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## Online Learning: Narratives of (Dis)location

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### Abstract:

The growth in using ICT to plan more effective learning in higher education necessitates a critical appropriation of the impact of 'transactional immediacy' on students' experiences of online learning and teaching. As institutions attempt to counter the effect of 'transactional distance' by exploring opportunities offered by asynchronous and synchronous online learning environments, the 'immediacy' of online education is often valorised. 'Transactional immediacy' in online learning can result in experiences of disorientation and dissonance. These experiences, though, are not necessarily negative.

This paper shares findings from a study of students' online journals in the Professional Certificate in Management, offered by the OU Business School. The study found ample evidence of a variety of dislocations which students experience, but also a variety of locating strategies employed by students to deal with the multifaceted disequilibrium some experience in learning online. This dislocation can be technological, epistemological and ontological. In their learning journals, students reflect on such experiences, but also document a variety of strategies to self-author. This paper aims to provide a theoretical foundation for the notion of (dis)location in online learning; presents qualitative research findings regarding the (dis)locating experiences of students, and shares ideas for the design of online learning experiences within a hermeneutical framework of (dis)location.

The findings have implications for the design, management and administration of online learning, and specifically for the use of online learning journals.

**Keywords:** autopoiesis, (dis)location, online learning, learning journals, transactional distance, transactional immediacy

### 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions continuously explore ways in which online engagement can lessen the impact of the 'transactional distance' between students and educators. The variety and growth in ICT allows for a blend of synchronous and asynchronous interactions in creating effective learning experiences. The 'transactional immediacy' that can be created by the effective use of ICT can alleviate some negative effects of 'transactional distance', but its immediacy may also create experiences where students feel disorientated and dislocated (Slaouti 2007:295).

This article explores a theoretical understanding of (dis)location as a characteristic of online learning. We then report on experiences of dislocation reported by students in their learning journals and discuss evidence of strategies some students employ to *counter* feelings of disequilibrium and dislocation. The article closes by using the binary of location and dislocation to suggest a hermeneutical framework of (dis)location as a heuristic device which may provide tentative ideas for both interpreting student experiences online and support the design of more effective online learning experiences.

### 2. Towards a hermeneutical framework of (dis)location

'Transactional distance' refers to the impact of geographical - and temporal - separation between students and the facilitator(s) of learning, resulting in "special patterns of learner and teacher behaviour (e.g. Moore 1993:22). 'Transactional distance' is an integral element in *all* educational settings, whether face-to-face or residential (Chen 2001:460; Moore 1993:23) and refers to the impact of a variety of geographical, cultural, language and prior learning factors on learning. New technologies allow and encourage a 'transactional immediacy' or 'just-in-time learning' unknown and/or impossible in the past (Hummel, Hlavacs & Weissenböck 2002). 'Transactional immediacy' is present in asynchronous *and* synchronous learning experiences, albeit in different forms. 'Transactional immediacy' challenges institutions, educators and students to reconfigure their assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning, their beliefs about their respective identities and their traditional roles. Where transactional distance has been blamed for feelings of isolation and disorientation, the current general presumption is that 'transactional immediacy' does *not* cause feelings of dislocation. This research provides some evidence towards the contrary. Online learning involves experiences of location, relocation and dislocation (Armstrong 2006).

The growth of the Internet and mobile technologies increasingly results in the compression of space and time in which "relationships are becoming less two dimensional and hierarchical and more like networks, rhizomes and Internet links" (Wiseman quoted by Edwards & Usher 2001:8). Edwards and Usher continues to provide a rationale for using (dis)location as "a useful, non-essentialising metaphorical resource through which to analyse, understand and develop changes in pedagogy in conditions of globalisation" (Edwards & Usher 2001:8). Usher and Edwards refer to "antipodality" being "the experience of (dis)location – of being neither here nor there but both here and there – created by vectors of transnational and globalised communication" (1998:3).

This article focuses specifically on *student* online experiences of (dis)location. The use of ICT in education however also impacts on knowledge and knowledge production as well as the curriculum (Bates 1993: 221). ICT blurs the boundaries between academic canonical, certified knowledge, and information (Edwards & Usher 2001:74). Online curricula with the endless possibilities of hyperlinks and searches challenge traditional notions of curriculum and disciplines as confined, bounded spaces (Edwards & Usher 2001). Poster (1997:214) argues that "canons and authorities are seriously undermined by the electronic nature of texts ... as texts become 'hypertexts'... the reader becomes an author, disrupting the stability of experts or 'authorities'."

Against this background, we explore a theoretical foundation for understanding a variety of feelings of dislocation as well as student strategies for dealing with dissonance and disequilibrium.

### 2.1 *The (dis)location of not being anywhere, really*

The disembodiment in online learning plays a major role in student experiences of online learning. "Virtualisation does not imply disembodiment, but relies on disembodiment" (Fleckenstein 2005). Students therefore frequently devise strategies to cope with this disembodiment and 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 result in students sending pictures of themselves or exchanging contact numbers, or even arranging to meet face-to-face (Fleckenstein 2005).

### 2.2 *The (dis)location of learning online, together*

It is often presumed that (by some magic) online interaction between individuals will automatically be a rich environment of different interactions as students proceed from asking for clarification (triggering), exploring issues together, integrating their findings and moving to application and resolution. These four phases of engagement are described as the practical inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson & Archer 2001). Research by Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin and Chang (2003) found the majority of postings studied to be either asking clarifying questions (triggering) or exploring the problem (2003:127). Most of the postings resembled "serial monologues" (Henri,

1991 quoted by Pawan et al 2003:119), with very little of the contributions building on the contributions of others (Pawan et al 2003:127).

Garrison et al (2001:10) comment that students prefer to continue exploring issues rather than move towards integration and resolution. This may require facilitators of students to prompt the group to move on. Being 'forced' to 'move on' and to integrate learning may be very uncomfortable to most students and may provide some sense of (often necessary) (dis)location.

Although research has shown that the sense of community among students can directly influence student satisfaction and success (Fleckenstein 2005; Rovai 2002), online communities are at least as complex as real-time, face-to-face teams. Being compelled to solve problems as a virtual team often challenges many students and can result in feelings of severe disorientation and (dis)location (as will be discussed later).

#### *2.4 The (dis)location of learning online*

Fleckenstein (2005) explores students' experiences in cyberspace as "emergent space" where "faceless", disembodied and "placeless" experiences of online education impact on teaching and learning. As such, these experiences testify to the dislocation students experience in learning and being online. Research by Slaouti (2007) confirms that the compression of space, time and personal programmes affect online learning with many students not being prepared for the time-consuming nature of online learning. "Many pointed out how asynchronous negotiation took longer and synchronous communication was problematic because ... being in difference time zones" (Slaouti 2007:295). The possibility of "misunderstanding about commitment" posed a serious challenge to working in online teams (Slaouti 2007:295-296).

#### *2.5 The (dis)location of identity*

Cyberspace does not only allow existing inequalities to continue but also "produces new formations of social and economic power and it is against these that its democratic actuality must be judged" (Edwards & Usher 2001:62). Education in cyberspace therefore reconfigures the definition of canonical academic knowledge, the authority and expertise of the educator, and the passivity and roles of students, and challenges traditional notions in pedagogy where the teacher is the all-knowing expert and students empty vessels to fill. It is no longer contested that cyberspace and online education is not necessarily more "open", "egalitarian" or even democratic (Edwards & Usher 2001:49).

Neither teachers nor students are always prepared for these reconfigurations and may find them (at least initially) (dis)locating and causing friction (Crawford 1999:57; Usher & Edwards 1998). In online education, the role of teachers changes to becoming guides and facilitators of learning (Steel & Hudson 2001:108), 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" may result in professional disorientation (Crawford 1999:57).

#### *2.6 The (dis)location of technology*

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" (2001:106). The fragility of technology refers not only to the many possible technological hiccups that users face, but also to the "robustness of the technology" (Steel & Hudson 2001:106) with continuous changes and innovation, resulting in students and teachers often feeling a sense of being behind the latest developments. Interestingly, the fear of technological failure was found (Steel & Hudson 2001:109) to be the "worst case scenario". "Even if the technology has never failed, for example, the fear is that it could" (Steel & Hudson 2001:109). In her research on online learning, Fleckenstein (2005) found unreliable technologies to have "played a central role in disrupting community building" and that "online participation was subject to seemingly random forces that disrupted and prevented the growth of fellowship".

## 2.8 *Self-authoring and locating strategies*

*Autopoiesis* describes the process of “self-creation” or “self-authoring” as researched by Maturana and Varela (1973), Baxter Magolda (2001) and Pizzolato (2003, 2004, 2005). Pizzolato describes self-authorship as “a relatively enduring way of orienting oneself toward provocative situations that includes recognising the contextual nature of knowledge, and balancing this understanding with one’s own internally defined beliefs, goals and sense of self” (2005:624). The process of authoring the self, according to Baxter Magolda (2001) and Pizzolato (2003) is often triggered by a “provocative experience” causing disequilibrium, dissonance or dislocation. This experience challenges the students to reconsider and re-appropriate assumptions, beliefs, goals and identities. By locating themselves, students and teachers embody their own personal and collective biographies as “situated, historical subjects” (Edwards & Usher 2001:120). By naming their worlds and their identities, students and teachers take responsibility for not only ‘mapping’ themselves against provided categories, but also plotting their own trajectories of development and even questioning the provided categories. This act of mapping, plotting and questioning is in its essence an action of autopoiesis or self-authoring. Mapping, plotting and questioning are different methods of ‘wayfinding.’

Pizzolato found that not *all* disequilibrium resulted in perspective change (2003:803; 2005:625). Students either avoided coping with the disequilibrium, or used a variety of individual and supported coping mechanisms (Pizzolato 2004:433). Some students, after initially reflecting and re-appropriating beliefs, assumptions, goals and identity, returned to their pre-disequilibrium beliefs, assumptions, goals and identity (Pizzolato 2004:435).

Research on the role and function of online learning journals (Prinsloo, Slade and Galpin 2008; Salmon 2002) has shown that learning journals can be useful devices in allowing and encouraging reflection which help students not only to become aware of their dislocations, but also encourage reflection on dealing with these feelings of dislocation and disequilibrium.

## 3. **Narratives of (dis)location: a case study**

### 3.1 *Context and methodology*

The Online Management Challenge (OMC) is an 18 day alternative for OU Business School students who cannot attend a short residential school or who prefer online participation. It comprises activities organised in four stages of between three and six days, with students required to complete each stage by a set date in order to proceed. Students are allocated to groups of about twelve, supported by a tutor. They are asked to be online daily, and are expected to make a substantive contribution to each stage. Throughout the course, students are required to keep a personal learning journal, which they draw upon to review their learning in the final stage. The *content* of the learning journals is not assessed. The learning journals are confidential and are only read by the tutor and the Course Director. In this case study, the focus was on the learning journals of one tutor group undertaking the OMC.

The student profile (compiled from information provided by students as part of an icebreaker introductory activity) shows a group consisting of 5 males and 7 females; 4 students explicitly identified themselves as ‘managers’; 2 students were outside of the UK and in different time zones, namely the Netherlands and Iraq, and all were employed in organisations including banking, engineering, a development agency, petrochemicals, healthcare, manufacturing, retail and tertiary education.

The postings of students in their learning journals were exported from the learning platform, Moodle, into a Word formatted document and then into Nvivo 7. The text was analysed using a grounded theory approach (Glaser 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researchers coded, discussed the codings and agreed on a descriptive thematic analysis.

### 3.3 *Discussion of findings*

There was ample evidence from their postings that online learning was, in many ways, a (dis)locating experience. Of the 12 students, 11 students posted specific comments in their

learning journals reflecting on the disequilibrium and dissonance they experienced. There was also evidence of students reacting to the disequilibrium and dislocation by *locating* themselves. Students' names have been changed to ensure anonymity. Quotations from student postings are indented, italicized and quoted verbatim.

### 3.3.1 *The (dis)location of being and learning online*

A number of student postings reflect on their feelings when logging in and not finding others online. For example, Andy writes

*logging in this early is out of sink with everyone else, as they seem to do most of theirs in the evening.*

Phillip also testifies to the disjuncture between his available time and the times that other students are online. He writes

*just a quick note. I didn't realise my time appears so committed. I am struggling to match my free windows with that of the group. I appear to be the only one online which makes it hard to start the next stages.*

Phillip comments on the impact of online learning on group communication and writes

*This task would be so much easier face to face where we could deal with issues and get resolve immediatley. Instead the flow of creativity is hindered waiting for the other team members to be on line and posting a note. Nothin seems to get resolved and by the time the other members have posted their thoughts I have forgotten mine. This form of communication is hard to get emotion across correctly.*

Being online brought some excitement, but many students found the amount of effort, the nature of being online and the continuous pressure to remain involved daunting. For example, Janet writes

*I am feeling a little apprehensive as I am playing catch up and still slightly unsure about exactly what is involved.*

Rose's notes in her learning journal reflect feelings of being overwhelmed and out-of-depth. On three occasions she writes

*Oh my god, where do i start? I am so going to struggle.*

*Good gracious, i'm losing it!! aahhhhhhhh*

*I've missed most of today, but i am trying to play catch up. I've read all the messages today...*

Being online presupposes an accessible learning platform and connectivity, as well as students' level of computer literacy. Only 3 students mentioned technical difficulties and these comments were during the first number of days. Andy writes

*Having nightmare time as borrowed computer is not performing the same as mine hence half message posted yesterday.*

Elizabeth also writes

*had real difficulties getting into broadband this weekend - probably due to flooding so missed out on some really good group work.*

### 3.3.2 *The (dis)location of becoming part of the management discourse*

Andy confesses his feelings of feeling out of depth when he writes

*Still having trouble organising my head around accounts, did them at university but mainly concentrated on Gross margins and interdepartment accounts not the overall general and set out. Having to reread the books as i must have missed a part!*

Where Andy reacts to his disorientation by planning a course of action, Joan is lost. She writes  
*I have just had a look at the group discussion again, and I still don't know whats going on, I really need somethink to work on, it's no good me working on a idea and some else has done it or I am heading in the wrong direction with it... I am not enjoying this at the moment, I don't even know what to post in the group.*

Rose complains being lost with the specific 'management-speak' and terminologies used in the course. She writes

*I'm struggling slightly with the language used, meaning that some of the terminology used is difficult to understand for me. ... It may be due to my lack of knowledge or confidence i don't know but i do feel that sometimes i'm not taken into consideration.*

Phillip expresses concern about the lack of management experience in the group and writes

*I have had to post a message summarising where we are at and asked them to volunteer to get involved in other things. No one with the exception of Deborah is making any comment on the financials, which is worrying. As managers they should be interested in the goal of the business, profit...*

### 3.3.3 *The (dis)location of learning in a team*

Although studying online as part of a team can provide security for some students, team work is often contributing to a sense of dissonance and dislocation. Chris compares his amount of dedication with the contributions of the rest of the group and writes

*It seems a bit unfair that some people have only contributed a minimal amount and they pass and i have put in lots of effort for the same result.*

Elizabeth shares her frustration with the amount of detail generated while pressed to work against time constraints. She writes

*I am now up to speed with the work I missed. However am getting very frustrated at the level of detail that other members of the group seem to want to post. The group seem intent on having more and more detail whereas I feel we now have all the elements of the business plan and need to be more concise in what we are doing.*

Vanessa talks about online team work as follows:

*I must admit I am a little frustrated at this point because it took so long to come to the decision of what problem we were going to use. I suppose this may be the downside to working online, although I think this is a great experience it is harder to co-ordinate people when you are not face-to-face or on the telephone.*

### 3.3.4 *The (dis)location of working against time constraints*

In the bounded period of 18 days in which the OMC takes place, students' learning is carefully structured around four successive phases involving a variety of problem solving and praxis. The linear structure of these four periods increases the pressure to remain involved daily. This constant pressure seems not only to continuously direct student effort, but also at times to disorientate and create dissonance.

Debbie writes

*21.20 well its all very exciting analysing the problem, and waiting for everyones input, time is ticking and i see as yet no consolidation of decision making, but we still have 40 minutes, so lets wait... This online stuff is much more nerve racking than being in a face to face meeting!!!*

Elizabeth reflects on balancing work commitments with her online engagement and writes

*Joan will post her responses to questions by 10am this morning. We will then be able to go into the brainstorming session. I am slightly worried as I have quite a few meetings today so not sure how often I will be able to join the group!*

### 3.3.5 *The (dis)location of not being online*

The analysis of students' learning journals also provided evidence of students experiencing dissonance and dislocation when they were not online or when they reflected on the approaching end of the OMC.

Janet writes

*I was really disappointed not being able to get online yesterday, which also surprised me how much when the ideas are flowing you want to be able to discuss...*

The last comment Phillip writes in his learning journal testifies something of the disappointment and dislocation he experiences at the end of the OMC. He writes

*I am having withdrawals now.*

### 3.3.6 *Some locating practices*

Though there was much evidence of students' experiences of disorientation and dislocation, there was equally evidence of steps and strategies taken by students to *locate* themselves.

John writes in his learning journal how he organised himself as well as tried to increase the effectiveness of the group. He writes

*Therefore it was vitally important that I logged on 2-3 times a day to keep up to date with any changes.*

Phillip also comments on the lack of contributions from the group, and writes

*As with the last task I feel that nobody is wanting to take the lead. Time is ticking and the end is drawing near so once again I had to step in to refocus the group on what are objectives are and what we need to do to progress on to stage 2.*

Debbie shares insight in her personal programme by writing

*Completed my first tasks tonite, - ran to school play - and ran back to see who else had logged on and joined in...*

In the light of the group not responding as he thought appropriate, Chris writes

*Nobody seemed to want to put the report together so i have created a document and posted it to the forum. It needs some work to make it flow properly but i'm waiting to see if someone else takes a look. I feel we are all doing good work individually but we only have one day to bring it all together.*

Andy evaluates his own efforts and reflects

*I may be digging to deep into a simple problem and missing the obvious*

## **4. Some pointers for the design and management of online learning**

International literature and research have shown that feelings of dissonance and disequilibrium are a 'normal' part of individual and societal learning and change. Richards and Usher (2001), and others have explored the different aspects of online learning as both a locating and dislocating experience. By foregrounding online learning as (dis)locating experience, the binary of dislocation and location may provide pointers for the design of more effective online learning experiences.

Building on the work of Prigogine, Doll develops an understanding of curriculum as allowing (and encouraging) chaos, activity, reflectivity, disequilibrium and openness (1986:14-15). He states "The teacher must intentionally cause enough chaos to motivate the student to reorganise. Obviously this is a tricky task. Too much chaos will lead to disruption" (1986:15). Dealing with and



becoming more comfortable with the permanence of ambiguity and disequilibrium challenge the beliefs, assumptions and identities of teachers and students alike.

Exploring the concept of (dis)location as a possible heuristic device for the design of more effective online learning experiences does not intend to replace other proven 'best practices'. Examples of research-based principles for the design of effective online learning experiences, include, for example, the comprehensive list provided by Grandzol and Grandzol (2006), the practical inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer 2001) and recent collections of essays on quality in ICT-based higher education (e.g. Fallows and Bhanot 2005). The following few pointers could usefully add to existing 'lists' of defining online quality and effectiveness.

- Dislocation and feelings of disequilibrium are *not* abnormal to learning and more specifically to online learning. Forewarning students and educators of the different aspects of dislocation and of possible strategies of 'wayfinding' may actually deepen the learning experience.
- By the time students enrol for an online learning experience, they have developed a range of "ways of knowing" and "ways of learning" as they negotiate their identities and survival (Bernal 2001). As part of online orientation, students could be encouraged to reflect on their unique "ways of knowing" and "ways of learning" to map possible strategies in dealing with online learning as (dis)locating experience.
- Learning journals or 'closed' spaces where students can provide facilitators of learning and site administrators information of feelings of dislocation can assist educators and designers of learning and allow them to design counter-strategies as well as 'legitimise' students' feelings.
- As Doll (1986) has indicated, there is a critical point in disequilibrium when chaos develops. Individuals have unique levels of tolerance for ambiguity and dissonance. Students and educators should be encouraged to develop a critical sense of (dis)location.
- The research by Pawan et al (2003) indicates that students encouraged to categorise their postings and interactions using the practical inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2001) as schema, may heighten their awareness of their own learning as well as prevent 'serial monologues'.
- Lifelong learning increasingly requires autopoiesis and strategies for self-authoring. Online learning as (dis)location will become part of most adult students' life histories as education and training becomes more and more globalised.

## 5. Conclusion

The growth of the variety and use of ICT in higher education provides stimulus for the analysis and critical interrogation of concepts like 'transactional distance' and 'transactional immediacy'. While 'transactional immediacy' may be valorised as effectively countering the dislocation students and educators experience due to time and geographical separation, 'transactional immediacy' in online learning may create different feelings of dissonance and dislocation. Research has also shown that students employ different strategies to locate themselves in the midst of feeling dislocated.

A hermeneutical framework of (dis)location provides an interesting and useful heuristic device for designing more effective online learning experiences. Planners and designers of online learning experiences will benefit from reviewing their designs from a framework of (dis)location. Students, once made aware of the continuum of (dis)location, can be encouraged to map their own locations and develop ways of knowing and ways of learning as a continuous process in "endless learning" (Edwards and Usher 2001: 153-157).

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