

Challenging online learner identity through online learning tools

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This paper explores ways learner identity needs to and can be developed in our rapidly changing digital globalised world. It argues for a redefinition of personalisation to one where learners are able to identify with and work within a learning community. Two tools for learning are discussed in relation to this notion of development of learner identity and personalised learning. The first is the V-ResORT (Virtual Resources for Online Research Training) website www.v-resort.ac.uk. This free and highly navigable resource provides complete research narratives by Masters and Doctoral students in education studies as well as researching academics. This represents a community of research practice revealing their understandings in authentic and compelling ways unlike the reified versions found in academic texts and research papers. Research students can flexibly explore the online researcher narratives and research lecturers/supervisors can use these as triggers with which to raise issues and ground aspects of methodology and theory. Research into the use of materials reveals the ways this helps connect the learners with research communities and develops their identities as researchers. The second tool for learning is the ViP (Virtual Interactive Platform). This is pedagogically driven Web2.0 tool that makes use of and extends server based media materials combined with online discussion functionality. The pedagogic innovation is the ways it allows distributed learners to upload, share and analyse visual media through commentary and discussion linked to supporting resources. The ViP supports learners to co-construct meaning and develop an identity as a learner working within a learning community.

Keywords: Identity, personalisation, tools for learning, Web2.0, research

Introduction

This paper argues that online learning tools can be developed to shape learner identity to one that enables the learner to proactively participate in a rapidly changing digital globalised world that demands construction and reconstruction of knowledge rather than pure consumption. In this world the notion of a curriculum can be reconceptualised from being essentially information to that of an engagement with the community who are producing this information. This engagement can be viewed as an enabling process for the learner. This requires a conceptualisation of personalisation as one in which the individual reconstructs their identity as a learner and tools are constructed that mediate the development of learner identity. This conceptualisation starts with some rethinking around the definition of personalisation in relation to learning.

Defining personalisation

There are a wide range of definitions of personalisation. For example, Ravenscroft and Cook (2007) emphasise the need to move from the world of the teacher to the world of the learner in designing learning. 'Personalisation and learner-centredness mean starting from the learner's own devices, preferences and behaviours' (Ravenscroft & Cook, 2007: 213). However this 'sympathetic' approach can so easily lead onto notions of intelligent and automated learning with the learners' every online move being tracked and their pathways mapped out in sympathy with these moves. This approach makes the assumption that the learner's preferred approach to learning is somehow fixed and/or desirable and has to be supported. The business of education and in particular Higher Education is to challenge learners and create 'uncomfortable spaces' in which the learner's very notions of what it is to be a learner move on.

Kakulska-Hume & Traxler, 2007 equally emphasise the need to recognise the learners' starting points 'By personalised learning we mean learning that recognises diversity, difference and individuality in the ways

the learning is developed, delivered and supported.’ (Kakulska-Hume & Traxler, 2007: 184) However these authors emphasise context and authenticity as central to a personalised learning experience.

Mayes & de Freitas (2007) articulate a Web2.0 notion of personalisation. They suggest that ‘some of the rapidly developing web tools for learning (Web 2.0) do provide the fully empowered e-learner with greater flexibility in control of their own learning through processes allowing rich dialogue with others with whom the learner can identify’ (Mayes & de Freitas 2007: 21). It is this level of control over learning in contexts where the learner can identify with others that is central to the notion of personalisation that will be explored in this paper. It is argued that there should be an expectation that learners engage in these new ways of learning in order to develop the new literacy skills associated with new learning technologies and develop new identities as learners.

In this paper personalised online learning activities are considered to be authentic learning activities with which the learner can identify and in which their notions of being a learner are challenged. This will be explored within the context of two online tools for learning that the author has designed. The first tool, V-ResORT supports beginning researchers to develop their understanding of the research process through an exploration of video streams of researcher narratives. The second tool, originally perceived as complementing V-ResORT, is of much wider application. This is the ViP which allows learners to upload their own media and construct their own discourse around their upload in online learner communities. However why V-ResORT and ViP have been termed tools for learning is considered first.

Tools versus resources for learning

The term tool for learning is used within the paper and a distinction is made between a resource and a tool. ‘Resources are content based artefacts that use various representations such as text, images, moving images and sound.’ (Beetham, 2007: 33). The Vygotskian perspective is that tools play a mediational role in the construction of knowledge, a change in tool has the potential to change the structure of a learning activity (Vygotsky, 1981). It can be argued that both V-ResORT and ViP are tools for learning as they are not simply repositories of content. In this paper it is argued that online resources when combined with pedagogic features such as powerful navigation, suggested learning pathways, opportunities to upload resources and make meaning of them etc. constitute tools for learning. The role of the technology itself is to some extent under-emphasised in the literature, for example ‘e-learning is fundamentally about learning and not about technology. Strategic development of e-learning should be based on the needs and demands of the learner and the quality of their education experience’ (SFEFC/SHEFC, 2003: 7). I would not disagree with this except that the nature of the tool itself can serve to be disruptive and it can shape the personalised learning experience. It is important to emphasise a Vygotskian perspective that e-learning is fundamentally about the technology mediating learning.

Virtual resources for online research training (V-ResORT)

V-ResORT, a Higher Education Council for England funded project (2004-8), has developed a freely available online resource to support the training of educational studies research students at Masters and Doctoral level. The project involved four UK partner universities, the Universities of Sheffield, Bath and Canterbury Christ Church and was led by the University of Nottingham, with a wider number of institutions contributing resources as a result of the action research development process. Central to the design is the recognition that video narratives can present authentic multiple representations of ‘real’ researchers projecting their knowledge and experience of the research process, can show complexity and the contested nature of educational research and can help to build online learning communities.

The website has sophisticated navigation features and suggested learning pathways that allow the learner to use this tool for learning to meet their personal needs. Importantly the resource provides opportunities for students to identify themselves as part of a network of research students, a network of researchers and a network of distance learners. This is a particular strength of the video narrative approach, but it is also strengthened by the underlying conceptual framework that was developed at the start of the project. This consists of six main questions that could be asked of any researcher or about any research that can represent their research journey. This framework has been found to be highly successful in revealing authentic research ‘stories’ that research students can find connections with. These questions are:

1. Where did the ideas for the research come from?
2. What is the aim/purpose of the research?
3. Why were the theoretical and methodological approaches chosen?

4. How was your research project designed and conducted? - How? When? Who with? Where?
5. How was the research reported and communicated to a range of audiences?
6. What happened to the research after it was completed?

The main navigation page shown in figure 1 contains these six questions represented as a research journey and the profile of one of the researchers is shown. Figure 2 illustrates one of the video narrative clips for this researcher. Learners can select a question, a researcher and then one of the short video clips shown. Selection of one researcher and then questions will reveal a complete research journey. Selection of a question and then the researchers in turn enables comparisons between all of the researchers for a particular question to be made.



Figure 1: The research journey and a researcher profile

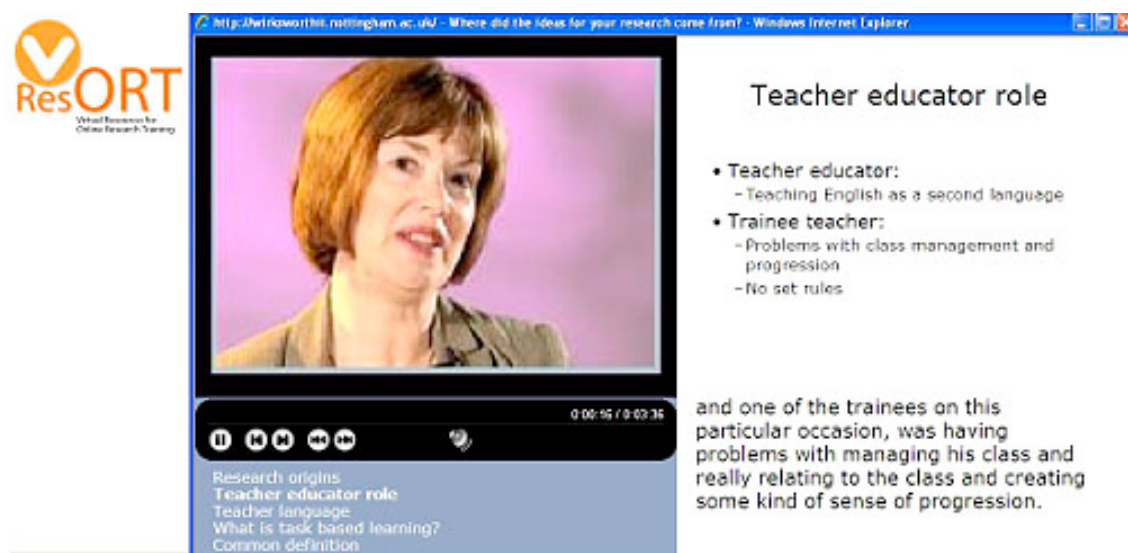


Figure 2: A research narrative

A key feature of the V-ResORT website is the way the materials are integrated into a meaningful learning resource. The complete research narratives are linked to reports, articles, data, thesis chapters and other useful online and text based resources. Skills training is provided that relates directly to skills referred to within the narratives, i.e. the use of interviews, focus groups, data analysis software. Figure 3 shows a skills based training video clip covering approaches to writing at research degree level which is also used for analysis of the conduct of focus groups.



Figure 3: Skills training: discussing writing and analysing the focus group

Discussant narratives are also included that explore general methodological issues that arise directly from the research narratives. This internal referencing was a deliberate pedagogic choice, the researcher narrative providing context and meaning for the learner - something research methodology texts often fail to do.

Figure 1 represents one approach to navigation around the video narratives. A second approach uses a key word search facility as shown in Figure 4. If a lecturer or a student enters a key word such as 'ethics' all the video narrative clips that engage with this issues are presented. This was thought to be of particular use in research training within taught components of research courses.

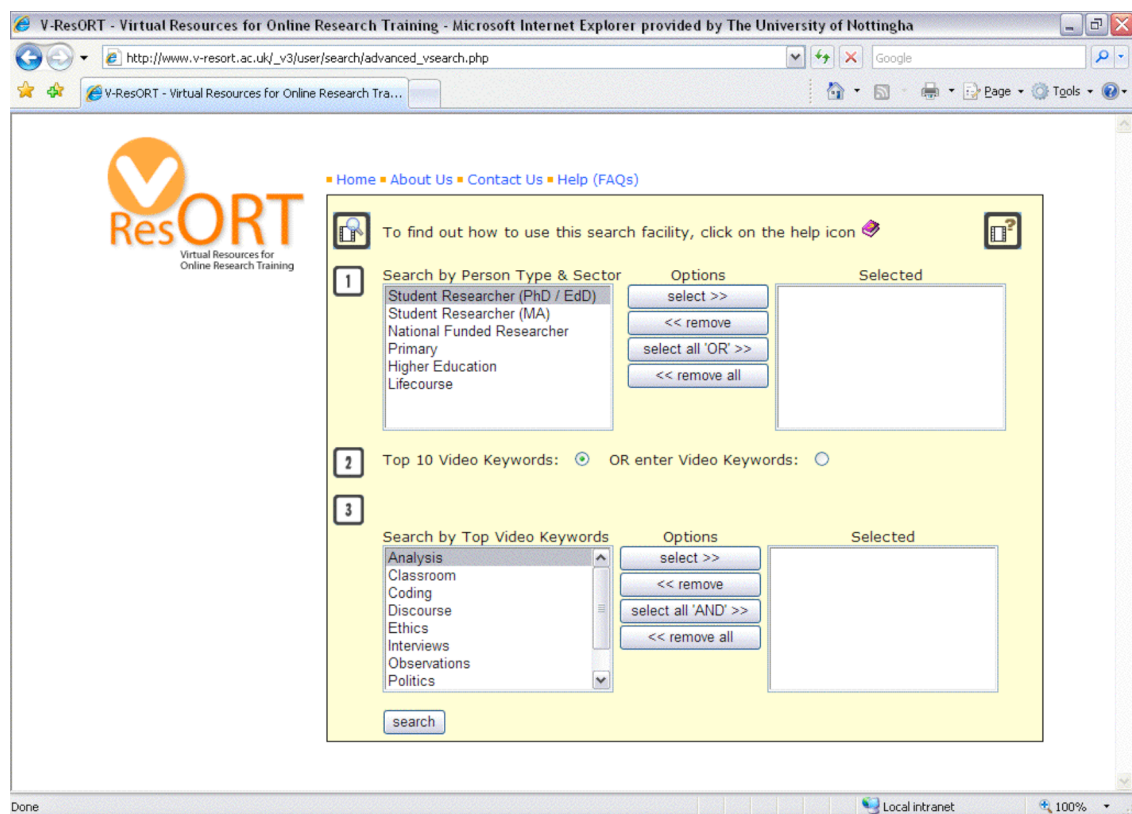


Figure 4: Key word search facility

The action research approach used to develop V-ResORT is explained in detail elsewhere (Joyes & Banks, 2008), but involved a series of workshops with HEIs in the UK to demonstrate early versions of the website at which ideas for resources and video narratives were gathered - as a result seven institutions contributed video narratives. The following section explores the impact of the resource from a personalised learning perspective.

Personalised learning

V-ResORT was designed to provide opportunities for personalised learning not simply because of its inbuilt pedagogic flexibility, but importantly because it presents an authentic learning context with which the learner can identify and in which their notions of being a learner/researcher are challenged. To gain a measure of the impact of V-ResORT evaluation data was gathered in a range of ways during the project. For the nearly 3000 registered users (both tutors and students) during 2007, email contact was made to request completion of a survey. Follow up telephone interviews were conducted with volunteer respondents who identified that they were using the website in interesting ways and stated that they were willing to be interviewed.

This survey and telephone interview data provides evidence of student as well as lecturer learning.

I looked through the materials (I think it was the first three) which stimulated thinking on research design. I liked the videos and the *link to a paper written by the person whose research I was most interested in*. (Senior Lecturer at a post 1992 university.)

In this instance the lecturer was to some extent a beginning researcher themselves and they were using the resources for their personal development needs. Lecturers who had been introduced to the materials as part of their research training were also recommending the materials for their students who were also undergoing research training. There is also evidence from within a Masters in Research Methods course, in which we had access to the discussion forum and blog activities, where the students were actively using the V-ResORT materials. One of these students volunteered to be interviewed and confirmed the online evidence from the course about the impact of the resources.

I met this resource as part of my masters course in research methods and found the video narratives compulsive viewing. I particularly liked the Patya video as *I related to the ways she seemed to be still exploring the methodological issues*. I watched this from start to finish one evening at home, it was so useful in developing an understanding of the real research process. The course readers are of course helpful but the video brought the research process alive for me. (Masters student at a pre 1992 UK university.)

There was evidence that the resources were useful at all stages of the research process not just in initial research training. This student was using the resource at the end of her doctorate and gives a sense of ways the resource can help a student overcome the sense of isolation that can be felt at this stage.

At my stage (final months of PhD write-up) the resources are valuable for those of us (probably most of us) working at a distance from our institutions ... it is nice to *feel part of a wider network of people* going through the same agony! (Professional Doctoral student at a pre 1992 UK university.)

The words highlighted in the quotes above provide evidence of the ways the resource provides opportunities for learners to identify themselves as part of a network of researchers - developing their sense of being part of a community. This is a particular strength of the video narrative approach, but it is also strengthened by the underlying conceptual framework that was developed at the start of the project.

The virtual interactive platform (ViP)

The Virtual Interactive Platform (ViP) was originally conceived as a complementary tool to support V-ResORT. It has been developed by the educational development: innovations technology lab (ed:it) at the University of Nottingham, UK <http://editlab.nottingham.ac.uk>. Strengths of V-ResORT are the quality of the video and the ways all the resources are integrated and are easily searchable. This strength comes at a cost, video is captured professionally, a story board is created, the video is segmented, transcriptions and PowerPoints are constructed and these resources are combined and uploaded to the video streaming server. Key search words and resources are then added and then the video can be viewed in its draft form and after revisions it can then go live. This is an expensive process and not user centric. The ViP is a

more flexible tool for learning in that it allows anyone to upload media (video, audio, animation, text) to the ViP server - see figure 5. It combines the best Web 2.0 concepts of Facebook and YouTube with features of a personal learning environment and as such is a social learning multimedia platform. The platform allows any user to:

- Upload a video, audio file, picture or animation;
- Add a set of commentaries and online resources around the media;
- Create groups of users and friends;
- Build a session/lesson around the multimedia;
- Engage in an interactive discussion by directly linking to snippets of the video or media;
- Share sessions amongst public and private groups.

A key feature is the way the author can add their commentary to their uploaded media. For example in the case of a video, the author can identify places in the video where they wish to add commentary and resources. This enables them to add meaning to the video. Any number of clips can be added to a media set within ViP and any number of 'media sets' can be included in a 'session' in which a discussion can take place. Importantly the author can select to keep their session containing video/videos private or share this within a small group or make this openly available. The author can invite others to add their own ideas around the video/s in the discussion forum and so multiple perspectives can be shared around the same video/s. Within the discussion users can select video clips within any of the video files present and point to these from the text - acting like video quotes. The reader of the post can read the text and select the video quote which will play the relevant video clip. This feature aids meaning making particularly when there is more than one media file present.

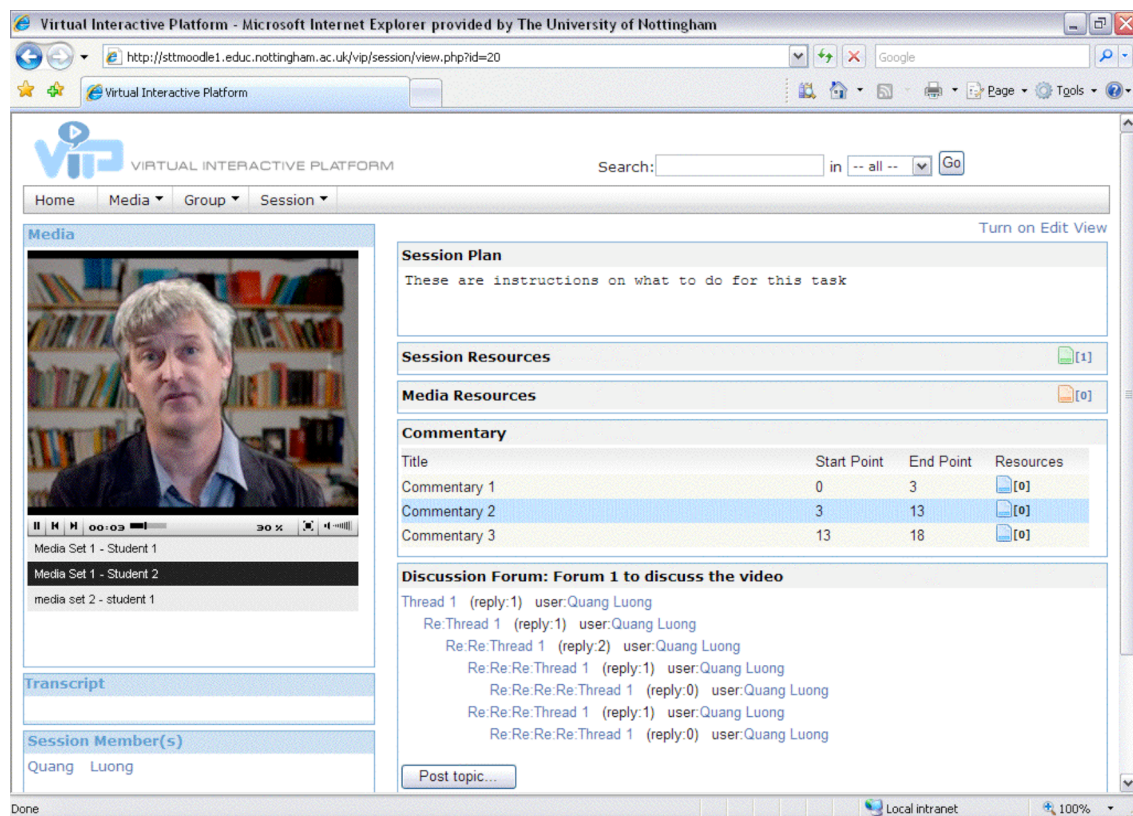


Figure 5: Virtual interactive platform showing video, commentary and discussion

The original idea for the context for use was to enable the uploading of practice research interviews and focus groups. The notion was that research students could discuss and develop their practice through a community of discourse within the safety of an online and private group. However it is currently being piloted with small groups of teachers in technology rich schools in Malaysia as part of a research project led by Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and involving the University of Nottingham, UK. The twenty teachers from five schools are sharing videos of classroom use of new learning technologies within three subject based online communities of practice - English, Maths and Science. In this project they are establishing their personal narratives around their practice and identifying key pedagogic issues for collaborative enquiry. This learning context is a radical departure from the 'top down' training these

teachers are used to - one which has failed to move their practice forwards. (Lee, 2007; Siti Suria Salim & Mohd. Nor, 2005). This research is exploring this personalised approach to continuing professional development - one in which self theories and new identities are forged. Luarillard (2007) makes a distinction between those who can simply “process” information and those who can glimpse opportunities and create new methods to sort out problems. What is increasingly valued globally are learners that not only can search and evaluate information but can work with others to generate new knowledge, can provide their own local contextualisation and experience to solve problems - the ViP is a visual learning tool designed to support this process.

Concluding remarks

As stated earlier in this paper personalised online learning activities are considered to be authentic learning activities with which the learner can identify and in which their notions of being a learner are challenged. V-ResORT supports beginning researchers to develop their understanding of the research process through an exploration of video streams of researcher narratives. The authenticity of the materials is supported not just by the fact that many of the narratives are provided by Doctoral and Masters students, but due to the conceptual framework and the nature of the ‘real’ language all the researchers use within their narratives.

Wenger’s notion that the ‘reification’ (stratification and codification) of knowledge provides a barrier to those new to a discipline gives an insight into the reasons why beginning research can often be problematic, not only for research students but for new lecturers in education. ‘There is a pedagogical cost to reifying that requires additional work - even possibly, a new practice - to make sense of the reification’ (Wenger 1998, p. 264). The reified account of the research process provides a rather tidy separation of choice of methodology, methods, field work, analysis and writing. Research within the project found that researchers talk quite openly of the messiness of the whole process adhering to a complexity model rather than a more simplistic one. The conceptual framework allows for the description of this complex process. For example, question 4 (How was your research project designed and conducted? - How? When? Who with? Where?) allows for literature review, fieldwork, analysis, further fieldwork, refining of research questions etc. to be reported in the ways the process happened. This tends not to be the ways research is reported in the literature which can represent the process as being more linear and ordered and we would argue that the latter is a confusing misrepresentation for those new to the area and an approach students cannot easily identify with - representing a barrier to their identity as members of a researcher community. This paper argues that in addition to the fact that the navigation allows for flexibility of use it is this authenticity that personalises V-ResORT for the target learners. This authentic language provides a means by which learners can begin to identify with themselves as being part of this leaning community and not outside of it - there is a change in learner identity. The ViP similarly personalises learning, but has features that help the learner co-construct new understandings and knowledge. This provides the potential for shaping the identity of the learner from consumer to producer.

There is a need for tools for learning that support personalisation - ones in which the context is perceived as being authentic to the learner so that they can develop an identity as part of a community. In addition there is a need to create ‘safe’ places for learners to explore and co-construct meaning - to structure learning as a process in which new and original knowledge is created rather than simply consumed. It is unlikely that these tools for learning will be fully developed outside of educational institutions and indicates a gap within Web 2.0 applications that is unlikely to be filled by companies such as Google or Yahoo, though Google groups does provide some facility for this.

In the spirit of open education and research articulated by Laurillard (2007), V-ResORT is available at <http://www.v-resort.ac.uk/> and is free for anyone to use as a learner resource and as an example of a tool that may be of use in informing the development of other tools for learning. The author currently has a research student exploring the impact of the ViP on teacher identity in the professional development project in Malaysia. He is keen to further explore the use of the above tools for learning in new contexts to further this research and invites those who wish to engage with this to contact him.

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Please cite as: Joyes, G. (2008). Challenging online learner identity through online learning tools. In *Hello! Where are you in the landscape of educational technology? Proceedings ascilite Melbourne 2008*. <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2008.2410>

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