K-L. (2005). *Engaged, inert or otherwise occupied? Deconstructing the twenty-first-century undergraduate student.* Keynote paper at the Sharing Scholarship in Learning and Teaching: Engaging Students Symposium, James Cook University, Townsville, Queensland.

Krause, K-L. (2007). Social involvement and commuter students: The first-year student voice. *Journal of the First Year Experience and Students in Transition*, 19(1), 27–45.

Krippendorff, K. (2004) *Content Analysis: An introduction to its methodology*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Kuh, G.D. (2009). The National survey of student engagement: conceptual and empirical foundations. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2009(141), 5–20.

Lea, M. R. & Jones, S. (2010). Digital literacies in higher education: exploring textual and technological practice. *Studies in Higher Education* 36 (4), 377–393.

McKavanagh, M., & Purnell, K.N. (2007). Student learning journey: Supporting student success through the student readiness questionnaire. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development*, 4, 27–38.

Minocha, S. (2009). A case study-based investigation of students' experiences with social software tools. *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 15(3), 245–265.

Mäkinen, M. & Annala, J. (2010). Meanings behind curriculum development in higher education. *Prime*, 4(2), 9–24.

Mäkinen, M. & Annala, J. (2011). Korkeakouluopintoihin kiinnittyminen asiantuntijaksi kasvun perustana. [Engagement in university studies] In M. Mäkinen, V. Korhonen, J. Annala, P. Svärd & V-M Värri (Eds.) *Korkeajännityksiä. Kohti osallisuutta luovaa korkeakoulutusta.* [Towards participatory higher education] Tampere: TUP, 59–80.

Pascarella, E.T. & Terenzini, P.T. (1991). *How college affects students.* San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass.

Preece, J. (2001). *Online communities. Designing usability, supporting sociability.* Originally publ. 2000. Chichester: Wiley.

Price, R., Becker, K., Clark, L. & Collins, S. (2011). Enbedding information literacy in a first-year business undergraduate course. *Studies in Higher Education* 36(6), 705–718.

Purnell, K., McCarthy, R. & McLeod, M. (2010). Student success at university: using early profiling and interventions to support learning. *Studies in Learning, Evaluation, Innovation and Development* 7(3), 77–86.

Rosson, M. B. & Carrol, J. M. (2002). *Scenario-based design.* Retreived March, 11, 2011 from http://www.lucas.lth.se/sepm/session1/SBD-handbook.pdf. Also in J. Jacko & A. Sears (Eds.). 2002. The Human-Computer Interaction Handbook: Fundamentals, Evolving Technologies and Emerging Applications. Mahwah (NJ.): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1032–1050.

Goedegebuure, L., Santiago, P., Fitznor, L., Stensaker, B. & Steen, M. (2008). *OECD reviews of tertiary education: New Zealand.* OECD. Retrieved May, 15, 2011 from http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/11/52/38012419.pdf.

Schroeder, S., Richter, T., McElvany, N., Hachfeld, A., Baumert, J., Schnotz, W., Horz, H. & Ullrich M. (2011). Teachers' beliefs, instructional behaviors, and students' engagement in learning from texts with instructional pictures. *Learning and Instruction*, 21(3), 403–415.

Scott, G. (2005). *Accessing the student voice: Final report.* Sydney, NSW: University of Western Sydney.

Shulman, L.S. (2002). Making difference: A table of learning. *Change*, 23(6), 36–45.

Silius, K. , Miilumäki, T., Huhtamäki, J., Tebest, T., Meriläinen, J. & Pohjolainen, P. (2010). Students' Motivations for Social Media Enhanced Studying and Learning. In *Knowledge Management & E-Learning: An International Journal (KM&EL)*, the Special Issue on "Technology Enhanced Learning".

Spiller. P. (2005). Teaching as a focussed conversation: The use of incentive-based preparation exercises, *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 42(4), 305–312.

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition.* (2nd Ed.). Chincago: University of Chicago Press.

Umbach, P.D. & Wawrzynski, M.R. (2005). Faculty do matter. The role of college faculty in student learning and engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 46(2), 153–184.

van den Beemt, A., Akkerman, S. & Simons, R-J. (2011). Considering young people's motives for interactive media use. *Educational Research Review*, 6, 55–66.

Wellman, B. (2002). Designing the Internet for a networked society: Little boxes, glocalization, and networked individualism. *Communications of the ACM*, 45(5), 91–96.

Yorke, P. & Knight, P. (2004). Self-theories: Some implications for teaching and learning in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 29(1), 25–37.

Zhao, C. & Kuh, G. (2004). Adding value: Learning communities and student engagement. *Research in Higher Education*, 45(2), 115–138.

_____