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PERSONAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS: USING SymbalooEDU IN LEARNING ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

Abstract

Social and technological changes over the last 25 years mean that teachers are now faced with the challenge of utilizing technology to support their student's digital literacy development. This article reports on how the online curation software platform SymbalooEDU was used to support undergraduate and postgraduate learners of English for Academic Purposes (EAP). The pedagogical theories behind personal learning environments (PLEs) are reviewed and then considered in the interpretation of data from two student surveys – a needs analysis of student's E-learning preferences, and a feedback survey about student perceptions and experiences of using SymbalooEDU to support their academic English learning. The results indicate that the students found the software beneficial for learning EAP but that the use of social learning was restricted by the way in which instructors set up and administered the social media in their courses. Educators need to be cognizant of the role they play in helping EAP learners develop their PLEs. Crucially, social media use in PLEs is not an activity whereby educators simply let the students take center stage. Its use has to be appropriately scaffolded and modelled to enable students to engage in meaningful peer mentoring, learning and teaching.

Key words

E-learning, English for academic purposes, social media, digital literacy, SymbalooEDU.

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Sažetak

Zahvaljujući društvenim i tehnološkim promenama u poslednjih pola veka, nastavnici se danas suočavaju sa izazovom korišćenja tehnologije kao podrške razvoju digitalne pismenosti svojih učenika. U ovom radu prikazujemo korišćenje pomoćne platforme SymbalooEDU u učenju engleskog za akademske potrebe kod studenata diplomskih i poslediplomskih studija. Dajemo prikaz pedagoških teorija o ličnim okruženjima za učenje i u svetlu njih interpretiramo podatke dobijene putem dve ankete: jedna je analizirala potrebe studenata na osnovu njihovih sklonosti u pogledu elektronskog učenja, dok su putem druge prikupljeni utisci i iskustva studenata u korišćenju platforme SymbalooEDU u učenju engleskog za akademske potrebe. Rezultati ankete ukazuju da studenti platformu smatraju korisnom u učenju engleskog za akademske potrebe, ali da je učenje bilo ograničeno načinom postavke i administriranja društvenih medija od strane profesora na kursevima. Nastavnici treba da budu svesni svoje uloge u razvoju ličnih okruženja za učenje svojih studenata. Društveni mediji nisu aktivnost u kojoj nastavnici treba studentima da prepuste centralnu ulogu. Njihovo korišćenje treba potpomagati i usmeravati, kako bi studenti na pravi način bili uključeni u procese vršnjačkog mentorstva, učenja i predavanja.

Ključne reči

elektronsko učenje, engleski za akademske potrebe, društveni mediji, digitalna pismenost, SymbalooEDU.

1. INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Centre for English Language Communication (CELC) at the National University of Singapore (NUS) decided to review its E-learning initiatives. It was decided that SymbalooEDU would be used to encourage students to develop their own academic personal learning environments (PLEs). PLEs are becoming more widely used by educators who are responding to the E-learning needs of their students. They are, as Van Harmelen (2006) notes, a relatively new phenomenon and have emerged in response to current pedagogical approaches which require that learner's E-learning systems be under the control of the learners themselves. This is because PLEs are inter-related systems that create environments which support learners and help them manage and control their own learning. In doing this, students are empowered to set their own learning objectives, manage both the content and process of their learning and communicate with one another in the process, in order to achieve their learning objectives (Attwell, 2007).

This paper reports on how SymbalooEDU was used as a PLE platform to support learners of English for academic purposes (EAP). To begin with, the primary pedagogical ideas behind PLEs are reviewed with the literature on PLEs and the use of social media in EAP. The insights from the literature both inform the research design and the interpretation of the data from two student surveys. The first survey is designed to gather needs analysis data of students E-learning preferences. The second is a feedback survey about student perceptions and experiences of using SymbalooEDU to support their learning. The findings indicate that the university students readily adopted the platform into their digital lives and found it to be a beneficial, particularly for self-access grammar learning. This was despite the fact that they did not fully utilize the social learning aspects of the PLE. The implications of these findings are that EAP instructors need to continue to facilitate and scaffold social learning for their students to fully reap the potential benefits of PLEs.

2. E-LEARNING AND PLEs

Downes (2005) uses the term 'E-learning 2.0' to refer to the shift in web based learning from read only to read-write learning. He argues that the development of web technology to allow written and video interaction has led to a social revolution. What has happened is that the Internet has shifted from a medium where information is transmitted and consumed, into a platform "in which content is created, shared, remixed, repurposed, and passed along" (Downes, 2005, para. 21). Examples of content creation, sharing and remixing services abound. *Blogger*, *Wikipedia*, *YouTube*, *Flickr* and *Facebook* are ubiquitous online websites providing such services.

A PLE is a personalized or individual online space in a web of content, connected to other online spaces and content creation services used by other students. As Van Harmelen, Metcalfe, and Randall (2009: 1) note, a PLE "provides an easy-to-use environment that supports individual learners and groups of co-learners". Learning happens through social activity (Vygotsky, 1978; Wenger, 1998), so students engage in peer mentoring, learning and teaching, which furthers their own professional learning.

Downes (2005) describes a PLE as a collection of interoperating applications that together form an 'environment' rather than a single system. In this environment, content is used, reused and remixed according to the students own needs and interests. This bricolage process promotes and encourages experiential and discovery-based learning which can greatly enhance learning experiences (Brown, 2002). Wheeler (2010) conceptualizes the essential components of PLEs and argues that PLEs encompass more than Web 2.0 tools, suggesting that experiences and learning through radio, television, music, books, and journals as well as formal learning contexts are essential aspects of PLEs. Wheeler

acknowledges that PLEs encompass personal web tools such as *YouTube*, *Flicker*, *Blogger* and *Delicious*, which are used to support learning. He also discusses how many of these Web tools are used to create content which is often shared and discussed on Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) made up of people that have connected with each other when learning in both formal and informal contexts.

Personal learning networks (PLNs) using peer-to-peer social networking sites such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *LinkedIn* are crucial to the learning processes within PLEs. PLNs are spaces where learners can connect and exchange ideas and negotiate meaning and understanding about whatever they are learning about. Prior to the development of Web 2.0, PLNs would have consisted of family, friends, colleagues and possibly educators, if one were engaged in some form of formalized learning. As the internet and Web 2.0 tools have become virtually ubiquitous in modern societies, PLNs can now include a multitude of different online networks and communities. Members of these communities often share, review and remake text, video and audio messages using asynchronous social networking sites such as *YouTube*, *Facebook* and *Twitter*. They also use synchronous messaging systems such as *Facebook Chat* and *Google Chat* to exchange opinions and understanding and share content using text, video chats and Web links. Learners in these PLNs often share common values and norms and interests and goals, and can evolve into what Lave and Wenger (1991) have termed a "community of practice" (CoP). PLNs offer modern learners what they have found in rich learning environments since time immemorial, a chance to learn in a socially vibrant context. Importantly, this learning is no longer constrained by the need for all learners to be in the same physical space. Learning is extended beyond the classroom and occurs online from whatever physical space the learner chooses. In an increasingly competitive and globalized university landscape understanding how to leverage Web 2.0 tools for learning has become a key competence for modern university students.

3. PLEs AND ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

Warschauer (1996) correctly predicted that computer-mediated communication would provide language learners with a way to both share messages and documents and that this would facilitate collaborative writing, as well as the collaborative construction of digital audio and video artefacts. Nowadays, in order to communicate effectively in university contexts where English is the medium of instruction, English as a second language (L2) students studying in EAP courses require opportunities to develop and practice these digital literacy skills. Not only do they need to practice how to communicate in English online with their peers and professors, but they also need to hone their online curation skills. This is because modern EAP university students are increasingly dependent on internet resources for their research needs. However, they often lack the critical thinking skills required to successfully evaluate the credibility of online information, which

is an essential aspect of information literacy. Indeed, Van de Vord (2010) found that courses requiring students to evaluate, construct or deconstruct online materials help students to become information literate. Developing and maintaining a PLE enables EAP students to begin to develop these skills in a personalized and low-stakes way, as they seek out and curate materials that enable them to scaffold their own learning. This is important because EAP learners are no longer expected to be simply passive participants in language learning, they are now expected to be more autonomous and make informed choices regarding how, when and what they study.

This change in how we think about teaching and learning can be linked to the rise of constructivist education theory, whereby learners are seen as active participants in the construction of their own contextualized knowledge. As Jarvis (2013: 392) notes, "[l]anguage pedagogy over the past 25 years has seen a significant shift from teacher to learner-centered approaches". Evidence of this can be seen in the rise of self-access centers on university campuses throughout the world. Modern PLEs fit neatly into this relatively new pedagogic paradigm because they are quintessentially personalized self-access learning centers that enable learners to take control and self-regulate their learning with their personal internet devices. In short, when used appropriately, PLEs can have a positive effect on EAP learner agency, and as Duff (2012: 417) explains, learner agency is crucial as it can enable L2 learners "to take concrete actions in pursuit of their goals". On the other hand, a lack of agency can result in L2 learner disengagement from educational goals.

Academic literacy is more than knowledge of language skills and appropriate language use in context. It includes a variety of competencies including reading, writing, critical thinking and an understanding of independent learning processes (Leki, 2000). For these reasons since 2005 social media such as weblogs (blogs), Facebook groups and other interactive online spaces such as wikis have been identified as suitable platforms to implement and manage EAP literacy learning activities. This is because research has shown that, when implemented properly, computer-mediated communication can facilitate communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), support student writing development and the socialization of learners into various academic discourse communities (Arnold & Ducate, 2006; Parker & Chao, 2007; Lundin, 2008; Yim, 2011). Furthermore, activities that involve the use of interactive technologies, such as weblogs (blogs), appeal to EAP educators and learners, because they can be used to facilitate course discussions beyond the physical classroom (Williams & Jacobs, 2004), support interactive communication (Shifflet, 2008), and help motivate students to engage in the writing process (Barrios, 2003; Trammel & Ferdig, 2004).

Encouraging and scaffolding learner's use of PLEs is the next logical technological step towards increasing EAP learner agency and autonomy in EAP literacy learning. The considerable social, pedagogic and technological changes over the last 25 years mean that EAP teachers are now faced with the challenge of

utilizing technology to support their student's communication and literacy development. As with other teaching and learning issues, the first action to take towards meeting this challenge is to understand the needs and preferences of the learners you want to support.

4. METHODOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING STUDENT E-LEARNING PREFERENCES

In 2011 a survey designed to gather information on how students' access the internet, the internet devices they use, where they learn online, how they like to learn and websites they find useful for learning English and communication skills was completed by 613 NUS undergraduates and postgraduate students. This was done with an online survey (surveymonkey.com) using a mix of multiple choice and Likert scale questions. A link to the survey was emailed by the course leaders to engineering, architecture, computer science, and arts and science undergraduate and postgraduate students completing 12 week EAP programs at the University. The survey data are summarized in the Appendix.

The multiple choice question data revealed that the laptop computer was by far the most common way for students to access the internet, with 97% using this type of device. Furthermore, 42.3% access it with a smart phone and a further 39.1% intend to buy a smart phone within the next six months. These figures indicate the students prefer portable internet devices. Indeed, 41.2 % access and learn online in retail Wi-Fi hotspots, with over 20% of respondents accessing the internet and learning on public transport. Whilst 97.8% of students access the internet for learning on campus, at home or in the dormitory, students learn in many different spaces, with no one space dominating where they learn.

The Likert scale questions showed that, when selecting online materials for study, 89% of respondents like to choose which online materials are important to them; 85.8% said they like to use resources from a number of different websites; 91.5% like a mix of materials they have found and materials the instructor has chosen, while 78.1% claim to need help finding good websites to support their learning. Furthermore, when asked about their preferences about how online course resources are organized, 92.3% indicated they preferred resources from a number of different websites to be in one space.

After researching the educational technology platforms, considering the software solutions available, and taking into account the survey results, SymbalooEDU was chosen by the CELC as the PLE platform to be piloted on CELC learners.

4.1. SymbalooEDU

SymbalooEDU enables users to organize, customize and update mixes of websites and share and use other people's tiles. It was thought that this would be an innovative and efficient way for NUS undergraduates to find new resources (see Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Screenshot of Academic Writing pilot webmix

These key functions distinguished SymbalooEDU from other browser-based sites such as https://delicious.com/ and https://www.diigo.com/ which do similar things in a less organized and less visual way. Furthermore, because SymbalooEDU hosts social media such as *Facebook*, *Twitter* and blogs, the platform can function as a PLE made up of the user's preferred communication and Web 2.0 tools. Because the platform is a software application that enables learners to organize, integrate and share online content in one setting or PLE, it enables educators to create mixes of tailored resources which can be shared with students, who can integrate them into their own PLE. Students are then free to use, add to and share content with peers and instructors. It also allows educators to encourage student-to-student interaction via social networking sites in an online setting by enabling users to simply construct customizable tiles which are linked to uniform resource

locators (URLs) of online resources. Once a user has created a grid of tiles (or 'webmix') using SymbalooEDU, they can share it via email.

The platform has a grid layout (see Fig. 1), with colored tiles within each space. The user can organize the tiles the way they like and a search box at the top of the grid allows for convenient searches for specific resources which can be added to webmixes. The appeal of this user-friendly platform is that it is visually attractive and easy to customize, organize and share information. This allows educators and learners to co-construct PLEs, which provide support for learners to set their own learning goals, manage their learning, manage both content and process, and communicate in the process of learning. Uniquely, SymbalooEDU allows users to add resources or links to projects quickly through its update function. When updates are made to a webmix, they will automatically appear on the webmixes that the user has shared with fellow students or professional peers. Each webmix can contain over 200 tiles and when a webmix is full or becomes overloaded and difficult to navigate another webmix can be created and hosted on the same platform. Furthermore, SymbalooEDU hosts a gallery of user-generated content that is indexed in *Google*. The platform also allows users to link to PDFs, Microsoft Word documents and Slideshare, PowerPoint and Prezi presentations. One can simply place documents of this kind in *Google Docs* and use the URL from *Google Docs* to make their own webmix tiles.

For educators, SymbalooEDU is a convenient place to organize resources and showcase student work by sharing their webmixes with their peers. For English language educators, it has numerous uses from providing learners with mixes of essential resources such as dictionaries, online concordance software and APA referencing guides to specific skills and grammar webmixes using links to *YouTube* video tutorials and grammar practice websites. The platform also enables learners to construct their own mixes of web content and share these mixes with their peers. For example, students could construct a portfolio of information and resources on whatever topic the class is working on and then share this information. They could also provide summaries, notes, reviews and even reports on the topics, and link this text to the webmix using *Google Docs*. Alternatively, they could provide a link to a slide or video presentation about a topic using http://www.slideshare.net or https://vimeo.com/. The different ways students are able to produce, construct and present work on SymbalooEDU are limited only by an educator's imagination. To facilitate social learning, SymbalooEDU has added social widgets (*Twitter*, *Facebook* and *YouTube)* to its tile database. These new widgets allow users to browse, update and post to these social sites, but also see what their friends are doing directly from the large central SymbalooEDU tile.

4.2. Researching and constructing the webmix

With an understanding of how the technology functions the content of the webmix became the focus. It was decided that a webmix (or basic selection of tiles), which the user could augment and modify, would be produced and piloted with students on *Intensive English Proficiency* courses for undergraduates and postgraduates. A key focus of the courses is academic writing and it was decided that constructing and piloting an academic writing webmix for students would have two important benefits. Firstly, the students require a lot of support with this skill and an academic webmix would be particularly useful as much of their assessed work is written. Secondly, the courses are central in the work of CELC, and the feedback from the students about the webmix would be a good gauge as to whether the platform could be used with other CELC courses. The following academic English categories were included in the webmix:

1. Academic writing: introduction, overview, approaches, style.
2. Essay writing: thesis statements, paragraphs, cohesion, compare and contrast, referencing.
3. Vocabulary: collocation, academic word lists, phrasal verbs.
4. Grammar: pronouns, verbs, tenses, noun phrases, determiners, etc.
5. Resources: dictionaries, writing guides, thesaurus, collocation tools.

These elements are discussed and taught throughout the course. Therefore learning support in these areas would be the most beneficial in helping students better understand the ideas and concepts taught in class. Two provisos were made in order to streamline the research process and ensure there was consistency in content selection across the topics. Firstly, where possible, the webmix links were to be to particular pages within a website, and not to a website homepage. This was done to make the webmix more specific and focused on the elements that require most support. It was also done to reduce the amount of online reading (and 'clicks') students would have to do to access content of the webmix. Secondly, it was stipulated that each topic should contain a mix of text and video learning opportunities. This was to ensure that the webmix was varied and not just links to pages of text. In addition, short, clear text and video explanations would be given priority in the construction of the webmix as these would be more suitable for viewing on public transport or in retail spaces with free Wi-Fi access.

Instructors researched digital resources and websites and determined which content would be most suitable for inclusion in the webmix. The materials selected were drawn from a number of sources such as *YouTube*, EFL websites, The British Council website and a number of different leading University English learning resources such as Purdue University's (https://owl.english.purdue.edu/). Each instructor was tasked with finding between 12 and 16 suitable/useful URLs for the webmix. The committee then reviewed the resources and selected the most

suitable according to agreed criteria content selection. These criteria were primarily based on how clear, concise and correct the explanations of the concept or idea were. However, secondary criteria related to visual appeal and the ease of navigation were also considered.

Word collocation, words that native speakers of English deem can be appropriately used together, *conduct research* as opposed to *make research* for instance, is a recurring problem for EAP students. In the webmix a *YouTube* audio slide show presentation was used to introduce the concept of collocation and provide examples. Also, self-study explanations of academic collocation lists were linked to the webmix to enable students to see what words collocate with high frequency academic words such as *consequence*, *associated* and *issue*. These resources were supplemented with a very useful collocation dictionary that was linked to the webmix.

Digital collection building of this kind is referred to as content curation. Smith Rumsey (2010: 13) notes that conducting this kind of core research activity "often engenders profound intellectual rewards for scholars" as the decisions made during collection building have "the benefit of forcing scholars to engage core disciplinary issues". He also notes that collaboration is preferred to individual effort. Accordingly, a https://www.dropbox.com folder was set up and the lecturers shared web links and written suggestions about good websites. This disseminated resources and stimulated discussion amongst the lecturers and facilitated the research process.

4.3. Design and distribution of webmix

In order to make the webmix visually attractive and easy to navigate, different colored tiles were given to the five different topics (the webmix can be viewed here). Two icons were also selected from the SymbalooEDU collection to signify the type of resource the tile linked to. A 'book' was chosen to signify text-based content and 'a person at lectern' was selected to signify video content (see Fig. 2). It is worth reiterating that the tile selection and features of the webmix were designed with the idea that students would be adding their own tiles, removing tiles they do not need, and customizing both the content and design of the webmix to suit their individual preferences.

In order to encourage online social learning, discussion and further sharing of links to resources, course *Facebook* pages were set up to encourage students to form their own PLNs. Social media tiles for *Facebook*, *Blogger* and *Twitter* were added to complete the webmix.

Figure 2. Webmix tile design

Once the mix was edited and the web links were checked, a URL was created for it using the share function and this was emailed to the students in the week their courses started. Prior to this, however, ten instructors were given an introductory SymbalooEDU workshop where they were given the rationale for its use as well as 'hands-on' practice navigating the platform, constructing tiles and personalizing their own SymbalooEDU accounts. This was essential training to enable instructors to answer student questions and troubleshoot problems they might have experienced.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To gather and record perceptions and beliefs about their use of SymbalooEDU, the students were asked to complete an online survey at the end of the semester. Again, a link to the survey was emailed by the course leaders to engineering, architecture, computer science, and arts and science undergraduate and postgraduate students completing 12 week EAP programs at the University. Of the 306 students that completed the survey 95% were undergraduates and 5% graduate students. As with the students E-learning preferences survey, the survey used a mix of multiple-choice and Likert scale questions (see Fig. 3). Although 27% of respondents claimed it was 'not very useful', 73% thought SymbalooEDU was a useful resource (see Fig. 4). Indeed 43% believed the platform to be so useful that they adopted it as their homepage bookmark browser. Further, 54% of respondents said they added other websites to the webmix, which indicates that they took ownership of the platform and integrated other personal and learning resources to it.

Furthermore, 35% of respondents accessed *Facebook*, *Twitter* or their blog using SymbalooEDU, showing that more than a third of students adopted the platform into their daily digital lives. The reasons for this positive perception of the platform are varied (see Fig. 5). As many as 87% of respondents thought it was

easy to access specific information about writing and 91% thought it useful to have all web links in one place. 82% liked the mix of video, audio and textual learning support whilst 90% liked having access to specific online resources selected by NUS instructors. In addition, 74% of respondents thought the links to content on different websites were so useful they explored the websites in more detail. This suggests the students were informally extending their studies beyond the curriculum in their own time, becoming more autonomous learners. This positive feedback indicates that CELC's use of SymbalooEDU as a PLE platform enabled the center to successfully address its EAP student preferences identified in the E-learning preferences survey.

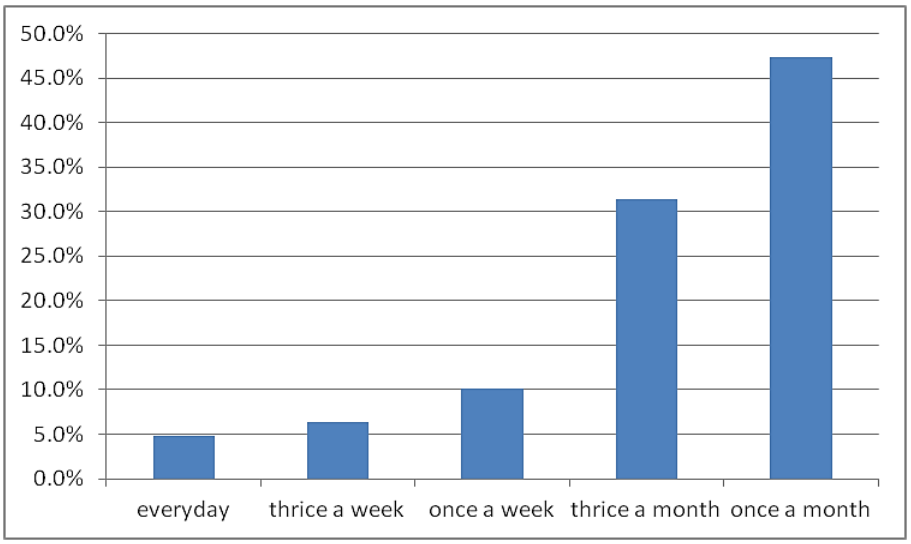

Figure 3. Frequency of use of SymbalooEDU

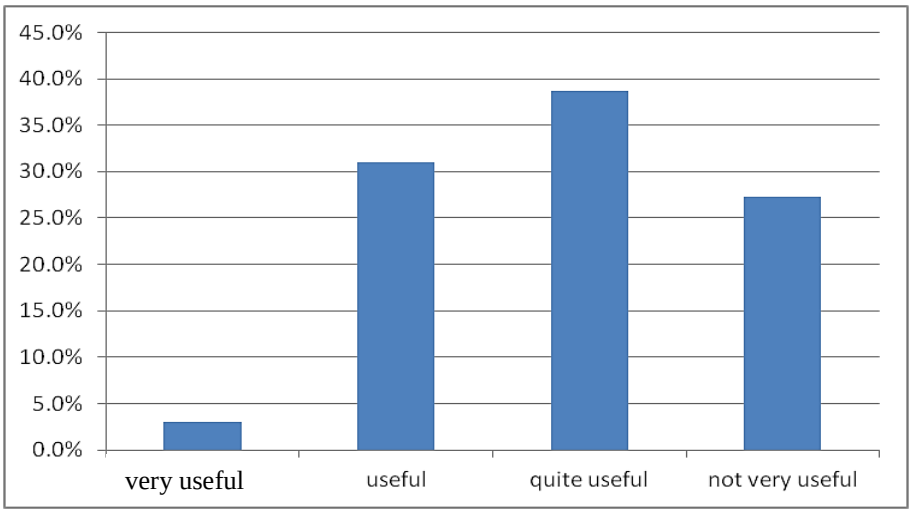

Figure 4. How would you describe your experience of SymbalooEDU?

Although most students found the webmix useful, they found it to be useful in different ways. The grammar content was perceived as most useful by 40% of respondents, with 30% believing the writing content to be most useful. These figures also reflect the learning concerns of CELC learners. For most EAP learners, improving grammar is a high priority and understanding grammar is inextricably linked to understanding how to improve paragraph composition using writing skills such as cohesion and argumentation.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
It was easy to access specific information about writing.	8.5%	78.6%	10.3%	2.6%
It was convenient to have all the weblinks in one place.	15.5%	75.1%	8.1%	1.3%
I now use SymbalooEDU as my bookmark browser.	5.2%	38.2%	45.9%	10.7%
I liked the mix of video, audio and textual learning support.	11.1%	71.4%	15.4%	2.1%
I liked having access to specific online information selected by NUS instructors.	11.2%	78.5%	8.2%	2.1%
I added other websites to those provided.	5.6%	48.5%	37.3%	8.6%
The websites were useful and I explored them in more detail.	7.3%	67%	23.2%	2.5%
I accessed *Facebook*/*Twitter*/my blog from SymbalooEDU.	2.6%	32.9%	50.4%	14.1%
My instructor was able to answer my questions about SymbalooEDU.	6.0%	72.8%	17.3%	3.9%

Figure 5. Student perceptions of SymbalooEDU

Furthermore, 23% of respondents thought the collocation and dictionary tools provided were the most useful, and 7% of the sample thought the social media links were the most useful. This is despite the fact that, as shown above, 35.5% of them accessed their social media through SymbalooEDU. One could argue that with the proliferation of mobile social media applications there are many ways for students to access *Facebook* and *Twitter*. However, it could also be argued that although social media learning opportunities were included on the courses, they were not fully integrated into curriculum of the courses, so were not used as much as they could have been for discussing and researching course related materials.

6. REFLECTION AND SUMMARY

The students found SymbalooEDU to be a beneficial and convenient PLE platform. They used and accessed the resources regularly and many adopted the platform

completely, integrating new content into the pilot webmix. However, a significant 45.9% of students did not add other resources to those provided. This is an important issue that should be addressed because, in order to fully exploit the platform, resources need to be regularly revised and updated by students, to ensure that they are relevant and that the hyperlinks are working. An efficient way to achieve this would be to ask students to recommend resources they have found and share them, and then have the class, guided by the instructor, evaluate the new resources and decide whether they are appropriate for the class webmix or not. A convenient way to share and evaluate academic resources of this kind is through the use of social media such as *Facebook*. Moreover, sharing and evaluating resources using social media is a good way to model to students how they should be using their PLEs, as it demonstrates that they need to be engaged and critical when assessing resources to add to their SymbalooEDU webmix.

As stated earlier, a key element of PLEs is the students' use of PLNs for social and informal learning. Although *Facebook* pages were set up for the courses, they were not used as much as they could have been by the students. A key reason for this is that the majority of the *Facebook* pages that were set up for the pilot study were used for entire CELC courses with the individual class instructor's communication not being personalized to their students. CELC has experienced a great deal of success with previous *Facebook* pages that were set up and administered by individual instructors. Students have used them to discuss course content and share information regularly (see Harwood & Blackstone, 2012). One of the reasons for the success was because the instructors knew all of the students who used the class page and were therefore able to add a personal dimension to the online interaction, for example, referring to issues brought up in class that day or sharing a link to a video mentioned in a discussion. Instructors were also able to bring online discussion and sharing it back into the classroom where appropriate, because they were engaged in the online conversation.

When *Facebook* pages are set up for entire courses they become less useful as a learning tool. This is because teachers (administrators of the pages) cannot possibly know what is going on in all the different classes across the course the page is designed for, which leads students to disengage from the site. Therefore, social learning opportunities should be embedded into the course curricula that are administrated and managed by individual lecturers and instructors to facilitate peer learning, thus enabling PLEs to evolve with learners' needs and use. Learners and instructors should be encouraged to communicate and share information, ideas, knowledge and resources using social media such as blogs and class *Facebook* pages. The appropriate uses of these platforms will also enable students to develop reflective practice and constructive feedback skills through online interactions with both peers and instructors.

In order to promote student engagement with the platform and encourage informal learning, instructors need to be engaged with the learning processes embedded in it. They should be aware of the benefits of content in the webmixes

sent to students and refer students to specific content resources. For example, if a student is having trouble with how they use synonyms to provide word variety to a text, the instructor could refer the student to a useful link in the SymbalooEDU webmix about cohesive devices, which could help them understand the use of synonyms such as *besides* and *furthermore* more clearly. Furthermore, instructors can show they are engaged in students' online learning in other ways, by simply 'liking' a link shared by a student on the class *Facebook* page, writing an encouraging comment in reply to a blog post or referring in class to an interesting discussion that occurred on one of the social media platforms being used. These digital acts are the modern day equivalent of 'ticking' a well-reasoned argument in an essay or writing "well thought out rationale" at the end of a paragraph in a business report assignment. They demonstrate to the students that the class instructor is 'present' and interested in what is going on online, and that they value their contributions.

This kind of reassurance is especially important for less confident learners when they are using social media in this way for the first time. Many students need models of appropriate use before they begin to participate. These kinds of interactions also enable learners to practice and improve their digital literacy skills, as they become more competent at evaluating and analyzing digital information. Indeed, new software applications such as http://www.scoop.it/ and http://paper.li/ have appeared to facilitate the content curating and sharing process. The ability to evaluate and curate online content embedded in webmixes and shared via social media is an essential 21st century skill. With learners increasing the volume and quality of the information evaluated and shared online, the tiles students decide to integrate into SymbalooEDU webmixes should also increase. This will increase the relevance of the webmix for learners and make their PLEs more useful and more personalized. This can only have a positive effect on learning outcomes both beyond and in the classroom.

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Appendix

E-learning needs analysis survey data summary

Part 1 – How do you access the internet? (Multiple Choice with multiple answers)	**%**
Use laptops	97.1
Access internet with Smartphone	42.3
Don't have a Smartphone but 39.1 % intend to get one in the next 6 months	31.3
Part 2 – Where do you access the internet and learn online? (Multiple Choice with multiple answers)	**%**
On campus (but not in the dorm)	90.9
At home or in their dorm	97.8
On public transport (the MRT or bus)	22.6
In retail Wi-Fi hotspots	41.2
Part 3 – How do you like to learn? (Likert Scale: percentage shows Agree and Strongly agree categories combined)	**%**
I use English/communication skills websites my instructor recommends	80.9
I use English/communication skills websites my friends recommend	56.1
I have found good websites on my own for learning English/communication skills	53.6
I need help finding good websites to support their learning of English	78.1
I like learning English from *YouTube* video lectures/explanations	56.3
It would be convenient if I could use my phone for learning English	66.6
I find grammar, reading, writing and listening skills websites useful lecture supplements	76.8
I like to use resources from a number of different websites	85.8
I would like to have resources from a number of different websites all in one place	92.3
I like to choose what online materials are important to me	89.0
I like a mix of my materials and materials the tutor has chosen	91.5