Sense of place in online learning environments

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Online learning environments are as diverse as the students and teachers who inhabit them. While one person may envisage an online learning environment to be a simulated website, another may imagine a site where vast numbers of students communicate using discussion boards, email and chat. With these varied expectations and perceptions in mind, this paper begins by acknowledging why a *sense of place* in online learning contexts can support and enhance the quality of student learning in higher education courses which have online components. Using George Seddon's understanding of *sense of place* (Seddon, 1972, 2004), the paper presents an analysis of developments in online learning spaces and explores this concept in terms of online learning, identity, community and belonging. As a student, locating oneself in an online learning environment is sometimes difficult - difficult to navigate, difficult to know and difficult to ascertain one's location as an individual and as a member of a community in virtual terms. Although the benefits offered by flexible, technologically-rich learning contexts often outweigh the problems associated with this type of learning, the confusion and disorientation sometimes felt by learners during online learning experiences is thought to be worthy of acknowledgement and analysis. The paper concludes with six recommendations drawn from "lessons learned" from online educators and students, and those researchers who have investigated online learning contexts over the past decades. It is anticipated that these recommendations will assist to foster a sense of place in future online learning environments.

Keywords: online learning, sense of place, community

Introduction: Is *place* important? What is the problem?

Teaching online is a phrase that is used in many contexts by a variety of people both in educational and commercial settings. Similarly, the phrase *learning online* brings about a range of impressions and expectations, some positive and others not so. When used in higher education contexts, these two phrases typically refer to a situation where all or some of the teaching and learning activities in a course are completed in an online environment. The degree to which a course is taught online has typically been referred to as a degree of *onlineness*, a terms used by many online educators including Salmon (2004).

Despite how online teaching and learning occurs and despite its degree of onlineness, most researchers and educators seem to agree that the purpose of online learning is to engage the learner in meaningful ways in order to achieve deep, authentic and applicable learning. In recent years, there has been much talk and debate about how to achieve such a commendable goal in conjunction with pedagogical cautions about not focusing too heavily on the technology of online learning environments to the detriment of the quality of learning itself. An over emphasis on the technologies used in online learning contexts does not necessarily benefit the learner or improve the quality of the learning. This paper recognises how online learning and teaching technologies can indeed enhance or detract from a sense of place for students in online learning environments, and relies upon previous literature to inform the recommendations included in the second half of the paper.

A sense of place is needed in online learning communities (Brook & Oliver, 2003; Lorion & Newbrough, 1996) to maximise the quality of student learning. This is best done when the learning and teaching processes are at the forefront, rather than the technology. Whereas the technology used in online learning contexts can sometimes dominate these contexts (Goodfellow & Lea, 2007), educators such as Clark, even as far back as 1983, suggest that "... educational technologies are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not influence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition" (R. E. Clark, 1983, p. 445). Since then, we have constantly been reminded to focus on the learning instead of allowing the technology alone to influence course structures and processes (Marrett & Harvey, 2001) and to consider how to cultivate a "sense of remote presence"

(Fontaine, 2002, p. 33) in online learning environments. As course designers and facilitators in online learning contexts, we are also reminded of the value of relationships in learning processes, a reminder which is often accompanied by a recommendation to work in a more "intimate way" (Keough, 2005, p. 1) when teaching online. This paper, while acknowledging the value of developing a sense of community in online learning environments, focuses more specifically on a sense of a place required by individual learners *within* such communities.

Just as effective face-to-face teaching and learning, online learning and teaching benefit from purposeful curriculum design in which learning purposes, learning guidelines and appropriate resources and learning activities and interactions are structured in meaningful ways. Without such guidance, individual online learners can find themselves confused, misplaced and even frustrated in terms of their lack of *place-ness*. Agger-Gupta (2002, p. 144) describes these emerging issues and defines some of them as "self and identity" and "relational spaces", which require analysis in the complex world of online learning. So, although the benefits offered by flexible, technologically-rich learning contexts often outweigh the problems associated with this type of virtual learning, the confusion and disorientation sometimes felt by students during online learning experiences is real and requires purposeful consideration by online course designers.

The concept of place, in real and virtual environments, is one that has been developing over the years in the consciousness of many educators and students from various disciplines and contexts. In some contexts, like the online learning environment, it has become a measure of a student's or a teacher's virtual location and personal sense of place, and may contribute to a sense of online community. This sense of place is often experienced more at the individual level than the community level. Although speaking from an environmental perspective, Seddon (2004, p. iii), for example, describes how this concept has grown over the years and how it has taken on a respectable status, one that can also be seen as a useful analytical framework in the field of online education:

> 'Place' was not much talked about thirty years ago but things have changed at two levels. The first is that 'sense of place' has become a mantra with some, usually in the interests of resisting change, sometimes wisely, sometimes not, at times suggesting a society that is unsure of the future and prefers to cling to the past. At the other end of the scale, 'place studies' are now academically respectable, and there is an international 'place network'. This is essentially analytical rather than promotional, attempting to understand how the values we attach to place are generated and maintained.

Just as Seddon suggests, a consideration of place is a means to analyse our own values and how they are attached to places, so too, the sense of place that students experience in online learning contexts requires analysis for the betterment of online learning design. In terms of the online learning environment, a student's sense of place can be crucial to their overall experience of learning. Kirkup (2001, p. 72) notes that questions including "where are you?" and "who are you?" are commonly asked in online discussion forums. Furthermore, a place to "hang out" has also been found to be a positive influence on an online learner's experience (Harris, 2004, p. 2). This is especially important for students studying in isolation. For these students, a sense of community, location and personal identity within their online learning environments can replace the loss that some students report when they no longer have opportunities to interact with others on a face-to-face basis. The connection between upholding a sense of community and a sense of place is also reliant upon the sense of identity held by each of the individual teachers and students involved: "A sense of community comes from a sense of shared identity, discourse or values" (Marrett & Harvey, 2001, p. 79). In these instances, a sense of identity and place frequently precede a sense of community. Without a sense of place, individual students may not be able to contribute or participate in online communities. For some students, a decision to "switch off" can literally mark the end of their online learning experience. For those who experience a greater sense of place, a greater sense of community or a greater sense of personal acknowledgement, this a sense may be just enough to keep them "switched on" to learning in the online environment long enough to "hang in there" and succeed.

In order to address these issues in online learning environments so that they do not detract from students' online learning experiences, the literature about online learning and teaching has been analysed for the purposes of extracting some useful recommendations for future online course design.

Where to from here?

Recent educational literature has begun to address the problem of how to modify learning environments that lack a sense of place for online learners. When designing these environments, educators have begun

to focus more on the humanisation or the personalisation of online learning contexts (Hudson, 2002; Jacobson, 1993; Keough, 2005) in order to recognise and value individual students' contributions and learning experiences. This movement has developed in response to claims about online learning environments being faceless, frustrating, alienating and unreal (Paxton, 2003), isolatory, inhuman, cold, and even hostile (Brabazon, 2002) and disembodying (D. Clark, 2002) for students. Some studies attribute the blame for these negative feelings to the quantity of information and resources being offered to students online while others hold the actual technology responsible for creating a sense of displacement. Students report on experiencing a "flood of information" (Cluett & Skene, 2007, p. 3) and feeling alienated in the mess of online environments, a syndrome coined the "jungle syndrome" (Hudson, 2002, p. 185).

The comments and observations reported above, have marked an increasing awareness of the place of the individual in the online learning environment and the importance of an individual's feelings, impressions and understandings of their own place within such spaces. Consequently, educators and online course designers have focused more and more in recent years on the role of socialisation, community development and acknowledgement of emotions associated with learning in higher education contexts (Paxton, 2003; Richardson & Swan, 2003). When these issues are acknowledged as being central to learning, educators and course designers see the value of introducing course components that ensure individual learners are recognised, not ignored or undervalued. This recognition of the individual can even foster a sense of place, community and belonging in online learning contexts. In these contexts, the online instructor's role extends their teaching concerns beyond content and facilitation of purely academic learning activities to include the support of individual students and the facilitation of online social experiences between students (Hudson, 2002). Without this focus on individual students' identity and their online sense of place, the development of online communities may be impeded.

Since its introduction to higher education contexts a few decades ago, the online learning movement has continued to develop along a variety of virtual pathways (Anderson, Bauer, & Speck, 2002). After considering recommendations from current literature which has reported on previous studies of online learning design, and considering varied teacher and student reactions to online learning contexts, this paper now proposes six recommendations which are constructed to enable course designers and online teachers to foster and feature a greater sense of place for students in online learning environments (see Figure 1).

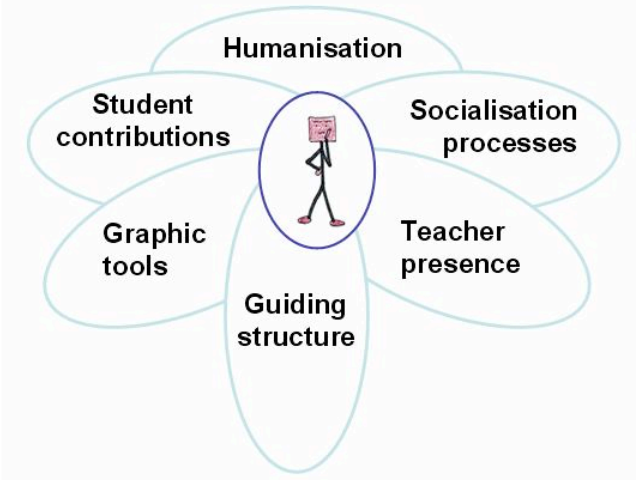

Figure 1: Recommendations for creating a *sense of place* in online learning environments

Humanisation

Much literature espouses the benefits of including the human factor in online learning environments (for example, Herrington, Oliver, & Reeves, 2002). Moreover, other educators lament the lack of "humanity" in some online learning courses. Across the board, recent published literature on online learning design represents varied recommendations about how to ensure online learning environments include a sense of belonging, community and informality (for example, Keough, 2005) in order to foster a more welcoming face in these learning contexts. However, these interactions do not always occur naturally – sometimes they need a little instructional design to assist their progress. For example, short sound files provided for students to access online in which online tutors introduce themselves to their students can be one way of

increasing the human presence in online learning environments. Other tutors report that providing some form of individual contact to students throughout the semester can assist in putting a human face into online learning environments, and this is especially important during the first stage of the semester (Bender, 2003).

Some online educators have attempted to prevent the dehumanisation of learning in virtual learning environments by adhering to specifically constructed online course models which deliberately focus on the social, emotional and motivational needs of learners (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Others, such as Jacobson (1993), go further and suggest that our online learning interactions should be characterised by human values such as civility, conviviality, reciprocity, harmony and spirituality. As O'Reilly (2000, p. 11) reminds us, "If teaching staff bring compassion, empathy and open-mindedness to their course design, then teaching and learning can gain enormous rewards from the advances in technology as the online environment supports the expression of human values". Paxton (2003) does not leave the humanity element to chance either. She is specific in her recommendations for how to create an "inviting" learning space by suggesting that each of the following components be included in an online course: (1) respect; (2) belief in cooperation and collaboration; (3) empathic understanding; (4) trust and genuineness; (5) optimism; and (6) intentionality, all of which relate to online facilitators showing their personal and human side, and encouraging students to do so (Paxton, 2003, p. 144).

Socialisation processes

Socialisation processes should be central, not incidental, to online learning design. As course designers and educators in higher education settings, we are encouraged to emphasise teacher-student and student-student learning relationships and interactions over and above the technology, and to teach in a more "in a more personalised and intimate way (R. E. Clark, 1983; Keough, 2005). Rather than designing courses which incorporate a few socialisation processes (for example, "virtual café" discussion boards) as optional extras that supplement current course structures, course designers are encouraged to construct a sense of belonging for individual students in the online environment early in the learning experience (Southard, Cranford, & Woods, 2005) in defined and purposeful ways.

This focus on socialisation has been recognised by more and more educators as the online learning movement has developed in magnitude and popularity in higher education contexts. For example, Salmon (2004) suggests that the first two stages of her five stage model of online teaching and learning should be devoted predominantly and purposefully to activities that promote student motivation and encouragement, and provide opportunities for socialisation. Hron and Freidrich (2003) suggest that online learning environments are enhanced when chat functions are made available as they provide students with opportunities to communicate their emotions as well as their ideas. When asked about an online sense of community, graduate students told Conrad (2005) that they valued *place*, *space* and *relationship* issues in the online learning environment. These issues of emotionality, virtual location and relationships are evidently important characteristics of learning environments that foster high quality learning.

With this advice at hand, the online learning environment becomes a location where a *sense of place* can be shared between its various participants rather than being dictated by one or merely received by many. When considered *en masse*, many of the criticisms of online learning and teaching environments as being isolatory and inhuman can perhaps be traced back to a lack of this sense of place or a lack of a sense of humanity, location and social presence. As Richardson and Swan remind us (2003, p. 81): "more research needs to be conducted in the area of social presence, in both online educational environments and traditional educational environments." Socialisation processes within online courses are thus deemed worthy of analysis from an instructional design perspective in that they enhance individual students' abilities to ascertain their sense of place in online learning environments.

Student contributions

Course designers are continually advised to design learning activities and assessment tasks which encourage online learners to be actively engaged with content, resources and other people (Herrington, Oliver, & Herrington, 2007; Kerns et al., 2005; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Instead of being passive observers of content or silent "lurkers", a term used repeatedly by Salmon (2004) and Agger-Gupta (2002) in both positive and negative ways, students are encouraged and expected to contribute, collaborate and create. These active learning processes call for students to develop online communication and information skills that are required for them to succeed online. For example, online learners need to know how to analyse, filter and organise online resources – not just locate and access them. They also require communication skills that rely on interaction, not just one-way communication formats. Furthermore, they need to be

familiar with a range of online communication technologies and be able to update their knowledge about these technologies as progress advances. The application of these skills can promote an online learning context that encourages student contributions and the development of student skills.

As well as providing students with an assortment of ways in which to further develop their generic skills and information literacies (Shapiro & Hughes, 2002), student participation in online learning processes can provide opportunities for students to be even more involved than they may have been in more traditional face-to-face learning contexts (McConnell, 2006). Furthermore, online learning contexts may represent even more complicated and interconnected communication possibilities than traditional on-campus lectures, tutorials and corridor discussions (Hamilton & Zimmerman, 2002), chances to replicate the complexities of authentic situations (Beaubien, 2002) and more opportunities for critical and higher order thinking (Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). Some online instructors have reported that online learning contexts which promote varied online communication techniques can result in more inclusive student conversations with greater opportunities for richer and more reflective discussions (Bender, 2003). Online learning environments characterised by interactive communication processes also provide chances for students to relate their learning to authentic day-to-day situations (Stevens-Long & Crowell, 2002). From these observations, it is evident that well designed courses can provide students with a multitude of opportunities to develop, practise and showcase their online communication and information skills – skills that will also be useful to them in future employment contexts.

If used well, online technologies can enable and promote a sense of place and allow students to construct their own sense of identity in a very conscious way (Stevens-Long & Crowell, 2002). Similarly, by encouraging students to be actively involved in a range of online communication activities, the outcome of these activities can contribute to creating a sense of place for individuals and groups of students in online courses. Despite the claim that working in online groups can reduce students' individual identity (Hudson, 2002), learning activities involving online groups can enhance student identity if the group learning activities are designed in such a way to recognise and value individual student roles. When students are given the power to create and contribute objects or learning products, a sense of place can be enhanced in the online environment (Harris, 2004) by acknowledging and responding to such efforts.

By providing students with opportunities to contribute their own creations and work, and by encouraging student involvement in online courses, students can develop a sense of ownership of the online setting as well as a sense of acknowledgement when their efforts are recognised and responded to by other online participants. In this way, students can not only notice a sense of place in online courses, they can also play a part in the development of such a setting.

Teacher presence

Adult learners do not like to feel lost in a learning environment and, furthermore, dislike admitting to feelings of loss and may refrain from asking for directions or support (Hudson, 2002). To resolve this situation, the online teacher requires more than just a presence, they need to bestow a leadership presence (Olson, 2002). To prevent students feeling lost or unsupported, the teacher presence in the online environment is vital in terms of leadership and support, even in courses based on student-centred learning principles. In fact, rather than overlooking a teacher's online role, online learning environments can provide ideal opportunities to define the teacher's role to enhance the learning context (Horton, 2001). Due to the abstraction of an online learning environment, a strong feeling of community is not always created online unless there is a skilful online teacher involved who can moderate and lead online learning contexts (Salmon, 2004) for the purposes of acknowledging individual students' and developing their sense of place within the online context. The advantage of the teacher contacting each student online at the beginning of the semester has also been advised as a way to develop a purposeful teacher presence in an online environment (Bender, 2003). By consciously working towards the development of an online community, an online tutor or facilitator can positively influence future learning interactions in an online course (McConnell, 2006). As suggested by Olson (2002), to be effective leaders, online teachers need to communicate openly and often, follow through on promises, set an appropriate tone for online interactions and be available and respond to queries. A learner's sense of identity, belonging and community provide a learning community with a sense of place – both for the individual learner and for a group of learners, and the online tutor has a crucial role in this respect.

As Palloff and Pratt explain, "the fully engaged, active learner is likely to bring new demands to the learning situation" (2002, p. 182), so the teacher must as available as possible, be vigilant about responding to students' inquiries and set their expectations clearly and early in the course. The way online teachers facilitate the development of relationships between online learners is often crucial to the overall

success of the learning experienced. This is often achieved through the establishment of what McConnell calls (2006, p. 42) "social presence" – a mixture between serious and not-so-serious types of course communication. Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) model of community inquiry also acknowledges this social presence, alongside cognitive presence and teacher presence, as does Rovai's (2002) recognition of the value of social presence in online contexts. So, online learning facilitators, teachers, tutors, lecturers or instructors are not just providers of content and information. Rather, they require refined online communication, moderation and facilitation skills. These skills, when exercised with expertise, can contribute or even initiate a sense of place and belonging in the context of online learning courses in higher education contexts which can, in turn, contribute to an online sense of community.

Graphic tools

In online learning environments, text is less dominant than in some other learning contexts (Ko & Rossen, 2004), learning resources are more varied in nature, distractions are ever-present and the option to hyperlink off into more interesting or "greener" virtual realms is a constant temptation. For these, and a multitude of other reasons, well designed graphic tools are essential elements in an effective online learning course. These tools can include graphic-based simulated interfaces, diagrams, animated models, videos, slideshows with attached sound files, graphics and photographs. Images, static or otherwise, that provide guidance, learning advice and timely feedback can create a sense of place in an online learning environment by assisting students in their online learning journey and by providing tools which aid direction, comprehension and interpretation (McVay Lynch, 2002). Hudson (2002) suggests that images used strategically in online learning environments can provide a range of functions; they can create a sense of playfulness; communicate values; foster a tolerance for individual difference; and even provide structural guidance to online learners. In fact, Fetherston (2008) suggests that the visual aspect of learning contexts is becoming more dominant as students are offered increased opportunities to produce, view and manipulate images.

Just as with other course components, image-based elements require careful placement and purposeful consideration in order to assist the development of a sense of place. The use of images in learning depends on how they are read and who creates them (Fetherston, 2008). For these reasons, incorporation of graphic elements in course design should be accompanied by an analysis of how such images would and could be interpreted by varied online participants and whether or not these elements would assist or detract from students developing a sense of place within their online learning environment.

Guiding structure

Last, and definitely not least, an online sense of place can be fostered by providing students with a guiding structure to the course and, subsequently, to their learning journey. Such a structure does not necessarily need to be entirely linear but does necessitate consideration within the overall design of an online course. Whether the course is based on constructivist learning philosophies (Jonassen, 1999), situated learning principles (Oliver & Herrington, 2001, 2003) or a combination of behaviourist, cognitivist and constructivist ideas (Ally, 2004), the course designer or teacher needs to provide students with some advice about or tools to use to negotiate their way through the maze of information, activities and resources that make up an online course.

Rather than "packaging resources as stand-alone learning materials" (McConnell, 2006, p. 28), online learning environments offer the advantage of being able to link various sections to create opportunities where students can construct knowledge. Sometimes this affordance of online learning contexts can also become a hindrance when navigation through a course structure becomes too unclear or confusing. For these opposing reasons, the online course should offer the online learner advice and support for traversing the online learning context and working out their place within this context. These structures may include simple textual or graphical sitemaps, introductory guides, semester plans, suggestions for how to "get back on track" or a short list of "tips for the online learner". However such guiding structures are included, they are required in all courses from the most sequential to the least linear and can contribute to the cultivation of a sense of place in online learning contexts.

Conclusions: Future online *sense of place*

Instead of attempting to reproduce traditional classroom-based teaching methods, the affordances and technologies of the online environment offer opportunities for the application of different types of learning pedagogies. This is well aligned with what Palloff and Pratt (1999, p. 23) suggest: "a new paradigm for learning, which involves a more active, collaborative, constructivist approach." If we are to use the lessons learned from the literature, from experience and from listening to students about their

online learning experiences, then the future of an online *sense of place* could be a little more humanised, a little more supported, a little less formal and a little less jungle-like than the past. Rather than just simply creating a "sense of *remote* presence" (Fontaine, 2002, p. 33), a sense of place becomes a state in which teacher, student and community presence and identity are recognised, valued and incorporated into the online course design at an overall and a detailed level. If developed in positive ways, an individual student's sense of place may indeed contribute to the overall sense of community within an entire course.

Our higher education students and teachers, and research into their learning and teaching practices, has taught us that human interaction on varied levels is still important in the online environment. In fact, online learning contexts, when designed with the learner's cognitive, locational and social needs in mind, can even foster a "mind-body-soul" connection" (Crook, 2007, p. 34). We have learned that images, structural guidance and the tone of communication can function effectively to enhance feelings and impressions that substantiate online learning communities and identities. More than likely, we will continue to learn more about how to answer the question of "where am I?" when asked in relation to online learning contexts from both a teacher's and student's perspective. With the lessons from previous literature in mind, this paper has attempted to focus upon the importance of developing a sense of place in online learning environments in order to optimise student learning. Both ideal and non-ideal uses of learning and teaching technologies have been acknowledged in an attempt to provide a two-sided view of the current state of online learning in higher education contexts. In conclusion, the affordances of online learning environments can be used to overcome their not so palatable characteristics which may have been more prevalent in the early days of online learning environments:

> The literature clearly shows that "successful" online courses have been able to overcome the disinviting aspects of the medium by applying the technologies to "humanise" the environment and establish a "social presence" of all participants; to encourage cooperation and collaboration between individuals, groups, and online educators / facilitators; to stimulate a much more meaningful view of the subject matter being taught; and to use operational activities which specifically address the disinvitational aspects on online learning. (Paxton, 2003, p. 150)

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