CREATING ONLINE DISCURSIVE SPACES THAT LEGITIMATE ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF KNOWING

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Abstract

Although educators have long recognised prior learning and life experience in their pedagogical strategies epistemological or cultural difference has not generally been legitimated. Knowledge originating from within non-western cultural groups, whether indigenous or migratory has not been valued. Such hegemony has created negative consequences for members of minority groups and has led to the exclusion of a range of possible epistemologies that might enhance learning. The advent of asynchronous models of communication, and in particular online learning, offers possibilities for more inclusionary and validating environments and pedagogy, by creating the opportunity for reflection through the dissociation from time and space. Yet technology does not in itself determine social process and if, like education, it remains enmeshed in a Western paradigm the possibilities for change remain limited.

We will propose a model of use for online discussion boards that recognises them as a separate 'thinking space' beyond the formality of the classroom. This allows us to create new discursive spaces in which the student has the opportunity to engage in learning in way that is culturally appropriate for themselves, valuing their own worldview and epistemology. In a culturally diverse classroom, the discussion board can become a central enabling point of reference that reduces the colonisation of the student by an academic steering media, allowing for praxis-based learning to occur. In such a model facilitation of the discursive and reflective processes assumes prominence, affording educators the opportunity to bridge the gap between the propositional and practical forms of knowledge construction.

Keywords

Epistemological pluralism, online learning, thinking spaces, third space, culture.

Introduction

Adult learners entering tertiary education bring with them skills acquired through earlier study, work or life experience. Increasingly, students in the tertiary sector are drawn from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds, over 37 percent of tertiary students in New Zealand are from non-European cultures (Ministry of Education, 2000). Many of these students bring with them worldviews and epistemologies that differ from that of the traditional westernised view of higher learning. Although educators have long recognised prior learning and life experience in our pedagogical strategies, generally speaking, they have failed to legitimate epistemological and cultural difference and acknowledge how they influence learning (Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 2002; McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000). This is despite the fact that traditional pedagogies are recognised as potentially inappropriate for non-Western cultures (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000). So whilst there is a drive toward creating opportunities for students to develop skills according to

the capabilities-driven graduate profiles that our society now requires and which encourage critical and reflective learning (Williamson & Nodder, 2002), how can we be sure that such models extend far enough to encompass alternative ways of knowledge construction?

The traditional classroom provides a setting where engagement and community building can occur yet the teacher must be cognisant of pre-determined learning outcomes. The nature of the Western tertiary academic system, or steering media, requires the teacher to facilitate the acquisition of meaning towards achieving these pre-determined learning outcomes. Learning activities are, therefore, designed to engage the learner and provide support, offering opportunities for discursive interaction but ultimately pre-determined outcomes must be met for students to 'succeed' (Laurillard, 1993). Such learning outcomes are situated ontologically and epistemologically within a system that largely bases what is legitimate on the social history of a hegemonic white middle class elite (Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 2002). This reductionist view overlooks the notion that learning is grounded in the social and cultural world of the learner and does not occur in isolation (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000).

In order to legitimate alternative ways of knowing the learner must first be able to construct knowledge in appropriate ways and secondly educators must widen their epistemological lens. Whilst feminism and post-modernism have led to less structured theoretical approaches, the tertiary sector appears generally reluctant to embrace the cultural aspects of learning, tending to erase them through culturally neutral epistemology and pedagogy (DeSouza, 2002). As McLoughlin and Oliver (2000) observe, constructivist pedagogies do in fact lend themselves to supporting a pluralistic model, recognising the social and cultural construction of knowledge. However, educators must be careful not to consider this recognition of cultural difference as an end-point from which we provide a bridging framework into traditional academic systems. Culturally sensitive strategies are often derived from the notion of integration, whereby the beliefs, customs and so forth of minorities are accepted and tolerated, can mask an underlying assimilationist goal (Hodson, 1996). Our 'one-size fits all' approach to learning fails to recognise or give sufficient weight to alternative models of knowledge construction. In particular it fails to give value to knowledge that might originate from within non-western cultural groups, whether these groups are indigenous or migratory (DeSouza, 2002; Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 2002). This hegemony has created negative consequences for members of minority groups and has led to the exclusion of a range of possible epistemologies that might enhance learning and has prevented the implementation of teaching and learning strategies that are inclusive of a wide range of learners.

It is important at this point to caution that simply being aware of other ways of knowing does not necessarily mean that other epistemologies are validated and celebrated. Our own research (DeSouza, 2002; Williamson, 2001; Williamson & Nodder, 2002) illuminates a need for epistemologies that are attuned to the cultural location of the participants and that recognise the limitations of current pedagogical approaches with respect to the lack of a cultural dimension. It also indicates that one way to achieve such diversity is through appropriately constructed discursive spaces and that online discussion boards, displaced as they are in space and time, offer a potentially suitable location for such discursive spaces. In this paper we will situate online learning in a socio-cultural context then go on to explore alternative epistemologies as they relate to tertiary-level learning in Aotearoa/New Zealand, finally we will draw this together by proposing how online learning can provide a supportive framework for culturally diverse learners in order that we value alternative ways of knowing.

Contextualising the Online Learning Environment

The asynchronous nature of discussion boards allows time for reflection and the dissociation from time and space (Rheingold, 1994), yet technology does not in itself determine social process. Technology in fact becomes "a mediating factor in the complex matrix of interaction between social structures, social actors and their socially constructed tools" (Castells, 1999, p.1). Further, technology practices tend, like education, to derive from Western frameworks that value propositional forms of knowledge based on recognised skills and education and the role of experts and as a result supportive technologies such as learning management systems are structured accordingly (Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 2002).

Whilst the Internet's role in defining future social structures stems from the centrality of information and communication, such a dispersed environment has the potential to allow differently constructed discursive spaces to emerge. It is important in this discussion that we articulate our view that technology is merely a

tool, a conduit through which learning can occur, and that, here at least, we consider it more appropriate to understand the nature and quality of the engagement that is taking place than the technology used to enable it. We must be able to question the independence of the medium and its role in perpetuating hegemonic systems (Gajjala & Mamidipudi, 2002), since the delivery mechanism for teaching and learning is dictated by the steering media and rarely if ever is the individual learner permitted to self-select media, other than by choosing not to participate, which is hardly an empowering position to be in. We must, therefore, be cognisant that "issues of power may be observed in situations of [information systems] development or information use" (Boudreau, 1997, p.1) and that, whilst Information and Communications Technology (ICT) can be viewed as an instrument for control, study of it is more often oriented to technical interest. It is therefore imperative to our wider discussion that we critically challenge the hegemonic assumptions behind ICT applications because:

> Rather than exploring a situation so as to control it (technical interest) or to understand it (practical interest), an emancipatory interest seeks to free people from physical, mental and social distortions and injustice (Boudreau, 1997, p.1).

One way of achieving this emancipation from a hegemonic steering media is through the creation of alternative discursive spaces and it is our proposal that such spaces are made possible and even supported by technology (in so far as the technology is assumed to work and access to the discussion board is equitable). Therefore, it is dialogue and not technology that will affect the learning that takes place (Williamson, 2001), however, before we can propose what such alternative discursive spaces might look like and identify their potential for supporting epistemological diversity, it is important to situate learning within the social and cultural context of Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Locating Culture in an Aotearoa/New Zealand Context

The tertiary education system in Aotearoa/New Zealand is founded on a traditional British model, yet New Zealand society at the beginning of the 21st century bears little resemblance to 19th century Britain. Were we focusing on a single cultural group it might be politic to develop a single culturally derived pedagogy, however, as we will see Aotearoa/New Zealand's tertiary system is populated by many different minority groups, both indigenous and migrant. In this section we will review the tertiary education landscape of Aotearoa/New Zealand, accepting that education exists within the wider cultural body of a nation which struggles to come to terms with an indigenous culture subjugated through years of colonialism and which now finds itself increasingly the destination for a wide range of migrants. The Ministry of Education's (2000) breakdown of tertiary students by ethnic origin is shown in figure 1. These figures imply that minority groups are at least equally or even slightly over represented in tertiary education versus the overall population, although this is difficult to precisely quantify since the New Zealand Census allows respondents to self-identify with multiple ethnicities (Statistics New Zealand, 2002).

Ethnic Group	Percentage
European/Pakeha	62.8
Maori	15.2
Pacific	4.5
Chinese	4.8
Indian	1.6
Other Asian	2.1
Other Ethnic Groups	3.4
International Students	4.4
Not Specified	1.2

Figure 1 - Ethnicity in Tertiary Education

Indigenous Knowledge
Maori are the indigenous people of Aotearoa/New Zealand, making up approximately 15 percent of the population (Statistics New Zealand, 2002) yet Maori have faced significant social and economic disadvantage as a result of their historical circumstances and current marginalisation within New Zealand society. Durie (1998) argues that this becomes cyclical as the next generation, often failing to thrive in the

westernised education system, are forced to fall back on low paying, low skilled and increasingly hard to find manual jobs. The relationship between Maori and Pakeha (non-Maori) is defined in Te Tiriti o Waitangi/The Treaty of Waitangi. This is the founding document of Aotearoa/New Zealand and forms the basis for biculturalism, which Sullivan (1994) defines as:

- Equal partnership between two groups.
- Maori are acknowledged as tangata whenua (people of the land).
- The Maori translation of Te Tiriti O Waitangi is acknowledged as the founding document of Aotearoa/New Zealand.
- Concerned with addressing past injustices and re-empowering indigenous people.

The organised European settlement of Aotearoa/New Zealand began with the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and subsequent waves of kin migration of Europeans through favourable policies and has resulted in a dominance of this group so that the indigenous Maori population have became outnumbered by others (Sullivan, 1994). The 'other' refers to the process by which a minority group is excluded on the basis of difference. Often the 'other' is seen as lowly and unsophisticated in contrast to the dominant group whose members see themselves as civilised and superior (Johnston, 1998).

Maori developed complex ways of knowing, philosophies and ethical models that underpinned their society prior to European arrival (McMurchy-Pilkington, 1996). As Henry (1999) notes, colonisation eroded these practices, forcing what remained to become aligned within a cognitive framework understood by the coloniser. Kaupapa Maori is both an ontology and an epistemology that encapsulates the Maori world-view and it can be seen as both a theory and a transformative praxis (Smith cited in Henry, 1999). Visibly different migrants (such as Indian, Chinese and Samoan) have also become 'others' because of their different physical appearance, religion or culture, without the status of the original Maori (Du Plessis & Alice, 1998).

Migration in the Post-colonial Period

Immigration is an important factor shaping the economic, social and cultural character of many Western countries and it is having an increasingly significant impact on tertiary education. It is estimated that 16.8% of the population of Aotearoa/New Zealand was born elsewhere (Statistics New Zealand cited in Abbott, 1997) and the successful settlement of migrants is an important issue for New Zealanders (Pernice, Trlin, Henderson, & North, 2000). However, the very measurement of this adaptation or integration is itself contentious. Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) hold that adaptation occurs when migrants overcome the cross-cultural problems related to every day social encounters by learning new culturally specific skills. While Ward et al. (2001) question whether adaptation means psychological well-being, self-esteem and feelings of acceptance. Perhaps more tangible outcomes could be considered, which might include identification with the host population, good academic and work performance or 'culturally appropriate' behaviour? Another model is proposed by Berry (1990) that considers integration as one of four possible strategies of adjustment to the immigration experience:

- Assimilation, which involves giving up ones cultural identity and disappearing into dominant society;
- Integration, which involves maintaining cultural identity but also adopting some values from the dominant culture;
- Separation, which means maintaining ones cultural identity and withdrawing from the dominant culture; and
- Marginalisation, which means being alienated from both ones own and the dominant culture.

Migrants are often viewed as outsiders entering an already formed inside and this requires a constant renegotiation of old and new, whilst continually being positioned as 'other' by the majority (Hegde, 1998). Migrant communities, and this includes researchers and academics within such communities, must also contend with the debate around what identity means for a community that "is dispersed in space, but still has a memory of its ancestry" (Mascarenhas-Keyes, 1999, p.1).

Minorities in Aotearoa/New Zealand are marginalised on two levels: As an outsider to the indigenous Maori but also as an outsider who is culturally 'other' to Pakeha (Jaber, 1998). For examples, Asians are

considered to be contributing to the economy even if they are 'too successful' by virtue of their skills and working attributes. Secondly, elements of Asian culture can be commodified for consumption in the form of food and restaurants (Pawson et al., 1996). This packaging absolves the consumer from caring about "the authenticity of the product, its cultural meaning, its technical sophistication or its historical origin" (Yuan, 2001, p.79). It takes traditional foods, clothing and rituals and creates barren images devoid of context and history, turning the sacred into fashion accessories.

The debate over citizenship has become critical with the renaissance in Maori sovereignty and increased migration (Roscoe, 1999). This renaissance is related to the global rise in indigenous movements in the 1970s and has seen Maori strongly assert their position as indigenous to Aotearoa/New Zealand and the evolution of a bicultural nationalism. Yet critics such as Thakur (1995) argue that this official rhetoric recognises the legitimacy of Maori and Pakeha at the exclusion of cultures that are non-white and non-indigenous and in turn they are then left out of the debate on the identity and future of the country.

Privileging Culture

Diversity in society is echoed in our classrooms and so educational designers must be cognisant of the need to support alternative models of knowledge construction, indeed we must at times privilege culture through the legitimation of epistemologically plural positions (DeSouza, 2002). However, in doing so it is critical that we distinguish between what dominant discourses say about minority groups and what groups say about themselves, if they are given the opportunity (Collins, 1998). Most discourses around race or ethnicity assume a collective origin, whether real or imagined (Drevdahl, Taylor, & Phillips, 2001) and many definitions assume that ethnicity is fixed. Senior and Bhopal (cited in Ismail, 1996) consider that an ethnic group can be defined as having one or more of the following characteristics:

- Shared social origins or background;
- shared distinctive culture that is maintained by future generations and forms a sense of identity and;
- a shared language or religious tradition.

Challenging this homogeneity, Lee (1998, p.178) describes ethnicity as a "multi-dimensional and variable concept, experienced differently by people in different circumstances." We cannot assume that minority groups are homogenous but that members of such groups have multiple identities that might be determined by such factors as class, caste, religion, occupation, village or region of family origin and that these multiple identities are themselves both unstable, diverse and likely to become fragmented and contested in a new land. Identity is subjective, socially constructed, contextually dynamic and historically specific (Musisi, 1999). There is a danger in assuming homogeneity since diversity within groups can be more significant than between groups (Austin, Gallop, McCay, Peternelj-Taylor, & Bayer, 1999).

Internet, Community and Culture

The Internet is an appropriate medium for enhancing existing physical communities without replacing them. Assuming that academia is not the victim of a technological imperative and that learning management systems are used strategically and not simply because they exist, then we must ask the question: How can this technology be harnessed to realise its potential for supporting learning such that it can counter hegemonic and monolithic constructions of academia in a world of increasing cultural diversity? One possible answer lies in the concept of a 'third space', which Oldenburg (1991) describes as a neutral ground away from the formal roles adopted in family and work (or, in this case, education) and cites examples such as the community centre or coffee shop. Commentators such as Rheingold (1994) see the Internet as just such a third space, less formal in nature but where communities can be established based on group needs and consensus, a tool that permits us to create multiple occurrences of "focused virtual homogeneity as communities coalesce across space" (Putnam, 2000, p.178). What this means for the teacher who chooses to adopt the concept of a third space within an educational framework is that the discussion board becomes a forum for providing an opportunity to build a learning model for enquirers who seek to create a dialectic and reflective learning network of like-minded individuals that goes beyond the limitations of the physical classroom.

In a similar vein Harding (1998, p.17) describes 'thinking spaces', based on post-colonial and feminist paradigms, which have opened up as a result of changes in both social relations and discourses. These spaces have created room for a new kind of questioning where "new kinds of possible futures can be articulated and debated." Solutions derived from scholarship in multicultural, postcolonial and global feminisms emphasise a change of focus away from the hegemony of epistemological purism, with its focus on rigid procedures and technical details based on the belief that a lack of purity is synonymous with intellectual weakness, to one of methodological pluralism grounded in rigorous reflexivity. We see benefits in linking such a concept as Harding discusses with a virtual 'third-space', distant in space and time and where it is possible to breakdown traditional power imbalances.

Discourse in the Third Space

Having established that alternative ways of knowing are generally not valued in the tertiary sector we have gone on to present an argument that there is significant benefit to be gained by allowing students to engage in learning in a way that values their own cultural and social heritage. The next question we must address is can an online discussion environments be used to create alternative discursive spaces such that alternative and multiple epistemologies are validated and so that positions other than those perpetuated by a hegemonic steering media can be asserted.

Tertiary education targeted at adult learners is successfully employing constructivist models of learning in the classroom. However studies reveal a tendency amongst even self-identifying constructivist educators to assume that the discussion board is an extension of the classroom (Williamson & Nodder, 2002). This results in a culturally neutral void where the hegemony of western learning disempowers other ways of knowing and where actions are contextualised as positive or negative, positioned in relation to the intended meaning that the facilitator is hoping to convey. By promoting online discussion boards as a third space, beyond the formal constructs of the classroom, they can be dissociated from the formal learning environment through time and space, creating the potential for reflexivity and alternative discourse. This positions the discussion board as an extension of the learning space based on a supposition that learning is itself a reflective process and it is dialogue, regardless of topicality, that is central to this reflection. It supports the learner to apply their own values and patterns of knowledge construction in such ways as they are appropriate to the individual learning process (Williamson, 2001).

Pedagogical Framework

A more traditional practice based approach to learning communicates meaning and leads to a relative valuing and devaluing of different posting qualities (Grundy, 1987). Such a focus can cause the facilitator to devalue any discussion that is seen as irrelevant or off-topic. By transferring our attention from practice to praxis our discursive spaces and the role of dialogue in facilitating the reflective process assumes prominence and permits educators to value and support alternative models of knowledge construction.

A praxis-based approach is drawn from the emancipatory pedagogies proposed by Freire (1972) and closely related to Habermas' theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1987a, 1987b). According to Habermas, the acquisition of knowledge and socialisation of the individual within a group requires that authentic debate take place. In this context, 'authentic' means that such debate assumes the veracity of Habermas' four validity claims, such that interaction should accord with them and result in undistorted communication. According to Habermas these validity claims are that a statement follows the rules of language, is true, that the speaker is speaking appropriately and in line with societal rules and norms and that they are sincere. Everyday life can be judged as 'democratic' only when debate takes place in an atmosphere of shared understanding and in order to resolve common problems. Such understanding must include reference to and respect for where individual group members stand epistemologically. Standing in the way of such authentic communication is the academic steering media, or system, which imposes rules, regulations and controls on students thereby potentially alienating the individual from the group process (Outhwaite, 1994). In the context of discussion boards, this is seen through the teacher's focus on the acquisition of meaning detracting from the potential of the students to engage in undistorted communication and the inability of this traditional model to recognise or legitimate multiple epistemologies, privileging as it does a single way of knowing above all others.

Integrating Discourse and Reflection

By adopting a theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1987a, 1987b) and linking this with the emancipatory pedagogy developed by Freire (1972), we are able to approach online learning from a different perspective that allows us to sidestep the hegemony of western pedagogies. Williamson and Nodder (In press) present an exploration of online discussion boards in a constructivist setting where, as one might expect, value is placed on practice yet the studies this paper reviews all describe the relative valuing and devaluing of different posting qualities by the facilitator or lecturer. It is shown that an academic steering media is attempting to measure the value of a posting to the discussion board based on how well acquisition of meaning has been demonstrated. Focus on meaning clearly leads the facilitator to relegate any discussion that is seen as irrelevant or off-topic. Where focus is placed on praxis, it can be the dialogue itself and the role of such dialogue in facilitating the reflective process that is important (Freire, 1972).

Discourse must be based on the concerns of the student rather than driven by the academic/administrative media that facilitate the educational environment and manage the student interface. If it is the student's intention to engage in sincere debate in order to reach a common understanding for the good of the group, then participants in the discussion board must be able and willing to accept the strongest argument. This process can be referred to as "social learning" and is based on social knowledge and legitimate norms connected to values (Skollerhorn, 1998, p.558). A model of dialogue and reflection supports the individual to move beyond a 'means-end' rationality, where they are focused on their own personal goals, so that learning is able to take place amongst the group whilst at the same time systemic distortion is minimised. As this occurs, the participant becomes socialised within the group and becomes comfortable presenting their own subjective viewpoint. Ultimately members of the group are able to reach an understanding and coordinate their actions by way of mutual agreement through discursive action and reflection. However, by being dissociated from space and time knowledge can be constructed appropriately for the learner before being drawn together amongst the group. In such a setting, participants gain new rational beliefs in their own and the group's ability to problem solve which are beyond the confines of the traditional learning environment.

In this environment, the role of the facilitator is one of facilitating the process of dialogue and reflection, valuing equally the learning styles used to construct knowledge and assisting with the process so as to weave together epistemologically diverse threads into a coherent and recognisable whole. The facilitator is not assessing what is said, rather how it is said and becomes reflexive to group postings. They must support and not judge or assign relative values to the way knowledge is generated. In this model, postings that might previously be considered off topic are viewed as an opportunity to remove distortions that exist both within the group and that stem from the systemic interruptions of academic requirements such as learning outcomes and assessment and the hegemony of mainstream society. Group and individual learning is enhanced through an environment where the group itself mediates dialogue and the locus of power moves from teacher to group. This occurs in such a way that the group itself becomes a community of learners responsible for their own learning and for the way they, both as individuals and as a group, construct knowledge.

Conclusion

In this paper we have argued that despite the adoption of constructivist pedagogies amongst many tertiary educators, our places of higher learning remain locked into a worldview that fails to recognise or value alternative epistemologies, disadvantaging students from different cultural backgrounds whether they are indigenous or members of a minority migrant community. We have further argued that technology, and particularly electronic communication and online discussion boards, offer educators the potential to legitimate and value cultural and epistemological diversity by creating new and alternative discursive spaces outside the formal learning environment of the classroom, displaced in time and space. Such places offer the potential for epistemological pluralism, creating the opportunity for reflection, knowledge construction, reporting and the reconstructing of knowledge in culturally appropriate ways whilst permitting interaction with a wider group at a time and place that is both safe and appropriate.

To achieve this we have promoted an emancipatory praxis-based approach to learning that offers learners the opportunity to bridge the gap between the propositional knowledge valued in the Westernised

academic system and the alternative forms of knowledge and knowledge construction so often found in indigenous and minority communities. By promoting the development of online 'thinking spaces' or 'third spaces' where, as Harding (1998, p.17) observes, "new kinds of possible futures can be articulated and debated" we believe that it is possible for educators to build a community of learners who remain grounded in their own epistemology but are able to relate to each other and to the learning outcomes at an ontological level.

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