



The 'strategic learner' goes digital: Web 2.0 and the implications of assessment when transferring from distance education to online learning

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With the rapid move by many Higher Education Institutions to an online mode of teaching, the changes in pedagogy sometimes result in new means of communication with students. Whereas previously in a classroom setting, or paper-based distance mode, students may have been encouraged to develop their thinking from a study guide, with the introduction of online learning new opportunities have arisen for students to engage in learning both with a text and in dialogue with other students. The chance to share knowledge, develop ideas and formulate new thinking has been a feature of many initiatives in online engagement. While some students may wholeheartedly engage in such interactive learning, others are less inclined and remain more detached in their learning. This group were identified in a study of a cohort of students undertaking an online learning course at a private tertiary college in New Zealand. This paper outlines the response of students who resisted the opportunity to engage in a more interactive approach to their online studies.

Keywords: online learning, strategic learner, dialogue, discussion forum, Web 2.0, affordance.

Introduction

This paper arose from a two year longitudinal study of staff and students as they changed from a correspondence, paper-based course, to an online provision. Prior to full implementation two pilot studies were undertaken with sample groups of students who volunteered to complete their programme in the online environment. This paper reports on the second of the two studies undertaken in 2008/09. The students were based in New Zealand and were all early childhood student teachers taking a six month degree upgrade. The object of this study was to examine the student teachers' reactions to the new learning environment and their ability to make use of the discussion forum allocated to them for the duration of the course. Among many diverse findings, the student interviews revealed a significant number who appeared to be 'strategic' in their approach to learning. The term 'strategic,' in this paper is similar to the term used by Marton & Säljö (1976), Enthwhistle (1993) and Biggs (1993), for whom a 'strategic' learner was seen as impersonal and working at a surface level. In this paper *strategic learners* are also characterised as: looking for the most expedient way to complete coursework, showing deference to what was said or written by the college tutor and accepting whatever was said or

written by the tutor. Learning that implied *sharing*, was not recognised by the strategic learners as 'getting the job done' which was regarded as the most important aspect of studying.

A strategic and individualistic approach, where knowledge is seen as there to be appropriated, or consumed, appears to have little in common with the current Web 2.0 concept of learning. The fundamental of Web 2.0, (see O'Reilly, 2009) is that knowledge is created and validated through shared dialogue (Dysthe, 2007). Learning is also seen as emergent, as ideas are developed through acts of shared thinking (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Shared ownership of learning in turn becomes the antithesis of this worldview where sharing is seen as non-productive and learning is regarded as the appropriation of knowledge as property. Knowledge in this sense becomes a commodity, an entity which is static and unchanging, acquired through individual enterprise. Once gained this knowledge has to be protected and removed so others don't gain access. This view of learning seems to typify aspects of the 'strategic learner' in Biggs (1993), for whom knowledge remains impersonal and at surface level. In relation to this study, the irony of the strategic approach is that students whose daily work in early childhood education was characterised by socio-cultural principles of learning, did not take the opportunity to develop themselves in a similar manner while studying at their own level. Even though the opportunity was there, in the design of the course, for the students to engage or not engage in a learning community they chose not to engage and not to recognise the learning space, or discussion forum, as a potential community.

This paper begins with an acknowledgement of several leading figures in the world of Web 2.0, and outlines their thinking, in relation to the shifts in learning patterns brought about through the digital learning environment. The practice of refining attitudes towards learning is further considered before a reference is made to the WEDL project environment so named as the learning platform was termed 'Web-Enhanced Digital Learning.' The study had no preconceived idea as to the outcome, and the 'strategic learner' was a discovery that was made through the grounded approach to the data gained through interview and analysis of the discussion forums with staff and students.

Learning in the age of Web 2.0

With access to the internet becoming more freely available, new challenges have arisen for teachers and students (Roder & Hunt, 2009). The ease with which information can be obtained raises many questions as to how this influences teaching and learning especially in an online environment. Can tertiary institutions therefore continue to provide courses and teaching structures as they did prior to the advent of online learning, or must they adapt to the new learning environment? Instead of being primarily purveyors of knowledge, should institutions become places for the exchange of ideas? With information so freely available does open access learning, which includes discussion, need to offer more than information supplied in neat parcels such as Study Guides? Should therefore knowledge and knowledge acquisition be reconceptualised in the new online learning environment?

Commentators have suggested that owing to Internet accessibility there have already been changes in the nature of our relationship to information and society (Castells, 2000: Fisher, Higgins & Loveless, 2008: Lankshear 2003: Roder & Hunt, 2009: Siemens, 2008). The argument is made that there has arisen a shift away from 'controlled teaching' to a greater sense of governance being exerted by the learner. This implies students making decisions over the content, and their level of interaction with other learners, no longer being confined by the classroom or the knowledge boundaries set up by the institution (Siemens, 2008). For some, the impact of the communications revolution implies that knowledge can no longer remain unquestioned. Knowledge is instead seen as in a state of flux (Kress & Pachler, 2007), where ownership is produced through interaction, between authors. Aldrich (2009) would add that online learning is an opportunity to 'unschool' students, and create a meaningful wider sense of ownership. This wider ownership would allow students to develop a sense of shared knowledge, to replace existing ideas of scholarship as fixed and immutable (LaPointe, D.K., & Gunawardena, 2004.) The development, in other words, of a 'mindset' may be more important than being in possession of prescribed facts. This debate about information and learning, which can be traced back to Illich's notion of de-schooling (Illich, 1970), implies students being critical, discursive, acquisitive and position taking while being open to new ideas (McWilliam, 2005). For students in a 'critical thinking community,' the interactive experience becomes a recognised part of what Bauman describes as the 'unlearning' process' (Bauman, 1993). This broad definition of learning, is therefore

seen to have a significant impact on students sharing ideas and gathering knowledge in a more informal context (Gulati, 2004).

Despite the advent of Web 2.0 technologies and the potential for radical change in the learning process, set assessments designed to meet learning outcomes summative in character rather than processual and discursive, remain predominant. The resulting prioritizing of assessment upholds the institutional provider in the role of knowledge gatekeeper and in turn reduces the scope of learning online. Openness challenges the institution, and the word threatens the privileged status of the textbook, or Study Guide. However it is the concern of the Web 2.0 educator to achieve learning with reference to *potential* learning outcomes (Davis and Sumara, 1990). For Siemens, this structure is one that permits learning to become the 'creation and navigation of networks' (Siemens, 2008, p.8). Students that are able to self-regulate, develop their learning in a fashion of their own making, reflecting their ability to manage networks they have constructed. In this way the role of the online provider is one of extended teaching, embracing the network and enabling connection-forming relationships (Driscoll, 2000: Downes, 2010). The role of the provider as a space for research is considerably advanced in this instance, as connections to faculty become another aspect to networking. Structured modules are not therefore removed, but less structured ways of working are provided, letting students take advantage of the new learning environment while still observing practical competence in any vocational field. Education is thus concerned with learning how to share information, and seeing oneself as a learner within a human endeavour of seeking change, in advancing the needs of ethical living (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Background to the WEDL research project

The students selected for the WEDL project were 21 early childhood student teachers who had completed a Diploma in Teaching at a private tertiary college prior to undertaking the six-month upgrade to a degree. This programme became the basis for this research project. The student teachers were all working in early childhood centres and ranged in age from early 20's to early 60's. The students came from all over New Zealand, with two in Australia. Only a few had met any of the college staff on a face-to-face basis. Some had completed their diploma as class-based students, while most had completed their diploma in a paper-based distance-learning mode; others had experienced a combination of both field (evening class-based) and distance learning.

The research method involved students and staff in a constructivist grounded research approach (Charmaz, 2005). In practice this study involved individual interviews with students on two occasions as well as two focus groups and two individual interviews with the staff. The students were interviewed for half an hour over five weeks into the online programme and again at the end of the six month programme. The premise was that the first interviews would generate themes for analysis and coding that could, additionally, inform the approach for the second interviews. Students were prepared for online study through a series of tasks that together constituted a non-assessed orientation 'course'. In preparation for the online discussion forum students were shown how to make an entry and how to follow discussions on the forum pages. The discussion forums lasted for the duration of each course which was up to a month in duration. The exception was the research course which lasted for the whole of the six months. The expectation was that students would make at least two postings for each course and while many did far more some were unable to keep up with even two postings towards the end of the course for reasons given below. The staff attended a pre-commencement series of workshops, which were video recorded and reported on as part of the study.

Each interview was audio recorded digitally, including phone interviews with students and staff focus groups. The recordings were sent to an external transcription service where they were transcribed. The recordings and transcriptions were then returned as electronic typescripts of each interview. The interview data was coded and analysed using *Weft* free domain software.

The first round of student interviews

The student interviews were semi-structured to allow the interviewers – three researchers based at the private tertiary college – to ask supplementary questions if there appeared to be more information forthcoming from the student interviewees. The questions included reference to students' past

experience of working online, the expectations students felt that the college had of them, the value of the discussion forum and how they felt about the forum.

Getting the job done

It was only after the first set of interviews had been completed that strands for coding the data were identified. It was at this point that strategic approaches to the course started to become evident. With reference to the online learning orientation tasks, some students expressed a need to know what was being assessed:

Student: Are we meant to do all of those little things?

Researcher: I think it's good. I can't say no.

S. We don't get them marked do we?

R. Not that first course no.

S. But the other ones?

This exchange exemplified the attitude of needing to know the strategic value of any contribution. First encounters with the discussion forum also saw students asking if they 'had to' answer all the posts by other students. While the query can be partly explained by the newness of the online mode, using the interview to clarify what gets 'marked' suggests already a strategic preoccupation.

Students were asked in the first interview what value they saw in the online discussion forum. Some of the students answered by saying that time was a big factor in being able to discuss their work with other students in the forum:

I know I want to be an active part of it I know what I have to do; it's finding the time to be completely involved in it at the moment. I might flick in during the day and read the discussions but you know as people keep telling me I've got a lot on my plate so my main focus is to get the assignments done and in (Student, 2009).

Since many of the students were working full time, it is understandable that prioritising how they spent their time was an important influence on their participation in online discussions. Another student experiencing similar difficulties with time and priorities clarified her attitude with additional comments:

Yes it depends what mood I'm in. I think it's great, you know, people ask you for readings and that but sometimes it's like I haven't got the time. I'm so busy trying to get everything done that I've got to do instead of trying to help someone out, or trying to go through all my readings, but then I know - that's what we're supposed to be doing. (Student, 2009).

Both students appear to want to be a part of the discussion forum, but multiple demands on their time cause them to approach it strategically. The second student however, clearly viewed participation in the discussion forum as a duty to the college, and a service to other students, rather than a contribution to her learning. An interesting admission and one that needs revisiting.

Valuing the Tutor

A tendency to revere the contribution of the tutor often appeared in the interviews. One student reported:

Whenever I go on the discussion forum I always search down and look for a lecturer's name so I go for lecturers more than the students. I mean I do read it all when I expand the text but I look for *their* notes. I know that's sort of like gospel. It's the right one. They know what they're talking about. (Student, 2009).

For this student, the discussion forum did not in any way disrupt traditional concepts of tutor's authority; it merely necessitated the development of new practical strategies for locating that voice. This attitude may well inhibit the development of discussion. When the tutor's ideas are considered the

most important, there is a danger that student contributions to discussion could remain at the level of requests for clarification or confirmation of 'rightness'.

Another student's response as to the experience of the discussion forum showed her to be in a stage of adaptation to the new facility:

Researcher: How has it helped you?

Student: Sometimes I try and get ideas for things, like everyone says pretty much different things so they all help you to think what you want to do, like the resources page everyone is giving different ideas.

R: How are you finding that, how are you finding the discussion forums?

S: It's quite good. Sometimes I think there's so much to read on there whereas maybe I should spend that 20 minutes getting into my reading. Then of course there are the six messages, you've got to read - you want to know what they say. To start with there was quite a lot on.

Here we find a student weighing up the benefits and potential distractions of the new mode. Curiosity about the various contributions of the other students, and recognition that there is valuable information there, appear to compete for the time allocated to traditional learning tasks.

Another student saw the discussion forum as a way to clarify her previous work, rather than share or develop anything:

Usually I will read a lot and finish the entire study guide and the readings and I take some notes and then I start doing my assignment. Only when I have a question will I ask people for help and join the discussion forum. I probably do it all myself. (Student, 2009)

The approach of using the discussion forum to get help and collect information was a common feature of the student interviews:

Yeah you take on board what you want and you leave out what you want to leave out. I found it really helpful when the tutors clarified points or if people put up the questions for the discussion and others started giving their answers. Sometimes people were getting way off track and the tutor would come in and just clarify more clearly what they want actually answered. I found that helpful. (Student, 2009).

Having information or questions come in from various contributors provides one recognised benefit for this student's learning; but the greater benefit is having that information subsequently controlled and valued by tutor. A more widespread tendency for students to view participation in the forum exclusively in terms of 'giving' or 'taking' is also evident in this quote. For the student quoted below, the discussion forum served little or no purpose, although she could see the benefit it provided for others:

For me they didn't seem useful because I participated because I had to, not because I needed to. I can see how for other people it could be very helpful and I did see other people posting things and questions and bouncing ideas off of each other which obviously was a good idea and it assisted their learning. (Student, 2009)

There is something quite wistful in this response; a sense, perhaps, of what has been lost through this adopted strategic approach to their learning.

The second round of student interviews

When the second interviews were held at the end of the six-month course, it was plain that many of the students still held unchanged attitudes towards the discussion forum. Participation at a minimum level was still the accepted approach:

Basically at the end of the day you're going to do what you're required to do to get through as much as it is a requirement to enter into it, they would do the bare minimum and then that's it. (Student, 2009)

Another student stated: “Just getting it done, and in on time ... you know, studying for me was more about getting the essays done” (Student, 2009).

When students were asked how helpful the course Study Guides had been, response to the *Research* Study Guide were particularly mixed. This course relied heavily on the students’ ability to devise their own project, and was the least prescriptive of the Study Guides:

The only Study Guide that I didn’t find helped me was the investigation (*research*). I think it was hard because they couldn’t write a Study Guide on every single area; you had to choose your own area. So that was the one that I didn’t find useful. (Student, 2009)

This student’s attitude can be linked to that of another student, explaining why the Study Guides suited her:

I suppose it does depend on the person. For me I think they were quite good - to just be given things. Otherwise if I chose things, I might you know choose stuff that I maybe already knew about already. Otherwise I might choose something completely different that I think that I should know about but at least if I got given something that I have to actually do, that specific thing makes it easier. (Student, 2009)

The Study Guides that covered ‘every single area’ were seen as ‘useful’ because they provided students with clear directions on where to expend their time and energy. In the second student’s comment there is even a suggestion that the Study Guide enabled her to avoid ‘cheating’ through choosing to study something already mastered.

As with the first series of interviews, students spoke of being overseen by tutors in the discussion forums as a good thing: “I think he [the lecturer] is doing wonderful. What he put on there last night actually made me stop and think! His comments were really good” (Student, 2009).

Getting the job done

A development in the strategic approach saw one student considering that participation in discussion forums should be made compulsory through assessment:

I think it would be a good thing. I think it’s all very easy (as it’s not part of the assessment) not to do it. To sit back, and take all that other people have said and think, “Yes I’ll use that,” and not actually put your input into it. I think if it was part of the assessment that you would then look at it in a different light and think, “Well actually I need to contribute, this is part of my assessment, and I need to think about what I’m going to help the others with.” (Student, 2009)

The statement above might indicate confusion on the part of student as to the role of the discussion forum in her learning, and whether participation is a matter of: ‘giving’ or ‘taking,’ helping others or developing her own thinking.

Some students expressed anxiety that others poached ideas more than they contributed ideas. This brought up issues of knowledge ‘stealing,’ versus knowledge sharing, as one student explained:

There was one discussion that I put on something about transition to school. I said too much, because a few people later said, “That’s a great idea I might do the same as you.” I’m thinking, “That’s not what it’s about.” I got a little bit peeved with that so, I’ve changed my topic. I thought people took it a bit too far, I mean too much information can be shared. (Student, 2009)

Another student was less circumspect: “I’m very cautious about what I write on there. I just don’t want people to steal my ideas” (Student, 2009).

Neither student demonstrates any understanding of the value that may be gained from sharing and exploring ideas together. Additionally, the accusatory way of speaking about other students in the same cohort, suggests that strategic learners may have a jealous approach to knowledge.

The interviews revealed much about how students felt about their study. They showed that while some recognise the learning potential of online discussion forums, other students were not clear about the concepts of sharing versus theft in a learning community. How the feed and exchange of knowledge worked in the online discussion also appeared to be poorly understood. Knowing what to do in an online environment will be discussed in the section following a review of the staff response to strategic approaches adopted by students.

Staff interviews

Three full time members of staff were interviewed in focus sessions and individual interviews at the start and end of the project. Questions were again set within a semi-structured framework, to allow the interviewer to ask supplementary questions if required. The interviews were again coded and interpreted within a constructivist grounded framework (Charmaz, 2005).

The three staff that acted as online tutors were provided with extensive preparation for the online teaching experience, including technical support and mock discussion forums that they had to supervise. Interviews conducted at the end of the professional development phase revealed that tutors considered the discussion forum useful for a variety of reasons, including: developing open discussion, clarifying the assignments, having opportunities to ask more in depth of the questions and a means to build a sense of trust.

The tutors felt that students had to undertake background reading on a subject in order to be able to discuss it in the forum; therefore, it was important to encourage students to undertake the course readings first. The student experience was seen as getting through a crisis of confidence after the reading stage. The discussion forum was envisaged as a space where the students could clarify their ideas after having read on the subject. Ideally staff wanted students to develop the ability to *comprehend* readings online so that tutors could, "... get them to think how the readings relate to the assignment." The online discussion was seen as having little or no consequence if the readings hadn't been assimilated. One tutor suggested:

The whole point of being here is to express your point of view, but also being open to persuasion by someone else's point of view or by someone else's perception - I suppose that's where the dialogue comes in (Tutor, 2009).

In relation to the discussion forum, staff clearly saw the need to direct students: "If you go into a lesson without a clear objective and without a clear plan of where you want to be and how you're going get there, you won't end up anywhere" (Tutor, 2009).

When further questioned whether there was a link between theory and practice, the tutors' appeared to hold a view of theory as unquestionable and unchanging, and therefore a reliable guide for students

Study Guides and Learning Objectives were seen as valuable ways to organise the course, especially for the students with English as a second language (ESOL). Frequent references to the 'classroom' suggested the carryover of traditional teaching and learning beliefs – such as learning having a predetermined direction that was contained within a discrete structure. When asked, at the start of the research project, how to advise students embarking on their first online learning experience, one tutor stated:

My advice would be think of it as a classroom, like they were walking into a classroom, yes it can be scary but if they go in there willing to try something new and learn different things and interact with these people in different ways then I think anyone could do well (Tutor, 2009).

Staff - student experience and WEB 2.0

The principle of an open learning experience, where students are seen as experts in their own right, co-constructing meaning, seems at odds with the approach of the strategic learner (Kress & Pachler, 2007). Use of the schoolroom metaphor (see Siemens, 2008), to exemplify an online forum indicates

staff unawareness of the extent to which past structures influence their work with students in the online environment. Staff felt that the Study Guide lent coherence and strength to the learning process, especially for the (ESOL) students. What is not recognised is that student ownership of the process (Siemens, 2008) is advanced when less reliance is placed on prescribed texts. The principle underlying Web 2.0 is that students should question fixed knowledge, creating in the process a sense of shared ownership of learning. The sense of seeing *others* as doing the sharing, reported on above, may reflect the distance felt by students who did not engage in the discussions.

With regard to the development of ability within an online learning community, the staff asserted that students should read set texts prior to engagement with others. However this response belies a sense of distrust in the learning community's ability to create meaningful dialogue without institutionally sanctioned terms of reference. In addition, requiring students to immediately become efficient in assimilating set texts and discussing them online seems to be an unrealistic basis for developing dialogue. Emphasis on set texts reduces the possibility that students might be empowered during the process of studying online through the development of their sense of identity and self-efficacy. The potential for the community to develop ideas in the 'rhizomatic' sense (see Courmier, 2008) through a dialogical exchange is thus undermined. According to Gulati (2004), it is within the informal/formal aspect of exchange that students can develop their own means for gathering ideas from each other (Gulati, 2004). Emergent learning is inhibited by the privileging of other, authoritative voices, and student opinions that are informed by them. The centrality of the tutor in much of the discussion by students was made apparent in references to their words being seen as 'gospel' (Student, 2009). The dependence of students on the tutors for guidance might be an indication of "too little attention being paid to the learner's voice in the process of learning." Gulati claims it is time for the tutor to adapt to the learner: "This includes the adaptation by the teacher, of the learner's world, through feedback on (*the*) learners' work and discussion." (2004, p. 3).

The value of preparation in an online environment

It is always easier to look in hindsight and make suggestions on how to improve the effectiveness of such a big undertaking as switching from class-based and correspondence distance learning to an online learning mode. Many more factors come into play beyond the logistics of making a new system work. Students in an online mode can have access to a far wider learning experience particularly those who previously studied by traditional correspondence learning. The ease of communications and the combined knowledge about learning through peer group interaction has meant that the concept of what it is to learn and develop your own knowledge base has changed dramatically.

The students in the online experience who were the focus of this study have been designated as strategic learners but that might be because they were unaware of any other approach to learning. The students' concept of learning in the programme may not have altered because previously held views that learning is individualistic, even competitive, were not addressed prior to the online experience. By not being familiar with 'networked learning' the students were not able to recognise the potential benefits of learning through interaction with others (Goodyear & Yang, 2008). Is it then the role of institutions to introduce all the implications for learning in a digital environment to staff and students? This is hard to justify when the approach of the strategic learner mirrors how the course is assessed.

If the online exchange was seen as an aspect of the learning outcomes, for example through processual evaluation of how the student is engaged within the learning episode, then there might be value in developing a more overt acceptance of online discussion. As there was no change in the assessment practices to match the change of mode, there was little incentive for students to move beyond a strategic approach. Marking that looks only at the end product and the students' ability to produce a final product runs counter to valuing engagement. The educational view of Web 2.0, the concept of emergent learning, is thus disregarded. In some ways the strategic learner is quite correct in their estimation of the learning task that it is the product that is most important.

Conclusion

The development of Web 2.0 and open ended learning presents tertiary education with many challenges. The scope for developing dialogue and student autonomy has important implications for institutions when shifting from a paper-based correspondence mode to an online mode. The affordance

of new learning through dialogue and the scope for students to empower their own ideas and sense of ownership of their learning challenges many aspects of the learning process.

As reported in this paper, students can see learning as a chore with the best approach being to get the job done as quickly as possible. It would be a great concern if these early childhood teachers transferred this same attitude to learning in their workplace, and this might be a subject for subsequent study. Approaches to the discussion forum also illustrate how strategically minded students had little concept of a learning community. As a result their engagement remained tangential, as references to the suitability of the forum for 'others' would suggest. Again this would be a useful area to look at in more detail.

The role of the tutor was out of proportion with engagement at stage three degree level and this may have been challenged if there had been more preparation beforehand to assuage students' fears and reduce the number of calls on the tutors for help. The very principle of the 'right' answer is one that has now been overcome in most quarters of the social sciences. However the tutors in this study did not appear to have a well developed understanding as to how students learn through dialogue in stages. The assumption being made was that students can effectively discuss a text within a forum as a first level of engagement. This appeared to be not only unrealistic but practically ensures that an overseer is required who can provide a clear sense of direction to the reading and learning experience. Again, this counters the sense of shared learning in the Web 2.0 context. A greater sense therefore of what was implied by working in the online environment may have opened up to the tutors other possibilities for how they might interact with the students and change their role when working online.

The information presented at the start of a course can effectively drive the way in which students and staff respond to the online experience. If the emphasis is on participation and giving, as opposed to individual narrowing of scope and prescribing, opportunities are afforded for lecturers and students, to wholeheartedly engage in a meaningful, lasting and at times profound exchange. Knowing what the new environment offers can lead to new realms of learning for each party (Dysthe, 2005). If the staff and students are not clear about the nature of the learning that they are engaged in, it is unlikely that a rich learning experience will eventuate.

Despite the richness of the learning environment and the educational opportunities that online discussion can provide, the difficulty remains of assessment practices not being in alignment with the online context. The logic of the strategic learner defeats sharing and engagement practices when the assessment scheme is summative in nature. If the assessment were processual, and the learning outcomes valued the process of learning, then further engagement by the strategic learner would be validated. The current alignment between learning tasks, experience, conditions and assessment criteria that are summative, removes participation in a learning community to the periphery of the learning process.

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