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In the Eye of the Storm: preliminary evidence on the use of online learning diaries

Abstract

The surprising lack of pressure and speed in the centre of the vortex of a storm are in stark contrast to the force and destruction often experienced at its periphery. Many spectators watching a developing storm will be caught between fear and a desire to escape. The metaphor of a storm has been applied here to the emotions experienced by many students enrolling in online learning courses. Not only do the requirements of studying online collide with personal and professional commitments, the experience of learning online (often in groups) results in many students feeling displaced, scared or out of control. Learning diaries, especially in an online environment, present students with an opportunity to reach the centre of the vortex, though this may not be as quiet and safe as we may have presumed.

This paper reports on students' reflections in their learning diaries as a prescriptive part of the Professional Certificate in Management offered by the <x University. The research focused on the unstructured learning diary entries of 12 students from one tutor group over an 18 day period of a short compulsory online course. This phenomenographic study used grounded theory as methodology to analyse and describe students' use of their learning diaries. The research found ample evidence that online learning diaries provide students with a safe space to reflect on the vortex around them. Without a quiet and reflective centre, students may be overwhelmed by the wider forces impacting on them. Students' postings provided rich descriptions of the vortex of studying online and the function of having a centre to withdraw to. There is, however, also evidence that posting reflections in learning diaries can itself be a dislocating and uncomfortable experience for some learners, while others question its usefulness.

This research provides practical and useful information for managers of online learning experiences, instructional designers and curriculum developers.

Introduction

The student experience in higher education has been analysed at length, but a full understanding of it eludes researchers and higher education institutions alike (Tinto 2006). Students' experiences can be stormy and unsettling – with students' previous beliefs and assumptions about learning, the world and themselves colliding with the epistemologies and ontologies inherent in higher education in general and in discipline contexts in particular. Barnett (1996) calls this colliding of worlds - 'displacement' and Brah (1996) describes the space where different identities meet - a 'diaspora space'. Edwards and Usher (2001) talk about education as (dis)location in which various educational practices cause location as well as dislocation.

Online learning as part of the higher education landscape is often presented as a safe space where gender, power and class are not as apparent as in face-to-face settings. Online learning is heralded as 'taking the distance out of distance education', 'borderless education' and the great 'equaliser' where anyone can study anytime. This apparently removes constraints usually associated with face-to-face education such as the need to be in a particular location and to attend lectures at specified times (Edwards & Usher, 2001). Students may also wish for a freer environment where they can continue with their personal and professional lives,

and study when they choose; therefore for them online learning can be a dream come true. However, online learning regularly surprises many of these students with its own impacts on personal and professional lives. While it may be borderless, other new barriers are introduced, such as time-zones, computer literacy, and the need to balance personal and professional commitments, and so on.

Whether face-to-face or in an online learning environment, the student experience can regularly evoke images of a brewing storm as pressures mount, personal and professional life worlds clash with study commitments and students trying to make sense of their experiences. In this paper we explore the impact of online learning diaries as the eye of the storm – a quiet and safe space where learners can reflect on the chaos around them. Online learning diaries provide glimpses as to how students experience the storm but also how they experience the centre of the vortex. While it is often assumed that learning diaries do, in fact, create a safe and quiet space for students to reflect, evidence seems to indicate that some students experience the act of reflection as discomforting and/or even useless.

In the literature review we will specifically explore the *impact* of learning diaries in the context of online learning as displacement or (dis)location. The methodological considerations provide insight into the research design and research choices made. We then continue to analyse and discuss the findings, and conclude by proposing several considerations which may further increase the function of learning diaries as an essential element of online learning.

Literature review

The function of learning diaries in the design of learning experiences has been well documented and researched (e.g. Biggs 1999, Bisman 2007, Boud 2001, Cunliffe 2002, Moon 1999, and Salmon 2002). For the purpose of this research we were curious to evaluate how students experienced and evaluated learning diaries. Previous research by the authors explored online learning as a (dis)locating experience. In this study, we focus on how students evaluated the use of online learning diaries in the context of (dis)location. The question we explored was: Do learning diaries provide students with a safe space, a quiet centre in the midst of the storm?

In this literature review we will revisit (dis)location as metaphor (originally proposed by Edwards & Usher, 2001) and enrich the metaphor by exploring online learning as displacement (as proposed by Barnett, 1996) and diaspora (as proposed by Brah, 1996).

Edwards and Usher (2001) highlight the fact that spatial metaphors are increasingly used to explore the impacts of globalisation which bring to the fore issues of border, location and boundaries. Wiseman (1998 in Edwards and Usher, 2001) describes a world “in which relationships are becoming less two dimensional and hierarchical and more like networks, rhizomes and Internet links”. Edwards and Usher (2001) agrees with Brah (1996) who speaks of current times as a ‘diaspora space’. The issue in this diaspora space is not only *relocation* but also (dis)location (Edwards & Usher, 2001).

Computer-mediated communication has “created a situation where both clock time and physical space can be transcended” (Edwards & Usher, 2001) and where all inhabitants in this global village “are likely to be strangers” (Turner 1994 in Edwards and Usher, 2001). Cyber space is then proposed by a number of authors as diaspora space where we all are nomads who are not necessarily ‘homeless’ but “capable of recreating our home everywhere” (Braidotti 1994 in Edwards & Usher, 2001). Cyberspace, having no ‘centre’ and ‘limited hierarchy’, demands that we speak of ICT no longer “simply in an instrumental sense as an

efficient tool of communication, but more aptly as a socially and culturally produced space that stimulates new forms of interaction, helps restructuring and forging creolised identities and produces new relations of power, for example, between teachers and learners” (Edwards & Usher, 2001).

In research done by Steel and Hudson (2001), they found that the “most prominent drawback, unsurprisingly, was the fragility of technology and its negative impact on the learning and teaching process” (2001). The fragility of technology not only refers to the many possible technological hiccups that teachers, designers and students face, but also to the “robustness of the technology” (Steel & Hudson, 2001) with continuous changes and innovation, resulting in students and teachers constantly feeling behind with the latest developments. Interestingly, the fear of technological failure was found (Steel & Hudson, 2001) to be the most feared scenario. “Even if the technology has never failed for example, the fear is that it could” (Steel & Hudson, 2001). In her research on online learning, Fleckenstein (2005) found unreliable technologies to have “played a central role in disrupting community building” and “online participation was subject to seemingly random forces that disrupted and prevented the growth of fellowship” (Fleckenstein, 2005).

While online learning is often celebrated as a truly democratic space, Edwards and Usher (2001) caution that cyberspace “produces new formations of social and economic power and it is against these that its democratic actuality must be judged”. They refer to Tabbi (1997 in Edwards & Usher, 2001) who “argues that it is precisely the disembodiment, disembeddedness and decontextualisation (no bodies, no history, no place), or dislocation, of electronic discussion that will always limit the democratic, and hence educational, potential of cyberspace.” Online environments can dislodge students’ and teachers’ “monochromatic worldviews that are often racist, sexist, and homophobic” (Luke 1996 in Edwards & Usher, 2001). “Virtualisation does not imply disembodiment, but *relies* on disembodiment” (Fleckenstein 2005, emphasis added). Students therefore frequently devise strategies to cope with this disembodiment and with feelings of disequilibrium. Fleckenstein reports how students often insert information about their physical environments into their virtual ones (Fleckenstein 2005). The disembodiment inherent in online learning can also result in students sending pictures of themselves or exchanging contact numbers, or arranging to meet face-to-face (Fleckenstein 2005).

This disembodiment and disembeddedness also impact on the configurations of teachers and students alike. Often, neither teachers nor students are prepared for these reconfigurations and find them (at least in the beginning) (dis)locating and causing friction (Crawford, 1999). In online education, the role of teachers changes to becoming guides and facilitators of learning (Steel & Hudson, 2001), often resulting in educators experiencing a sense of (dis)location from traditional perceptions about their authority and subject expertise. The change from being “gods of knowledge to directors of or leaders in the pursuit of knowledge” often result in professional disorientation (Crawford, 1999).

The different (dis)locations Edwards and Usher (2001) discuss in relation to online learning, can be summarised as follows:

- Dislocations of **identity** – the impact of anonymity, new identities, changed autobiographies (disembedded, disembodied and decontextualised). The different markers of identity (dress, facial expressions, body types, accessories and labels) which play a major role in face-to-face communication are absent in online environments. Often students and teachers assume different personalities and identities online.

- Dislocations of **relations** – the relationship between teacher and students is changed; relationships *between* students are affected, and the relationship between students and texts is altered.
- Dislocation of **authority** – the traditional authority of teachers and texts are questioned; notions of authority range from number of postings, proficiency of expression; number of links/followers, etc.
- Dislocation of **trust** – hierarchical and horizontal observation and resulting in mistrust and loss of certainty.
- Dislocation of **roles and competencies** - competent and professional educators and students may find themselves dislocated in online contexts where their previous roles and competencies become superfluous, and new roles and competencies are required.

Online learning as (dis)locating practice intensifies the need for reflexivity in which participants constantly make meaning of the fluid and uncertain environment (Edwards & Usher, 2001). The authors refer to the point made by Giddens (1991 in Edwards & Usher, 2001) that the proliferation of information and personal decision-making are “existentially troubling” and that participants are forced to increased levels of reflexivity as ambiguity, insecurity and existential anxiety becomes “unstoppable”. Reflexivity creates opportunities for participants to map their own location (however temporarily) and those of others (Edwards & Usher, 2001).

Prinsloo, Slade and Galpin (2008), using the notion of “location” as heuristic framework analysed student learning diaries and found evidence of different types of dislocation and also, evidence of how students attempted to locate themselves. The following dislocations were identified by Prinsloo et al, 2008)

- The (dis)location of being and learning online.
- The (dis)location of becoming part of the management discourse.
- The (dis)location of learning in a team.
- The (dis)location of working against time constraints.
- The (dis)location of not being online.

Their research also found evidence in several student postings of how students *located* themselves to cope within the general context of (dis)location.

The context, programme and participants

The focus of this research project is the learning diary as a structured and compulsory part of an online course held over eighteen days. It comprises activities organised in four timed and sequential stages of between three and six days. Students are allocated to a group of about twelve participants supported by a tutor, and are asked to be online every day.

Throughout the course, students are required to keep a private¹ online learning diary in which they are asked to review their learning and experiences of working online. The learning diaries are therefore an integral part of the structured learning experience with students

¹ Although they are told that tutors have read access

required to have *at least* four entries in their diaries (one for each stage). It is important to note that the *content* of the learning diaries is not assessed². Students are given no further advice regarding the content of their diaries, nor how reflexivity can potentially enrich their learning and empower them in becoming managers.

The content and structure of students' entries into their learning diaries is left entirely to them³. They are, however, also required to formally review each stage in the public domain of their tutor group. In these stage reviews, they are requested to reflect and evaluate both their own learning and their experiences in groups.⁴

Despite the minimum requirement for posting, nine students from our study group posted entries into their learning diaries on ten of the 18 days of the course. Six students posted reflections on more than 15 days while the minimum number of actual postings was six (Prinsloo, Slade and Galpin, 2008).

Methodology

The research scope and methodologies were clarified with staff from the University Research Ethics Committee. Care was taken to ensure the anonymity of the students and tutor involved.

The approach adopted was phenomenographic as explored by Richards (1999) and Cope (2004). Phenomenographic research is interested in the qualitative differences among the perceptions and experiences of individual students. In an attempt to ensure validity and reliability in phenomenographic research, Cope (2004) proposes a number of verification strategies which we incorporated in the research design. The strategies adopted include acknowledging the researchers' background and prior experiences; reporting the means by which an unbiased sample was chosen; describing the data collection and data analysis processes; declaring the processes involved to control and check interpretations; presenting results in a manner which permits informed scrutiny; and the clear description of categories adequately illustrated with quotes.

At the end of the course, learners were required to complete an evaluation form in which they appraised different elements of the course, including the learning diary. The 18 comments regarding the learning diary were extracted anonymously and clustered into broad categories by two of the three researchers. These categories were compared and agreement reached (and differences noted) following a verification by the third researcher. Some statements were allocated to more than one category.

The 18 comments resulted in three broad themes:

Theme 1: *Learning diaries as locating experience*

Theme 2: *Learning diaries as dislocating act*

Theme 3: *Pointers for improvement of the function of the learning diaries*

² This addresses to some extent the caution by Boud (2001) of the impact of assessment on the authenticity of the content of learning diaries.

³ In the schema proposed by Varner and Peck (2003) the unstructured nature of these online learning diaries contribute to greater reflection and more authenticity.

⁴ There are several differences between the format and content of students' reflections in their learning diaries and their reviews of stages in the public domain. This is the focus of further research not reported here.

Analysis and discussion of findings

The three identified themes are explored in detail, analysing students' postings and reflecting on the implications for the use of online learning diaries.

Theme 1: Learning diaries as locating experience

Nine of the 18 statements were clustered under this theme. Statements were clustered here if they showed appreciation for the opportunity to complete entries in a learning journal, commented about the positive impact of having a place to show their emotions and/or tracked the progression of their learning and development as managers.

The following statements⁵ are examples of comments under this theme:

- “I wasn't just satisfied with the learning diary - I thought it fantastic! All tutor groups/ courses with a conferencing facility should have this. All conferences & learning diary's should not carry marks, but like here - you can't get an overall pass unless you contribute to both!!!!!!”
- “Liked the diary - opportunity to let off steam and reflect from the beginning”
- “Loved the learning diary it was an excellent tool to capture students feelings.”
- I think I got better with the diary as the challenge progressed, I lost some of my self consciousness and understood better the effectiveness that could be gained from it.
- “the Learning Diaries technique would be a great tool for me to take into the workplace for staff inductions and project management. I found the diary a great tool to refer back to for assessing progress and analysing problems.”

These statements confirm the findings of Prinsloo, Slade and Galpin (2008) that students experience learning diaries as a safe space to vent their frustrations, hopes, and fears.

Theme 2: Learning diaries as dislocating act

A less researched issue is the sense of dislocation experienced by some students when required or asked to post entries to a learning diary. Six of the 18 statements were linked to this theme, and included

- “It was difficult to keep up entering in the learning diary as the <course> was fairly time demanding as since I was also travelling on business it was also very difficult for me to keep p with time zone changes.”
- “Although the learning diary is a good tool, I am desperate for noting my thoughts, I have a great memory at work so never write anything down, this didn't change, even with the constant nudges to do so. I am sure I would have got much more out of the diary had I used it more.”
- “I found the learning diary hard to fill in, but I find things hard to express anyway, one of my weaknesses.”
- “the learnind diary felt like a stone”

⁵ The statements are presented anonymously and unedited. Grammatical, syntax and typing errors have not been changed.

In considering these statements, we concluded that:

- the act of completing the learning diary sometimes added to the pressures of finding enough time to do the other online activities amidst balancing personal and professional lives.
- there were feelings of discomfort with recording personal thoughts, either from students who felt self-conscious, or those experiencing difficulty expressing their thoughts.
- not all understood the potential role of the learning diary as reflection-on-action (as proposed by Schön 1983, 1987).
- the *requirement* to complete a learning diary was experienced as very negative.

These findings offer potentially useful insights for course designers considering the future use of learning diaries. A basic assumption is that learning diaries are intended to enhance and deepen learning rather than frustrate it. With regard to this research, it is important to note the remark that “The aim of the work is not to develop reflective skills in these students, but to improve their learning. The quality of their reflection is incidental” (Moon, 1999). The amount of time required by students to post reflections should not negatively impact on time available for study activities. Although some students may perceive reflection time as a ‘waste’ and a distraction from the real purpose, reflexivity and a reflective mindset has been proven to deepen learning (O’Donnell, Reeve & Smith 2006; Ryan 2005 online). It is understandable that some learners experience discomfort and are self-conscious. Many have never been exposed to the act of conscious reflection. As prior experiences regarding reflectivity may differ, it is quite possible that students will not know how to reflect nor what to record.

Theme 3: Pointers for improvement of the function of the learning diaries

In theme 3, students have proposed specific improvements to the use of online learning diaries. Six comments dealt with suggestions on the improvement of learning diaries in the context of the course, and included:

- “Learning diary a bit primitive. Think this area could be improved. Maybe some prompt questions already typed in there.”
- “Also I think more guidance of what to record in the learning diary would help as sometimes I just made entrys without any real point or purpose to them other than I knew I had to make one.”
- “It was nice to reflect some thoughts on the learning diary. I just hope we get some feedback that will include the work on the learning diary, because I will find it interesting to see what the tutor thinks about my thoughts.”

The first element in this theme is the need for more structure. One student proposed ‘prompt questions’ and another ‘more guidance’. Varner and Peck (2003) propose that learning diaries can be described as varying along two primary continua, namely a vertical axis indicating varying degrees of structure, with the other axis signifying whether the focus of the learning outcomes are inwardly or outwardly focused. The more inwardly a learning diary is envisaged to be, the less structure, while the more outwardly a learning diary is designed to function, for example, being assessed, the more structured it should be. Research by Prinsloo, Slade and Galpin (2008) also suggests that more structure may actually impede spontaneity and result in a loss of some authenticity. As each of the different stage reviews is

followed by a formal structured public review, the learning diary in its current unstructured format reveals rich and thick descriptions of students' experiences of the vortex. As Prinsloo et al (2008) suggest, more guidance in the orientation to the course and the possible inclusion of some of the postings of previous learning diaries, may actually allow students to find their feet quicker in posting their reflections. The 'primitive' nature of the learning diaries is intended.

Another supported element is the need for feedback from the tutor or the course management team. Prinsloo et al (2008) found that many students actually address the online tutor in their diaries in the form of a dialogue. Although tutors are allowed to contact a student should they become aware of some serious impeding factors that the student may deal or struggle with, s/he will routinely only read the postings without responding. Boud (2001) warns that there may be several factors inhibiting or frustrating reflexivity in a learning experience. He explores two inhibiting factors, namely the impact of who will read these reflections, and whether and how these reflections will be assessed (2001). To engage reflexively with a space where one deliberately decides to be (dis)located for the sake of growing while knowing that someone else will watch your ideas, may cause emotions to be so dislocated that the purpose of reflexivity as dislocating practice loses its impetus. "The expectation of writing for an external audience can profoundly shape what we write and even what we allow ourselves to consider. The range of consequences of being read by others can stretch from mild embarrassment to loss of a job or even worse" (Boud, 2001). Boud further explores the effect of assessment on diary writing and concludes that knowing that the diaries will be read and considered as part of formal assessment, may adversely affect the quality and honesty of writing.

The learning diary in the context of the course can then actually become much more. Students can become aware that learning diaries are one way to nurture a 'reflective mindset' which enhances better decisions and strategic thinking (Schön 1983, 1987).

One posting refers to the fact that the student 'confesses' that "the only reason that I wasn't very satisfied with this is due to my own lack of time to fill it in." Although the student accepts responsibility for not gaining any benefit from the learning diary, their confession points to a need to make the benefits of posting reflections in the learning diaries more explicit.

Two postings pointing to the need for more clarity on the function of the learning diary in the context of the course are:

- "bit unsure at first about the learning diary - actually completely missed it for the first three days !!"
- "Still not sure what the learning diary contributed to the course, but it was interesting to note how my attitudes and approach had changed during the course".

Both indicate that the purpose of the learning diaries was not always clear to students (except as a requirement for the course). Although the second posting shares uncertainty regarding its purpose, it also suggests an appreciation for the fact that the learning diary did provide an indication of changing "attitudes and approach". What is interesting here is the implication that the student actually contemplated previous postings in his or her learning diary and became aware of a change in attitudes and approach during the course. In the midst of the uncertainty, this posting shows the benefit of having a trail to retrace and reflect upon.

Should students be encouraged to read their previous postings and write one final reflection, then the richness of their experiences and growth as learners and as managers may become

more obvious to them and the managers of the course. Such reflections can then become part of the orientation to the course to show how the learning diary as an essential element of the course contributes to a reflective mindset.

Conclusions

Online learning, like the broader student experience in higher education, can be described as a 'diaspora space', and a (dis)location. In online learning space, place, identity, roles and competencies are swept away to create a vortex in which students personal, professional and student agendas clash and morph. This study found ample evidence that online learning diaries provide most students with a safe space to reflect on the vortex around them. Without a quiet and reflective centre, students are occasionally overwhelmed by the forces around them. Students' postings provide rich descriptions of the vortex of studying online and the advantage of having a centre to withdraw to. There is however also evidence that posting reflections in learning diaries itself can be a dislocating and uncomfortable experience for some learners, while others question its usefulness.

Although this small study can not be considered as representative of all students taking part in online learning, they do, however, provide some important pointers for the designers and managers of online learning environments. *Without* proper guidance on the function of online learning diaries, the act of posting reflection may contradict its very purpose. This research confirms previous studies that reflection *does* enrich and deepen learning, but only when properly introduced and explained. While the act of reflection remains an uncomfortable experience for many learners, this should not distract from its usefulness. As learners develop a reflective mindset and praxis, learning diaries can become a normal (and celebrated) part of the daily lives of managers.

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