



Disorienting spaces: Engaging the multiple “student” in online learning

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Effective student engagement in learning is not a simple transposition of practices from the traditional classroom to the online environment, and strategies for engaging students may work less well in the unbounded spaces of interaction of the Internet where assumed understandings of teaching and learning have less hold. Even experienced practitioners encounter unexpected outcomes when designing pedagogies to engage students online, and in a range of studies students have been found to show great variation in how they engage in online learning. This study explores the complexities of shifting teaching practices to online spaces and the effects on the interactions of participants. One of these effects is the disorientation reported by practitioners in their attempts to apply strategies to engage students online. This paper investigates the mismatch between expectations of teaching academics and students by focussing on what the “student” is online. I use two analytical moves: a discourse analysis of practitioners interviews to identify “ways of talking” about students, and Annemarie Mol’s (2002; 1999) concept of *enactment* to understand student activity and identity in the interactive spaces of online learning. My argument is that understanding the category of “student” as enacted in multiple versions offers a way to approach the “potentially disorienting spaces” (Bayne and Ross, 2007) of teaching practices in online spaces.

Keywords: discourse analysis, online learning, enactment, student engagement

Shifting engagement online

That networked communication technologies have transformative effects on higher education has become a perennial observation in the literature on online education, and was declared as “commonplace” by Pollock (2000) nearly a decade ago. The shift of teaching and learning to virtual communication spaces has been heralded as marking profound change, as transformative (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008; Alexander, 2006; Gibbs & Gosper, 2006), and even as a technological “revolution” (Harasim, 2000; Castells et al., 1999; Kellner, 2003). Yet the shape of higher education online learning is still a work in progress, in flux, its objects and practices always mutable and “overdetermined”, to use Mark Poster’s (2001) term (p. 17). How these transformations take place *in practice*, and their effects on the participants of online learning, tend to be less prominent in large-scale discussions. With student engagement now a primary focus and basis of measurement in higher education institutions in the English speaking world (McShane, 2006; Rust, 2002), the question arises as to how effective are practices for engaging students online, and what transformations have been accomplished.

Online learning presents a different space of interaction and engagement for teaching practice, and this difference brings an implicit comparison with the tradition of face-to-face learning. Price and Oliver (2007) point out that while the purpose may be the same in both contexts, “the methods of achieving this alter in significant ways” (p. 24). This is exemplified, they note, in the “relatively frequent breakdowns in teaching online” (p. 24), requiring greater effort to remedy. They also suggest that the practices brought to online teaching draw on “conventional” or assumed knowledge and practice. The traditional, physical locations of teaching and learning bring a set of assumed and shared understandings based largely on constraints of size of teaching rooms and scheduled class times. The metaphors used for online learning environments tend to preserve that tradition (p. 24). However, the efficacy of this tradition as the assumed organising principle for approaches to teaching has diminished with the steady shift towards the blurred

boundaries and individuated environments of online learning (Jones, Asensio, & Goodyear, 2000). Online spaces offer greater options, choices and possibilities for teaching and learning, but simultaneously fewer shared understandings of what, where, who and how it takes place. The interactions that assemble and sustain online learning are underpinned by written communication, and non-verbal communication and paralinguistic cues must be conveyed textually online (Price, Richardson & Jelfs, 2007). The life of learning in virtual spaces is constituted essentially through writing, and Andrew Feenberg (1989) observes, “[Life] in such a 'written world' gives rise to many unfamiliar problems and possibilities” (p. 23).

Online learning spaces can be expected to present uncertainty, risk and opportunities for innovative approaches and hybrid arrangements, consequently, the goal of student engagement cannot be expected to be a simple transposition from modes of traditional teaching to online teaching. This paper explores the dilemmas in teaching practice for academic teachers as they shift between these two modes of teaching, and questions the stability of the category of the “student” in online learning.

Investigating online teaching practice through approaches to student engagement

The current emphasis in higher education on “the student” (McShane, 2006, p. 88), and existing measures of the student experience (Krause & Coates, 2008; Coates, 2005), have shaped teaching practice around the need for effective student engagement through the possibilities opened up by online learning spaces. Indeed the notion of the “student” cannot be assumed to have a common understanding in an environment in which technologies reconfigure possibilities of spaces, times and size of student cohort, to shape the learning environments of mass learning (Marginson, 2000, p. 29).

These concerns are reflected in the disorienting effect on practitioners with “disruptive technologies” (Conole, de Laat, Dillon, & Darby, 2008), and their deployment and integration into teaching and learning practice (Price & Oliver, 2007; Sharpe, Benfield & Francis, 2006). Putting online learning into practice is not simply a matter of application of a technological tool. Price & Oliver (2007) give the example of building social interaction online as “fraught with complexity” (p. 21), since it requires much effort and planning to achieve group interaction and cohesion. The tool metaphor carries the assumption that technologies work, and that they will be used for the purpose for which they were designed. In fact, there is a high level of “breakdown” and failure of the technologies of online learning, particularly large-scale implementations (Hannon, 2009). A further assumption is that students, and staff, will use the technologies as intended, and Goodyear & Ellis (2008) identify studies in higher education learning which challenge the “assumption of compliance” (p. 146) in students’ use of technologies. Don Ihde (2002) called the unintended use of a technology the “designer fallacy”, and cautioned that the reduction of technologies to functionality masks their ambiguity and potential for appropriation (p. 106). For practitioners, the promise in the rhetoric of technologies for teaching online is not matched by the outcomes which are achieved in practice (Price & Oliver, 2007; Conole et al., 2008).

If student engagement is an outcome or measure for effective teaching and learning, the activities that produce student engagement are practice. Practice involves actions, decisions, objects, discursive activities which can be identified in terms or their material effects, which is viewed as action oriented, embodied, and as shared “arrays of human activity” (Schatzi, 2001, p. 2). This paper draws on interview accounts from a broader Ph D research study into practices of online teaching, and takes up one of the issues of concern expressed in accounts by participants: how can my practice effectively engage students in online learning?

I will draw on two theoretical concepts for analysis in this study, both of them centred on the action orientation of practice. The first is a discourse approach involving the identification of interpretative repertoires, or “ways of talking” (Edley, 2001, p. 198; Every & Augoustinos, 2007) that occur in coherent forms and provide “a basis of shared social understanding” (Edley, 2001, p. 198) across a discipline or field of practice. Interpretative repertoires consist of the system of terms and metaphors that circulate among practitioners in a field of practice and are used to evaluate and constitute that practice (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p. 149). Interview transcripts can be analysed to identify the dilemmas of practice for speakers, and the rhetorical strategies and terms used to evaluate or resolve issues of practice. Repertoires can be used to identify variations of discourse in how practitioners account for issues and dilemmas arising in their practice.

The second is Annemarie Mols’ (2002; 1999) concept of enactment. Mol explores objects such as technologies, and entities such as diseases (anaemia), as realities which are enacted in practices,

rather than being isolated from them and having a pre-existing reality (p. 36). Potter (1996), like Mol, considers that categories and identities do not arrive preformed into the world:

Reality enters into human practices by way of the categories and descriptions that are part of those practices...It is constituted in one way or another as people talk it, write it and argue it (p. 98).

In Mol's example of anaemia (p. 77), based on her field work, she described how a disease may be enacted as multiple realities, with distinct "versions". She found it performed in several ways: one was *clinically* in the consulting room, another was *statistically* in the laboratory: two diseases were enacted, with distinct contexts and effects. While these enactments may overlap they were not necessarily coherent. Mol draws on actor-network perspectives (Latour, 1987; Law, 2004) which treat objects and phenomena not as things in themselves, but as a "continuously generated effect of the "web of relations within which they are located" (Law, 2009, p. 141). Mol (2002) contrasts her approach with that of Goffman's (1959) presentation of the self is a "mere performance" (p. 35), with an authentic identity or self hidden behind the presentations. In this approach, ideas about reality and identities are explored in terms of their orientation to action, in practice. The implications are that realities and identities are contingent on performances, and can be understood or shown to be multiple and not necessary congruent. Law (2004) states, "enactments, it is being argued, don't just present something that has already been made, but also have powerful productive consequences" (p. 56).

These theoretical concepts will provide the basis for taking up the dilemmas for practitioners arising from the transformative impact of virtual spaces on higher education. They underpin the analysis of practitioners accounts based on the corpus of interview transcripts, first by identifying interpretative repertoires in discourses of online learning, then in considering the participants in online teaching and learning practices, such as technologies and students, in terms of situated enactments.

Teaching practices in online spaces still occur as if there is an uncomplicated transition from face-to-face settings (Coates, 2005; Malikowski, Thompson, & Theis, 2006), and there is a history in which "technology has been seen as added on to a set of traditional educational practices" (Goodyear & Ellis, 2008, p. 149). There is a need to examine the practices of teaching online more critically and more closely, both as strategies for student engagement and as approaches to technologies. The shift to online teaching is caught between its promise and its pitfalls: on the one hand there is the possibility for innovative pedagogical approaches to enhance learning and extend its reach (Conole et al., 2008; McLoughlin & Lee, 2008); on the other hand there are the demands and difficulties encountered in new undertakings. Teaching into online spaces brings issues of institutional integration as well as acceptance and adoption by both teaching staff and students (Georgina & Olson, 2008; McNaught, 2005), with the outcome that online teaching can be "the ultimate disorienting dilemma in higher education" (McShane, 2006, p. 89). My focus is on this disorientation and how it occurs *in practice*, and the dilemmas that arise for practitioners as they negotiate the uncertain and unsettled terrain of virtual spaces. My question is: what happens in practice that makes engaging students online uncertain and disorienting?

The study

The data for this study comprised accounts by practitioners on their experiences with student engagement in their online teaching and learning, selected from a broader study involving a total of 28 practitioners from three Australian universities. The participants reflected a range of work roles related to online learning, including teaching academics, academic managers, technical support, and educational designers. Data was produced in the form of transcripts of interviews and associated artefacts or documents. Issues around student engagement were one category that emerged from the broader analysis, and for this study, transcripts were scanned and comments compiled based on the enquiry question: how did practitioners report their experiences of student engagement in online learning? A total of 124 comments concerning student engagement were collected from 20 participants, of whom 18 were teaching academics, one an academic developer, one online support staff. These comments were first grouped into categories, then examined for systematic forms of language and rhetorical strategies that were used to resolve issues and dilemmas of student engagement. Interpretative repertoires were identified from these "ways of talking". A summary of practitioners' comments, organised into categories and ranked by frequency, is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Practitioners' talk about students in contexts of online learning

Talk about students	Frequency
as a problem, requiring new strategies for engagement	55
as a “collaborative”, online community of learners	36
as customer focussed: ‘individualistic’, ‘optional’ students	28
as the digital generation: the “Net generation”, having a “particular relationship to technology”	5

Ways of talking about students

The analysis identified four “ways of talking” about students, or interpretative repertoires, that were used by practitioners while reflecting on their practices of online teaching. The repertoires are elaborated below, using pseudonyms to identify speakers. These were:

- talk of problems and strategies for engaging students online in terms of *student-centred learning*
- students as a *community of learners*, using online spaces for collaboration
- the student as *customer*, engaging selectively and exercising preferences in learning
- the student as the *digital generation*, with a distinct engagement with networked technologies.

Students requiring new strategies for engagement (55 responses, or 44%)

Practitioners reflected on experiences and practices that were less effective in engaging students in terms of student-centred learning. Comments drawing on this repertoire mainly described the encounter between students and the technologies of learning as problematic and engagement as poor, and were framed as a dilemma for practice which required revised or new strategies for engagement. Practitioners evaluated their own practices in terms of a goal of student-centred learning, a way of talking that derives from the “paradigm shift” (Rust, 2002, p. 146) from teacher focussed to learner-centred approaches. These evaluative descriptions evoked the contrast between surface and deep learning associated with the shift to a focus on student learning (Ramsden, 2003), with descriptions of the need for “self-directed learning”, “motivation”, “personal interaction”, and the centrality of the “relationship to the student”. Speakers recounted examples of superficial or instrumental interaction, low levels of participation in online discussion, lack of shared expectations, a “large drop-out rate”, and minimal or last minute engagement. A mismatch of expectations was reported with international students from Asia, who were attributed with an orientation to teacher-centred learning, and as unable to engage with analytical or deeper learning.

Learning technologies were seen as producing unanticipated problems and requiring intensive effort to align with student learning. Alison, a tutor in a media based unit, noted the absence of non-verbal cues in online discussion for the second iteration of her unit, and the potential for online communication to fail in establishing student engagement:

In the case of teaching online, there are not the nonverbal cues and shared expectations are not built up in the teacher student relationship. The staff/student relationship is harder to develop again, this is more so for first years... the missing cues means there is more potential for misunderstanding. Even knowing this and having strategies does not eliminate this possibility entirely.

Descriptions drawing on the student-centred learning repertoire were used to account for poor engagement online, and evaluate practitioners' strategies. In the interview accounts, practice was described as a comparison or transposition of teaching approaches from face to face to online learning contexts, with mainly unexpected or disconcerting results.

Students as a community of learners (36 responses, or 29%)

The repertoire of a community of learning is organised around the principle that students collaborate in their learning by forming a self-sustaining learning community. The notion of a community of learners (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007) entails the view that higher order or deep learning occurs in an environment

of collaboration among peers, and that there is evidence that a “sense of community” is associated with effective learning in online contexts (p. 158). The model of the community of learners is a much explored approach to participatory teaching and learning, and continues to function as a well-established and useful metaphor for designing interactive and engaging learning using networked communication.

“Community talk” has been referred to as a “classic repertoire” (Wetherell & Potter, 1988, p. 172). In this study, talk of a community of learning was drawn on in 29% of comments, and reflected accounts of student engagement which achieved deep learning in online communication spaces, including reports of unexpected positive experiences with international students. As an expression of Feenberg’s (1989) “written world”, the online community is constructed by discursive activity, and constituted by textual interactions that convey salience and meaning to participants. In this study, the community of learning repertoire was drawn on in accounts by speakers which included the terms *collaborative, engagement, interact, self-reliant, self-sustaining, virtually autonomously, building relationships, dialogue, deep learning, peers, community building, community of learners* and *community of practice*.

These accounts indicate that, under the right conditions, students were reported to constitute an online learning community as a means of engagement. International students were reported as adapting to learning online (8 comments), with speakers noting the readiness and motivation of international students using online discussion. These reports contrasted with the previous theme in which international students were described as unable to engage with deep learning.

Students as customers (28 responses, or 23%)

The repertoire of the student as customer was drawn on to describe students who negotiated their learning within a set of individual demands and preferences, and who adapted available technologies for this purpose. Comments from one lecturer (Monica) and three tutors (Alison, Paula and Laura) described students as “more individualistic, focussed on assessment only”, “optional”, “pick n mix” (Alison); as expecting immediacy in communication, a “prompt response” (Monica), and of “24/7 availability” (Paula). Laura observed “a definite shift from seeing class attendance as what one must do, to being something optional, for both online and face to face participation”. Preferences were expressed for modes of communication to occur only with the lecturer/tutor rather than with peers. Alison noted, “there are often quite a few students in any one intake who prefer to ring rather than email and don’t seem to use the online study guide or discussion list”.

The customer or consumer repertoire is common in higher education literature (Blackmore, 2001, p. 362; Blin & Munro, 2008, p. 478), and is related to shifts away from the traditional university to more corporate styles of management and a market economy. The accounts in this study indicate that both practitioners and students draw on the customer repertoire to understand students’ orientation to their learning. What is significant here is how students appropriated technologies to produce individual orientations to learning according to their own preferences, which often took priority over the arrangements set out in the unit of study and by teaching staff, contributing to dilemmas for teaching approaches among practitioners.

Students as the digital generation (5 responses, or 4%)

Talk of a generational difference that distinguishes students on the basis of their use of technologies is the repertoire of the digital generation. A small number of speakers described students as generationally distinct. For instance, Wendy, a lecturer of large classes, described students as holding “a particular relationship with technology”. The digital generation has been described as the “Net Gen” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), the “New Student” (Oblinger, 2003), and “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). The Net generation are “students who were born in the 1980s and later” (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), who are “experiential, engaged, and constantly connected, with a strong need for immediacy” (Ramaley, 2005). Prensky holds that the “digital natives” are distinct to the extent that they have different brain structures. Such views suggest university teaching is unable or failing to keep pace with the needs of this generation.

Critics of this view suggest there is little supporting evidence for the “digital divide” between students and staff (Kennedy et al., 2008a). On the contrary, there is evidence that students show great diversity in their proficiency and use of Web 2.0 and mobile technologies (Kennedy et al., 2008b; Sharpe & Benfield, 2005) and that the focus should be on the design of learning environments rather than the technology (Sheely, 2008). Bayne and Ross (2007) note that the “potentially disorienting spaces” of networked technologies enable a simplistic reduction to generational difference, and link digital generation talk with “a ‘marketized’ public discourse” in which online learning is constructed around globalisation and a

market-driven higher education sector. They point out that, contrary to proponents of this view, there is little evidence that students demand “more technologically-driven approaches to teaching and learning”.

It is this discourse of the market that may be the context through which generational talk may be more usefully understood. In the accounts from practitioners in this study, talk of “generational difference” (Wendy) and the digital divide can be seen as part of the repertoire of the students as customer. Students were seen not as embracing networked technologies for learning, rather they were seen mainly as instrumentally appropriating particular technologies into their working and social world, in which their learning was only one component. Appropriation also went in the opposite direction. A segment of the student population were reported by two large class lecturers, Fran and Lia, as marginalised, as “depersonalised” and poorly “accommodated” by new technologies (Fran), and as experiencing problems with access and submission to online learning systems (Fran, Lia). Talk of generational difference obscures other differences: of socio-economic status, of language and cultural diversity, of expectations and prior experience of education, and of experience and use of networked technologies.

Summarising the repertoires

Networked technologies offer new and potentially radical opportunities for learning (Hemmis, Bayne, & Land, 2009), but bring an unfamiliar and less stable environment for even experienced practitioners, requiring different approaches and models for pedagogy (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008). The discourse approach of identifying interpretative repertoires can be used to understand the various ways practitioners negotiate the “disorienting spaces” of online learning as they attempt to resolve the dilemmas of practice. Each of the four repertoires reflect coherent “ways of talking about objects and events in the world” (Edley, 2001), ways which exist as prior discourses and were deployed by practitioners to make sense of how students engage in the less concrete spaces of virtualised learning.

The accounts of practitioners confirm the diversity of engagement found in studies on the student experience (Kennedy et al., 2008b; JISC, 2007; Sharpe & Benfield, 2005). In this study, 71% of responses by practitioners recounted problematic experiences with students in online learning, while 29% of responses were successful experiences. The accounts of poor engagement had a common theme: descriptions in terms of student-centred learning and the digital generation also reflected the individuated, personalised uses of technologies that were inherent to the discourse of student as customer. The study suggests that learning technologies have a profound effect on both teaching practice and student engagement, and supports the view that students negotiate their *own* relationship to online learning and the university, frequently on their own terms.

In these accounts, engagement carried a double orientation: not only did students build their own distinctive relationship to their learning, confirming the student experience studies cited above, their orientation to the technologies of online learning was variable and often unexpected (to practitioners), requiring a re-evaluation of teaching practice. The combination of learning and technologies produced a hybrid, technologised student.

Disorienting practice

Emerging from these accounts is the picture of the disoriented practitioner. With 71% of responses indicating low levels of engagement, students’ interaction over the virtual spaces of learning framed variable and unpredictable relationships to their learning and to teaching staff, consequently disrupting prior assumptions concerning teaching practice. The disrupted practice, however, is influenced by factors beyond teacher-student interaction, and occurs within an environment of globalised institutional and technological change, and an associated re-examination of academic identity and work (Lee & McWilliam, 2008; Clegg, 2007; Marginson, 2000). Academic identity has become a “multiple and shifting term” (Clegg, 2007, p. 329), and teaching academics negotiate variable orientations to technologies within or despite standardised institutional agendas. Critics have expressed concerns at the impact of technologies on teaching and learning practice: as “disorienting” (Bayne & Ross, 2007; McShane, 2006); at the tendency for managed learning technologies “to place educators in straitjackets” (Gibbs & Gosper, 2006, p. 52); at institutional and technological factors “disfiguring academics’ work and identity” (McWilliam, 2004), and the tension between the institutional constraints on uses of learning technologies and the “radical” potential of social software (Hemmis et al., 2009). The complexity of technologies and learning is foregrounded by Goodyear & Ellis (2008) in student-centred approaches:

What may look like a technological intervention actually depends on a web of skilful activity, human relationships, and subtle adjustments to a changing material environment (p. 149).

The authors refer to the “intervention” of a technology by the metaphor of a device or tool, which masks the effort involved in the arrangements of people, pedagogical practices, machines, software and administration. In online learning, this effort encompasses the adoption and take-up by staff and students of technologies, which may be variable and unpredictable.

This unpredictability was in evidence in this study in the comments by practitioners on unexpected uses of technologies by students. A recurring trope in this study was the expression of a sense of disorientation by practitioners to the types of engagement by students in online learning spaces, where interactions with students were often found to be guided by different rules and expectations. In many interviews with teaching academics, a reflective moment or *aporia* recurred, in which speakers expressed bewilderment at unfamiliar conditions of engagement, and arrived at an impasse in their teaching practice. In the following examples, two lecturers of large first year classes, Craig and Fran, and one tutor, Alison, expressed such reflective moments as they recalled their experiences.

Alison noted that the combination of face-to-face classes and the use of the LMS brought a different notion of attendance:

This is the second year I've had students voice that they shouldn't have to go to all the classes, instead should be allowed to “pick n mix”. But this causes a slew of problems, including the individualistic demand to go over concepts again.

Craig expressed frustration at the effects of “flexibility”, by which he meant the availability of unit resources and content online, with the consequence that many students considered attendance at lectures and tutorials optional:

We're giving them the technology to give them greater flexibility to be slacker, and so that's a down side of a technology, and what can we do about that? Well on our level nothing quickly.

Craig's impasse was also encountered by Fran, who grappled with the logistics and constraints of to engaging students in a large cohort online. She asked what type of day to day engagement was possible when conducting tutorials for such large numbers by online groupwork:

I mean personal interaction with a group of students of about 700 is pretty difficult, you're not going to have all of them at any one time. So ... there are some real issues about that in terms of that you really need to develop very good skills about how you communicate across with technology.

For Fran, there were two issues: managing a large cohort of students when interaction was conducted over online spaces, and for her, the “real issues” of engaging students that arose when the online mode was adopted as pedagogy. The dilemma for Fran was how to manage the time to interact with over 20 small groups per teacher online, and achieve her learning goals of preparing for assessment of hands-on health communication, over a distance, through groupwork.

These comments reflected disruptions in teaching practice, as practitioners recounted incidents which entailed dilemmas, or questioned the efficacy of practices in online spaces. Similar disorienting impasses were recounted: on mass learning environments, on plagiarism online, and individuated preferences in communication. Practitioners attempted to make sense of and explain their practices by drawing on repertoires; for example, Craig and Alison explained lack of engagement in terms of the low acceptance of student-centred learning approaches, and the appropriation of learning technologies in terms of the student as customer. Their disorientation arose when these explanations were unable to resolve these dilemmas in their teaching practice.

Technologies played a central role in the mismatch between teaching practices and student engagement, and shaped the relations and the interaction between students, their learning, and their teachers. How, therefore, is it possible for a create strategies for engagement that would better cope with the “disorienting spaces” of online learning? While there is no single answer to this, a useful step may be to review *what* constitutes the student in “the network university”.

The student as multiple

The student that emerges in practitioners' accounts is *multiple*, that is, the "student" is constituted differently in online learning contexts, and enacted according to specific discourses or interpretative repertoires: as a member of an online community of learners, or the individuating discourses of student as customer, as member of the digital generation, or as a student-centred learner. In online learning, the student engages through the "written world" (Feenberg, 1989) that constitutes online spaces, and is shaped by the discourses of textual interaction used in virtual spaces. My argument is that understanding the category of "student" as enacted in multiple ways offers a way to address the disorientation of practice in online learning.

The disorientation expressed by practitioners in this study calls for a different approach to the teaching-learning nexus in online spaces. Students were reported as interacting online in distinctive ways that were recognisable as antecedent discourses and shared understandings. While each such repertoires provided an explanation of students' actions, they combined to create online learning as a disorienting space.

Mol (1999) argued that a category such as identity need not be inherent, hidden or stable, but performed and enacted in practice, in different "versions". Following this notion, the student can be considered as an identity that is constituted by existing practices, such as those constituted by the customer or community repertoires. Some enactments of the student bring consequences: an understanding of engagement in terms of customer preferences ignores the broader shaping factors that act on the whole teaching and learning environment, and the numerous actors and entities involved in learning. These encompass all types of participants in online learning: students, lecturers and tutors, learning technologies, units of study, schedules, institutional support, procedures and learning activities, "all of these assemble and together enact a set of practices that make a more or less precarious reality" (Law, 2009, p. 151). The process of progressively assembling the contingent relations that form student learning is more complex than individual preference.

The technologies tended not to take centre stage in online learning, and there were few descriptions of technical functions in this study. Rather, technologies opened the interactions of learning to the discourses of community, customer, and the Net generation, through virtual spaces which were less separated by the markers of the physical settings of these practices.

The disorientation of practitioners in online learning spaces needs to be considered as an effect of practice and the relations that constitute it. Rather than understanding students' actions as the result of predispositions or preferences for learning embodied in the individual, they can be understood as the result of an *assemblage* of people, technologies, curriculum, times and places. Since online interaction is essentially text-based, an individual may more readily move from enacting one repertoire to another. Online learning is formed less by the constraints of traditional pedagogies built around fixed times and spaces, and participants are more able to modify the formerly prearranged conditions of engagement. The personalised virtual spaces available through computer interfaces invites opportunities to organise learning within individual preferences and preferred modes of interaction. Discourses and repertoires, as customer, as community, and Net generation, form the building blocks to construct the student online.

Conclusion

We had a university-wide decision to have flexible learning, whatever flexible learning is, online stuff so, you know, we can't entirely blame the students. (Craig)

This paper set out to explore teaching practice through the responses of practitioners to the ways their students engaged in online learning, and understand how they re-orient and review their teaching practice for the spaces of online learning. Some limitations in this study: participants were selected by invitation on the basis of a current practice and a commitment to online learning, and were drawn mainly from disciplines within Humanities, Business and Health. The analysis for this study did not encompass academics or managers who were indifferent or antagonistic to online learning, or who drew on practices and pedagogies of knowledge transmission. A broader range of pedagogical approaches may result in alternative or further repertoires of student engagement.

The disorientation expressed by practitioners can be understood as a response to multiple and competing enactments of the student. Engaging learners requires working with the blurred boundaries and the modes of interaction of online sociality deployed by students in other areas of their lives, and which infiltrate learning to produce the multiple enactments of the student. Practitioners need to negotiate the stakes and

conditions of engagement and model the interactions for their learning context, rather than assume communication modes and styles are understood. Teaching practice online means being implicated in enacting the student.

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Please cite as: Hannon, J. (2009). Disorienting spaces: Engaging the multiple “student” in online learning. In *Same places, different spaces. Proceedings ascilite Auckland 2009*. <http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/auckland09/procs/hannon.pdf>

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