Are we looking at education technologies upside down? Loopd.life provides a new perspective.

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My Experience of Education Technologies

For me, university was the best time of my life. Whilst studying for a degree in Sport Science and Material Technology I had several part time jobs, competed in sports and academic competitions, organised student societies in dance, capoeira and managed large campus events. This variety of responsibilities led to a fulfilling experience as well as a balanced insight into the emotionally complex logistics of student life. In my final year of university, 2013, I began to form the idea for Loopd.life. The first recorded proposition was:

> "to build a media-rich mobile app that combines the social and extracurricular aspects of student life with teaching and learning"

At the time, everything that took place at university was located in either of two online resources: [1] the university-provided intranet system (for me this was called WebCT) that acted mostly as a repository for course content, and [2] social media (or more accurately, Facebook) for everything else. At the beginning of my undergraduate degree in 2008, this division was acceptable as there was a clear distinction between the purpose and functions of each platform from a student perspective. However, during the subsequent five years I spent studying, I watched social media become an ever-greater part of people's lives, simplifying complex personal and emotional desires and aligning the behaviour of technology to the communications and relationships of everyday life. These technologies became accessible and efficient at solving problems and offered new ways to create content and share experiences with a wider audience. In short, social media platforms dramatically out-performed education platforms (especially on mobile devices) and, as a result, the engagement and enjoyment of student life progressed on Facebook, while learning technologies stagnated. This gap continues to widen today as social media innovates so rapidly, however, Loopd.life is one of the first pioneering learning technology to bridge the gap.

The Power of Community to Motivate and Inspire Learning

Over the last decade, the value of peer learning (both as a tool to engage, and support knowledge retention) has become evident and as a result, education is more project based and sociable. My goal with Loopd.life is to accelerate the learning process through better communication and more helpful personal organisation. Instead of a traditional approach to teaching and learning,

Loopd.life encourages greater awareness of community activities, helping to build relationships and facilitate ambition in ways that motivate engagement and hard work. Additionally, Loopd.life reduces many of the logistical barriers (including doubt) that hinder a productive and fulfilling experience.

When designing Loopd.life, the first thing we considered was the fact that students attend university for different reasons, and therefore, we should increase the range of motivating opportunities supported by our technology. There are three distinct categories of opportunities available to students on a daily basis throughout their education. [1] Social motivation, [2] extracurricular motivation and [3] academic motivation, labeled respectively as "Social", "Activity" and "Work" in Figure 1. Students will naturally gravitate towards the activities and opportunities of their preference, and this builds engagement and confidence for the individual as a valued and participating member of the university community. At this stage, through a combination of trust (in the community and technology) and confidence (as an individual) Loopd.life inspires students to try new opportunities and develop a more enterprising skill set.
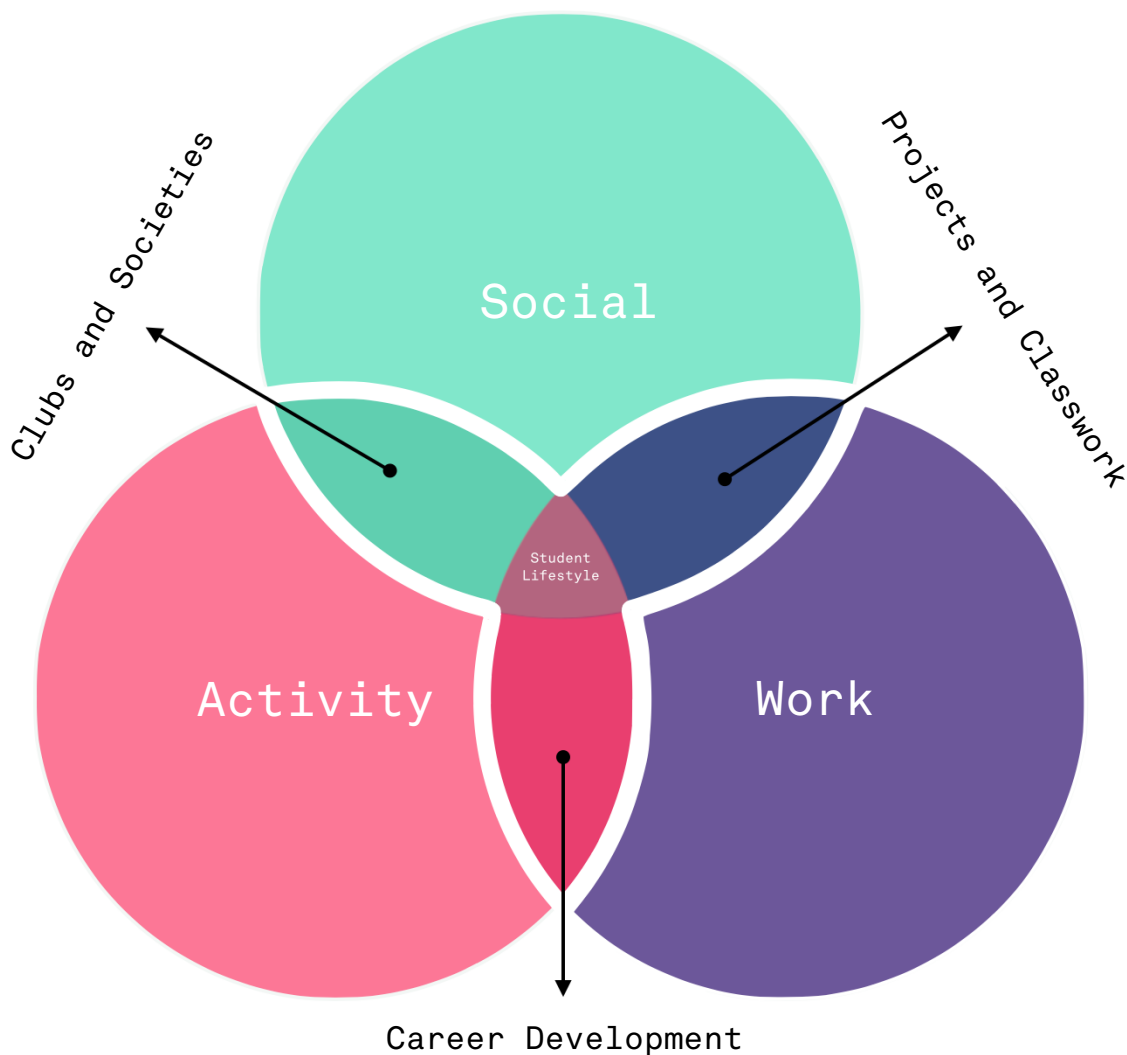

Figure 1: Concept theory of the interaction and overlap of motivational opportunities available to students. Loopd.life encourages a more enterprising lifestyle and education.

The Engineering Challenge of a Social Learning Environment

Crucial to the success and popularity of social media is the ease with which people can create and share content dynamically with others. This freedom to collaborate online enables both academic and non-academic communities to develop rapidly and spontaneously. The challenge from an engineering perspective, is therefore, to build a platform that fulfils social media principles, while maintaining the safety and academic responsibility of a university community.

Traditionally, the framework for education technologies is to focus on the type of information transfer (resources or results) with the direction of communication from the top (or teacher) down to the end user (or student). With Loopd.life we turn the system upside down, focusing on the relationships and lifestyle of the students and their community, and then we invite the top-down communications from staff to join in. As seen in Figure 2, we reverse the focus of the platform from an institutional framework to a people-orientated system.

"We use Loopd.life at Newcastle College and it has transformed how we communicate with students and how they communicate with each other. I cannot recommend it more highly."

Deni Chambers
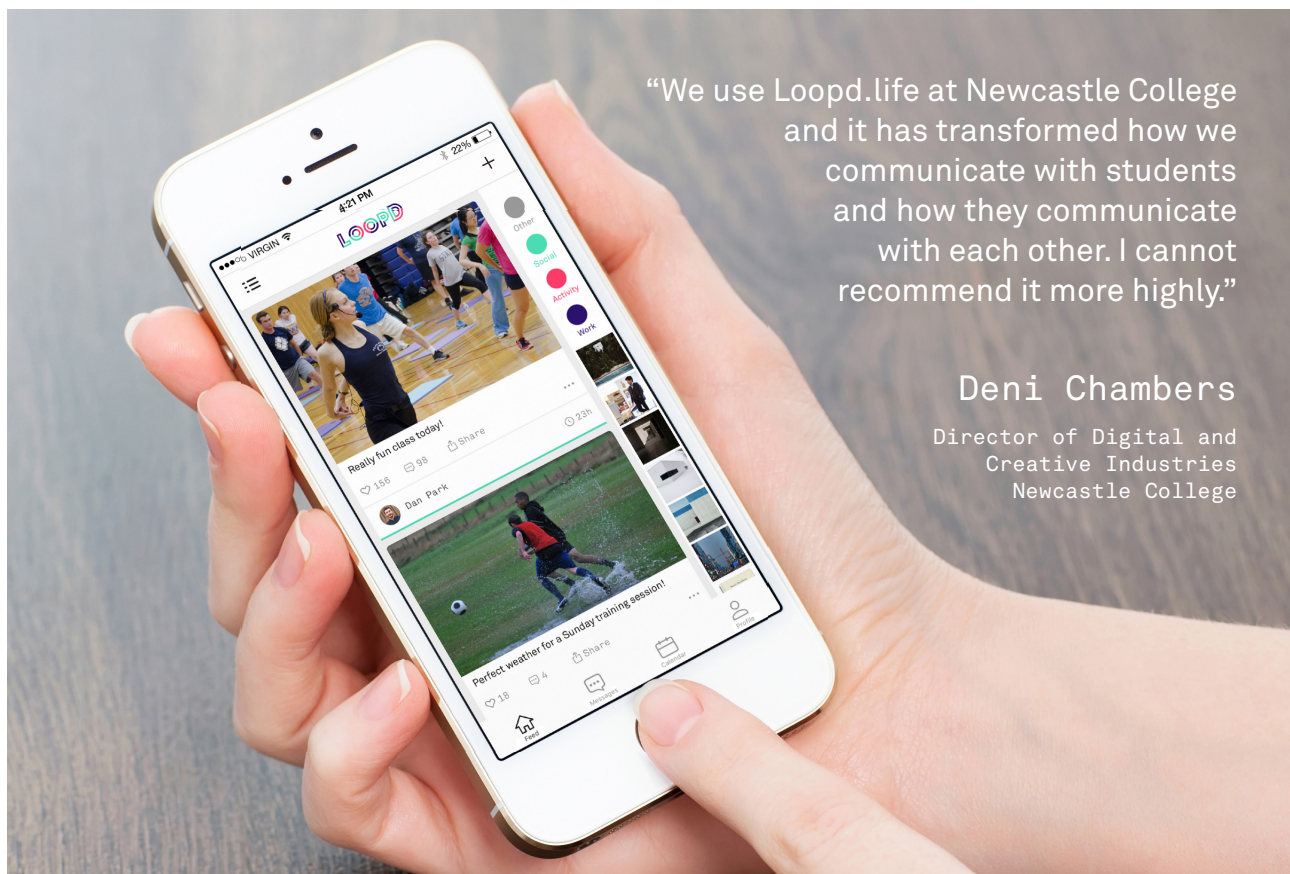Director of Digital and Creative Industries
Newcastle College

Figure 2: Screenshot of the Loopd.life iOS mobile app at Newcastle College, demonstrating a people and activity focus to the platform.

Over the last decade, the value placed on employee relationships has changed the management practices of commercial industry to become more flexible and collaborative, and for a long time, peer learning and other classroom teaching methods have changed in a similar way. We hope that through the success of Loopd.life and the value we place on staff/student relationships, we inspire other education technologies to change their focus and perspective as well.

The Benefits of Loopd.life

Unique concepts: Loopd.life integrates the concept of education technology with the principles from social media to create two powerful advantages:

[1] Loopd.life offers the engaging and interactive benefits of habitual social media, while ensuring the privacy, safety and academic responsibility of a university environment.

[2] Loopd.life focuses on the communication and management of activities, relationships and goals, encompassing some of the most powerful internal motivations in life and creating an ideal foundation to organise and inspire the learning process.

New to Education: The role of Loopd.life as a social learning environment provides two features that are deficient within traditional education technologies:

[1] Loopd.life delivers a real-time communication focus to all academic course groups with the management and organisation of resources channeled into conversations. This dynamic learning structure and accessibility via comprehensive iOS and Android mobile apps, creates and inspires spontaneous opportunities for both academic and non-academic discussion.

[2] Loopd.life is a media-rich application that is visually attractive and easy to use without tuition. This simplicity helps users to engage in all of it's features, creating more opportunities to benefit and develop meaningful relationships that support retention, engagement and self-confidence. Loopd.life is especially valuable during the induction of new staff and students to help foster a common sense of purpose, culture and to act as a visual portfolio of how the university operates.

Achievements and Research

Loopd.life began as a student project in 2013 and has since won several awards for technological innovation such as, the University of Birmingham Technology Award (2014) and the Midlands Bseen Award for Innovation (2015). The engagement and interaction from both staff and students has been consistently high since launching in 2015, with many users voluntarily accessing the platform outside of working hours. Considering the social media perception of the platform, a Pilot Study at Newcastle College (during 2015-2016) revealed that half of the content posted by staff and students had direct academic or career benefit, with the remaining portion equally divided between social and extracurricular activities. Further details of pre-pilot studies (in 2014) and the pilot study at Newcastle College can be found in our research paper:

`M.Childs, Oxford Brookes University; Loopd.life Social Learning Environment: Pilot studies of a novel social media platform for education. (2016)`

Loopd.life has over a dozen active clients and in 2017, will launch in a number of new institutions, businesses and charities around the UK and abroad. Please contact us on: **+442071937939** or email us at: `info@loopd.life` or visit: `www.loopd.life`