Learner identities in transition: Getting to know our students better through a comparative investigation of two British and Australian postgraduate programs

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This paper describes research in progress, which aims to explore the ways in which learners in higher education negotiate issues of identity performance when making the transition between face-to-face learning and learning online. The research compares the talk of two groups of British and Australian learners engaged on courses in which an initial period of classroom-based learning is followed by collaborative, internet-based study.

Drawing on methodological tools provided by discourse analysis, the project is working with discussion-board transcripts generated in the context of online learning to formulate a methodology appropriate for analysing the 'frozen talk' of the online discussion. Insights from this analysis will be used to draw conclusions on how identities are 'written' within online courses, how this differs from identity construction in conventional learning contexts, and how differing institutional, cultural and pedagogical factors affect modes of identity construction among learners in such 'blended' learning environments.

Keywords: blended learning, identity, discourse analysis, online communication

Identity transitions

The growth in the cultural relevance of new digital technologies for communication, and the location of increasing amounts of social activity within cyberspace environments, continue to impact significantly on learners in higher education, and on the institutions within which they are embedded. Much research in the fields of cultural and cybercultural studies, technology studies and cultural theory has focused on the tendency of these spaces to allow an openness and relative fluidity in the way in which individuals 'write' their identities online (Turkle, 1996; Voithofer 2002; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). By contrast, other recent work in this area makes reference to phenomenological approaches, which highlight the importance of embodiment and co-presence to the formation of human ways of knowing. In applying these ideas to online spaces, this literature tends to criticise much cyber-utopic thinking for its failure to properly consider the material constraints which affect our engagement with the digital domain and the ways in which we construct ourselves – or are constructed – within it (Whitley, 1997; Coyne, 1999; Hayles, 1999; Hardey, 2002).

While there is a growing literature applying these ideas to the cyberspace classroom (Dreyfus, 2001; Warschauer, 2002; Mann, 2003; Bayne, 2004; Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2005), there has been relatively little study of the ways in which identities are negotiated in 'blended' learning contexts, in which online and embodied environments are both brought into play in the delivery of learning and teaching.

The objective of the research to be presented is to enrich the existing literature by conducting a comparative study of two online, postgraduate-level courses in contrasting institutions – the University of Edinburgh and the University of New South Wales. Both courses offer professional development in teaching and learning. These courses are particularly apt for a study of this type, not only in that the online medium used for teaching tends to foreground identity issues, but also in that they offer a context within which course participants – often experienced teachers – are themselves negotiating unfamiliar identities as advanced learners.

Spaces for study

We are looking at two, discrete learning 'events' – one course at Edinburgh and another at New South Wales. The University of Edinburgh course 'An introduction to digital environments for learning', constitutes the foundational element of a taught postgraduate program, the MSc in E-learning. The instance of this course which the project will investigate took place over twelve weeks, in which a single, intensive face-to-face summer school week was followed by further weeks of online, distance learning. Participants in this program were academic and support staff from higher and further education institutions across the UK. The course we will be looking at applies a critical approach to the new learning spaces enabled by internet technologies, conducting collaborative work and discursive exchange across a range of modes and media including weblogs, wikis, discussion boards and chat rooms.

The University of New South Wales course 'Designing Short Courses and Workshops', is an elective course in both the Master of Clinical Education and Master of Public Health programs. The course instance being explored for this project took place over eight weeks, in which a single face-to-face workshop run over three days was followed by further weeks of online, distance learning. The online environment is designed to enable participants to engage in collaborative tasks working towards a final plan for their own short course or workshop. Participants in the course were medical educators, working in health-related fields.

Considering frozen talk

The research to be presented explores the ways in which learners in these two study environments negotiated issues of identity performance when learning online. How, in such a context, do learners negotiate the shift from relatively familiar, embodied modes of identity construction experienced face-to-face to the textually-constructed and more mutable modes offered by the online environment? And how do these identity issues affect the project of learning and teaching? Our research analyses the online 'talk' of these two groups of learners, on programs which are comparable in terms of their content and mode of delivery, but which are each operating within different cultural and institutional contexts.

The study uses methods drawn from critical discourse analysis (Denzin, 1997; Hine, 2000; Fairclough, 2001; Wodak & Meyer, 2001; Fairclough, 2003) to examine the writing genres and modes of identity performance operating within these two courses. While these methodologies are well-established in research in conventional teaching contexts, their application to the study of online spaces is still relatively untried (important exceptions are (Warschauer, 1999; Gustafson, Hodgson et al. 2004)). For this reason, an important outcome of this research is the attempt to forge a methodology suitable to the study of interaction in digital learning spaces. In reporting on our methodology, we aim to contribute to the repertoire of approaches available to researchers in learning and social interaction in the digital domain.

Working within a view of identity as performance rather than essence (Butler, 1990), the method of discourse analysis we use draws on the work of Fairclough (2003) in exploring the range of semantic, discursive and generic domains learners operate within as they textually 'perform' identity within the online discussion group.

Research themes in progress

The methodology we use focuses primarily on two aspects of textual analysis drawn from Fairclough (2003). First, we look at how the semantic relations expressed in students' postings work to legitimate their content. An early finding is that legitimation based on a narrative of *experience* (or what Fairclough after Van Leeuwen calls 'mythopoesis') tends often to be very much foregrounded within students' postings. The narrative technique is striking in the way it appears to allow students – who are also experienced teachers in other contexts – to discursively position themselves in relation to an argument, while also enabling them to perform an authorising identity as either expert learner, or expert teacher.

This theme of the 'balancing' of learner and teacher identity is further explored through analysis of modality and the way this aspect of 'speech' can enable us to say something about the performance of identity through truth commitment, values and dialogicality in individual postings. Early findings indicate that the emergent discussion board 'genre' offers a novel space in which the interplay between formal academic discourse and 'playful' talk enables a form of interdiscursive 'hybridity' (Fairclough, 2003) which holds interesting promise and challenge for designers of online pedagogy. In such a space, students on the courses being studied were able skilfully to perform identities and roles which were synchronously those of expert and novice, teacher and learner, writer and speaker.

Various other compelling themes are emerging from our analysis. For example, in relation to 'intertextuality', how do our learners weave and position their own 'voices' around those of their peers, authorities and teachers, and how does the medium within which these exchanges take place constrain and enable this kind of dialogicality? What genre 'mix' defines what is particular to the pedagogical discussion board, and how can we draw on genre analysis to better enable our learners to work well within these spaces? And, in relation to our overall theme, in what ways can analysis of the features of talk described above help us to approach what is distinctive about the identities of learners online, and better enable us to practice and critique within the field of online learning?

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