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# Online Literacies and Learning: Operational, Cultural and Critical Dimensions

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This paper addresses the nature of literacy practices in online distance learning environments, specifically those involved in text-based collaborative discussion at post-compulsory level. A three-dimensional framework, relating operational, cultural and critical aspects of linguistic interaction online, is used to argue that research in this field needs to take account of wider institutional and social contexts if it is to address issues of student resistance to socialisation into virtual learning communities. Some methodologies for research of this kind are discussed, and sample analyses of participant interaction on UK Open University Masters courses are presented.

**Keywords:** literacies, social literacies, online learning, virtual learning community, culture, critical dimension

## Introduction: Literacy, Technology and Online Learning

Literacy has long been a central concern of educationists, as an end in itself, and as a means of socialisation. Recently, with the application of thinking from the field of New Literacy Studies (Barton 2001; Gee, 2000; Street, 1995), literacy has become a lens through which to take a more critical view of educational practice, as exemplified in the problematisation of student writing undertaken by writers in the field of academic literacies (Ivanič, 1997; Lea & Street, 1998; Lillis, 2001). In this paper I apply this lens to an examination of some of the practices involved in learning and teaching in online environments.

Over the last decade, technological developments, especially the rapid expansion of the worldwide web and the use of email, have highlighted the role of electronic tools and forms of mediation in the development of literacies: 'we are in the midst of a broad-based shift from Print to Digital-Electronics as the organising context for literate-textual practice and for learning and teaching' (Durrent & Green, 1998, quoted in Lankshear *et al.*, 2000: 26). It has been argued that the main challenge to literacy pedagogy arising from these developments is the multi-modality of digital-electronic communication. The New London Group, for example, proposes that teaching has to take into account 'the burgeoning variety of text forms associated with information and multimedia technologies' (New London Group, 1996: 61). This notion of different kinds of literacy related to different forms of technology, termed 'multiliteracies', has been elaborated by writers such as Douglas Kellner, to encompass the ability to 'critically and hermeneutically process print, graphics, moving images and sounds' (Kellner, 2002: 163), a view which draws on the perception of fundamental differences

between visual and print communication, as argued by Kress (1997), Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996) and others. The implicit technological determinism in the original multiliteracies concept has been criticised by some who regard the social context of communication as more significant than the medium (e.g. Abbot, 2002: 33), and the notion of 'multiple literacies' has developed in order to maintain a view of the social groundedness of all literacy practices, whatever the medium. Snyder (2002: 174) suggests that we have now transcended 'simplistic bifurcations' between pro- and anti-technology positions characteristic of earlier debates on the role of the computer in reading and writing, and that there is now a convergence of audiovisual media and printed media, popular culture and high culture, entertainment and education, information and knowledge. In her view, teachers should attend to the whole spectrum of communication practices, '... no longer ignoring the skills involved in relating them to each other' (Snyder, 2001: 122).

But whilst it is true that multiple literacies in the wider world are multi-modal, and that literacies at school level are beginning to reflect this, in the field of online distance learning in post-compulsory education, rapidly expanding as a site of educational practice, literacy practices still remain predominantly written. In this arena, the greater part of interaction continues to be via the asynchronous exchange of text-based messages, using email or other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Richards, 2000). The key significances of this mode of teaching and learning can be summarised as follows:

- It is a site of change in institutional practice, e.g. from face-to-face to partially or wholly distance-based learning, that is becoming increasingly important in the economically important sectors of higher and post-compulsory education (Evans & Nation, 2000).
- It is a site of potential multinational and multicultural participation that is currently dominated by linguistic and cultural norms associated with English-speaking societies (Ess, 2002).
- It is mode of communication which is subject to shaping by formal print-literate and informal oral-literate conventions at one and the same time (Herring, 2001).

The online learning literature has tended to emphasise the possibilities for democratisation of the teacher–learner relationship (e.g. Swan, 2002), or to celebrate the affordances of peer collaborative learning (e.g. Bonk & King, 1998), rather than to problematise the literacy practices they give rise to. This is because practice and research in online teaching and learning are fixated on the operational and pedagogical dimensions of online interaction, and tend not to take account of the struggles of individual learners (and sometimes teachers too) to construct the virtual social environment in a way that makes most sense to them. Online distance learning is often seen as a process of socialisation into a virtual learning community, but as Kramer-Dahl (2001) argues, it is the responsibility of critical practitioners to respect and explore the origin of student resistance to such socialisation.

In this paper, I argue for a view of the practices involved in teaching and learning in online environments as social literacies, and for a research agenda which explores the ways that relations of social power are enacted in electronic text-based virtual classrooms. In particular, I address the question of how indi-

vidual learners develop strategies of resistance to socialisation into institutional online learning communities. I use the concepts of 'operational', 'cultural' and 'critical' dimensions of literacy (Lankshear *et al.*, 2000) to examine some of the current discourses around online learning, including that of the 'transferable skills' curriculum with which it is often associated, and the pedagogical issues that have arisen out of research into the conditions of computer-mediated social interaction. I argue that these perspectives raise, but do not address, questions about the way that individual participants in online learning groups experience and contest the attempt to socialise them into dominant literacy practices. I consider some of the methodological implications and problems of analysing specific online learning events as contested literacy practices, and illustrate these issues with two examples analysing interactions on UK Open University (UKOU) postgraduate online courses.

### **Social Literacies: Operational, Cultural and Critical Dimensions**

Lankshear *et al.* (2000) discuss literacies, technologies and pedagogies in terms of three dimensions of practice. The 'operational' dimension is concerned with developing performance with the linguistic systems, procedures, tools and techniques involved in making or interpreting texts. The 'cultural' dimension puts these operational competencies to service in an authentic social or occupational context, enhancing the learner's ability to participate in the discourses of the social world. The 'critical' dimension encompasses the means for transformation and active re-production of existing literacy practices or discourses, developing the ability to evaluate, critique and redesign the resources through which these practices and discourses are mediated.

This perspective is useful in relating literacies and literacy pedagogy to electronic communication, because it encourages us to look beyond the words that the learners write onto the screen and to enquire into the kinds of virtual social action that these words perform, intentionally or otherwise. Much of the focus of traditional literacy teaching in schools has been on the operational skills involved in reading and writing, and now, in the electronic age, this focus looks like being transferred to the skills involved in operating computers and managing information. But, as Street (1995) has argued, operational aspects of literacy are closely bound up with the organisational practices and procedures through which 'learning' as a specific kind of social action is constituted. In the context of schooling, these can include the use of relatively simple technologies, such as the blackboard, to objectify language forms and give them an external authority (Street, 1995: 116). With the more complex medium of digital communication, the scope for using the tools to confer authority or authenticity on language use is greatly increased, but this in turn means that the role of technology in constituting, not just mediating, the learning culture, is also increased. This technologising of literacy can have consequences at the wider cultural level, if, for example, learning becomes cut off from the real world of social practice, through using computers to create pedagogical versions of occupational literacies, perhaps bearing little connection to the mature versions of those practices as they are found in the world outside school. Lankshear *et al.* give the example of 'writing newspaper stories in columns' as a technologised pedagogical practice to be

contrasted with the mature practice of 'doing Journalism' (Lankshear *et al.*, 2000: 44).

Whilst the Lankshear *et al.* framework was developed to account for the ways computers are being used in Australian schools, it can also be applied to post-compulsory education settings. In otherwise 'embodied' contexts such as university campuses, the use of online communication to conduct traditional activities such as tutorials, reading groups, examinations etc. is on the increase, and has been shown to be a site of both empowerment and disempowerment for students. Thinking in terms of cultural and critical dimensions of literacy helps to explain some of these effects. Crook's account of campus-based students using online classrooms (Crook, 2002: 116) shows that, although the designed-for mode of use of electronic discussion on a particular university course envisaged peer support conducted through informal online group conversation, in practice students made more use of 'short and serendipitous exchanges as [they] moved about the campus', using e-mail or instant messaging, rather than conferences or discussion boards. In this case, the technologising of pedagogical practice was culturally inappropriate, but the students were nevertheless able to transform both their actual use of the tools and the underlying relations of peer support that were the justification for using them. Kitto and Higgins' account (2003), on the other hand, shows what may happen when the learner has no power to effect such a transformation. The student in this case study was subject to sanction for late submission of an online examination because her claim that this was due to technical failure was not believed. The institution characterised the student herself as the problem, rather than the combined human-computer system, which betrays a failure to grasp the cultural implications of mixing a traditional academic literacy practice such as the one-off unseen examination, with the new technologies of remote and flexible communication. However, in this case there was no possibility for the student to transform either the conditions of use of the technology, or the relation that existed between her and the institution – she failed the exam.

In both these examples, the pedagogical communication practices and their embedded use of technologies can be viewed as social literacies analysable in terms of their operational, cultural and critical dimensions. Because the practices are contextualised within a physical environment in which people meet face to face as well as communicating electronically, the materiality (Barton, 2001) of the texts that are produced and consumed varies greatly, from spoken to handwritten to print/graphical to electronic. The specific role of electronic technologies, in contrast to other tools and modes of interaction, in constructing the various literacy events is fairly evident. In the case of fully online teaching and learning, however, there is much less variation in textual materiality as almost all communication is written to screens. This does not mean, though, that the literacy practices that are being enacted are any less social or complex than their place-based equivalents; only that the other, non-technological, constituents of them are invisible.

### Online Literacies and Learning

Fully online teaching and learning in higher education has been described by Berge and Collins (1995) as the 'merging of informal dialogues, invisible colleges,

oral presentations, and scholarly publications into a kind of dialogic virtual university'. In such an environment textual practices are also instantiations of institutional procedures, as Lea (2003) has argued, but these procedures may be based on assumptions about the nature of technologised literacies that are not justified by research or experience. For example, there is an emerging curriculum in which different subjects and areas of knowledge have become less significant than the 'transdisciplinary' skills involved in using ICT to study them (Edwards & Usher, 2000: 78). The importance of these skills is rationalised in terms of the presumed occupational relevance of 'media competences' (Peters, 2000) to working in virtual companies, organisations, working groups and project teams in the emerging virtual economy. References to such generic and supposedly transferable online communication skills now appear in the stated learning outcomes of courses at all levels. In practice they often refer primarily to the operational skills involved in using computers and online databases, and secondarily to virtual versions of the higher order 'teamwork' skills which have been required occupational outcomes of higher education for some time (Thorpe, 1998), such as online groupworking and negotiation, group decision-making, task management, etc. But there is far from universal agreement about how these latter skills may be assessed in terms of learner behaviour in textually mediated discussion. Assessment systems which set out to evaluate the online collaborative behaviour of learners for the purposes of awarding credit (e.g. McDonald *et al.*, 2000; Sutherland, 2003) apply criteria such as 'engagement with subject matter', 'responsiveness', 'contribution to organisation of the group's activities', 'synthesis of new propositions', 'coherence of contribution', 'effective facilitation of the discussion', 'drawing on others' comments' etc. These statements give little indication of the form of the texts through which such competences might be developed, nor of the role of wider cultural and critical factors in their acquisition.

Where online pedagogy has looked to research in order to inform its practices, it has tended to be in the areas of computer-mediated discourse, collaborative learning, and social presence, rather than literacies. For example, studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have identified a number of ways in which the medium may influence social interaction. Text-only channels such as email can reduce evidence of social status, such as age, gender, race and class (Herring, 2001), so that information normally relied upon to give weight to certain voices, such as the teacher's, is no longer available. Although, as Herring also points out, there is evidence that email use itself is becoming more formal as it becomes more widespread, it is still thought to empower some (the shy, the inarticulate, the reflective) who would be marginalised in other, more visible, contexts. Similarly, asynchronous text-based interaction amongst groups, which is the dominant mode in internet communication, distorts patterns of turn-taking and addressivity, resulting in hybrid genres which may be at the same time speech-like, letter-like, note-like, essay-like. This hybridity may serve to legitimate forms and sources of information which might not be considered authoritative in conventional educational contexts (e.g. Lea, 2001, describes students adapting referencing conventions to allow them to cite each other's views given in online discussion). Some writers in the field of online learning have suggested that CMC generates a form of interaction between learners and

teachers which is less constrained by social factors than its face-to-face equivalent (Lapadat, 2003), or that it is more equitable and democratic than traditional classroom discussion, and consequently more satisfying to students and more productive of mindfulness and culture of reflection (Swan, 2002: 26). Others have put forward the view that individual learning can benefit from collaborative engagement in a virtual community in which learners help each other to make sense of information and ideas (Garrison *et al.*, 2001; Wallace, 2003). But studies which analyse online interaction from these cultural perspectives tend to focus on the knowledge, information, ideas etc. that are considered to be the product of discussion, rather than on social relations between the participants themselves. Whilst the literature in the general field of online communication boasts a number of detailed studies of participant experience (e.g. Baym, 1998), the more specialised accounts of online learning do not, as a rule, focus on the individual; researchers in this field tend to look for patterns of attitudes or perceptions which can be generalised across a number of participants affected by a given set of technical and pedagogical conditions.

If we read between the lines of some of the better-known studies of online learning interaction we can often find indications of cultural and critical dimensions of social activity, although these tend to be analysed in terms of sociocultural learning theories, rather than as descriptions of institutional literacy practices. For example, in Bonk *et al.*'s 'microanalysis' of transcripts of online dialogue amongst preservice teachers (Bonk *et al.*, 1998: 299–306) there is a description of one particular learner whose online voice was 'articulate, creative, entertaining, controversial and domineering' (p. 305), but who was nevertheless unsuccessful in engaging his fellow learners in a debate of the substantive issues he raised. This participant had a cynical, colloquial style of self-presentation which some of the other students imitated, and which the researchers considered evidence of a maturity of intellect and experience beyond that of the majority of the learning group. The authors theorise this in terms of a group 'zone of proximal development' (Wertsch, 1985), which this learner had 'outgrown'. But this explanation does not account for the variety of otherwise constructive ways that other students reacted to his provocation, some critical, some humorous, nor address the experience of those who were 'intimidated or bewildered' (p. 305) by it, nor suggest appropriate pedagogical responses. Nor indeed does it address the authors' own suppositions in evaluating the productions of this problematic contributor as evidence of a more advanced stage of intellectual and social development.

Other accounts of the experience of learner-participants in online environments raise similar questions about the nature of the communication practices developed by individuals and groups, and their role in constructing the experience for all participants. Duin and Hansen, for example, discuss the difference between the interactions of older and younger students in a collaborative writing network, in terms of the distribution of power: the older students acquiescing to '...established models of authority...' whilst the younger writers did not recognise the presence of the instructor and instead 'used the network to negotiate a larger cultural meaning of public stances and identities' (Duin & Hansen, 1994: 100). Hara and Kling (1999), in a well-cited rare account of an unsuccessful online learning event, associate students' feelings of frustration with perceptions of

disempowerment related to ambiguity and unreliability in the behaviour of both the technology and the teachers. Nesbitt *et al.* (2000) describe facetious and 'off-task' behaviour by a few mischief-makers in a number of unmoderated learning groups, who deliberately targeted other students with mockery and abuse in order to disrupt their compliance with the requirements of the learning task. Mann's (2003) 'personal inquiry' into online learning reflects on her own experience of unease about her identity in an online group, and retrospectively analyses linguistic elements of her messages (e.g. a tendency to avoid the first person) to show how this affected her self-presentation.

These accounts of the behaviour of particular online learners raise questions about participant experience, social relations, and the role of institutional context in shaping interaction, that are not easily addressed from the pedagogical perspective of learning theory, nor through the utterance-based methodologies of content analysis – currently the principle means of analysing the social dimension of online discourse in educational contexts (e.g. Rourke *et al.*, 2001). Understanding how some kinds of participation in text-based interaction come to be transformative, in the sense that they reconstruct the community of their authors at a different level of social and educational significance, requires a wider view than is afforded by the 'skills curriculum' or the investigation of social presence or scaffolding in online interaction. It requires a perspective on textual communication that is concerned with the way that participants themselves construct a sense of appropriate 'behaviour': of what is admirable and what is offensive. It also requires a wider view of what is cultural in the sociocultural domain, an acknowledgement of the implications of written linguistic communication for those whose backgrounds are diverse, or non-traditional, from the institution's point of view. It also requires a wider, and more critical, view of the institutional context in which the online environment is embedded, and of the role of institutional factors in shaping the interaction as social action in a larger sense: as the awarding of status, or the application of sanctions, or more subtly in the conferring or withholding of recognition for individuals' accounts of the realities of their experience (Gee, 2000).

### **Methodologies for Investigating Online Literacies**

One implication of the attempt to develop a broad view of operational, cultural and critical literate aspects of text-based interactions amongst participants in online learning environments, is the need to enhance existing methodologies used to analyse conference transcripts. This calls for a more linguistic-ethnographic approach (Blommaert, 2001; Paccagnella, 1997) aimed at exploring the social value of communications, in particular the way they enact and reveal relations of power. It is important to go beyond the idea that individual contributions from individual participants may be unproblematically classified in terms of functional categories of interaction or argument, such as 'content statements', 'questions', 'peer response' (Bonk *et al.*, 1998: 296). Linguistic description of texts-as-interaction needs to take account of the potential of all written text to become shifted from its context as dialogue, and to have its meaning changed over time. Methodologies are needed which aim to describe the complexity of interpretations that participants put onto each other's words.



The variety, in fact, of intentions that specific texts can enact within a given context, and the multiplicity of ways in which these intentions can be recognised by others. There is not room for a detailed discussion of methodology here, but some general principles can be proposed, and two examples from practice discussed by way of illustration.

First, this approach requires attention to be paid to a somewhat wider textual context than is normal in research in online learning. For example, the institutional background – how the formal school / university and the student's relation to it is textually constructed – is as important as the pedagogical context. This may involve focusing on participant experience across a wider spectrum than an individual course, perhaps over a succession of courses, or on events from different arenas of their dealings with the institution.

Secondly, we need to examine online 'conversations' in which the same participants persist, not just the content of individual messages or the output of individual contributors. These conversations may be held within continuous threads, or dispersed across separate threads, even separate conferences. Analysis of the discourse represented by these conversations needs to be done at a variety of levels: the signs and textual forms, the language used, the conventions observed, the turns taken, the ideas and emotions expressed etc.

Thirdly, detailed evidence from participants' reflection on their experience is necessary, perhaps through interviews or in-depth surveys. These reflections should be critical, not simply attitudinal, with informants encouraged to re-examine online events and reinterpret them in the light of subsequent experience. As part of this process we need to consider the role of the researcher as participant observer, especially if his or her participation is as a teacher or in some other institutional role, and is thus marked in terms of the power relations which are the focus of the enquiry. This is exactly the case in the second of the two examples from Open University practice that are discussed below.

### **Example Analyses of UK Open University Practice**

The UK Open University (UKOU), as a distance teaching institution, constructs itself, and its relation to students, in text. This is done through postings of regulatory material, rules, advice, procedures, etc. alongside the textbooks, printed course guides, video and audio tapes that constitute the subject matter of the courses. The student's role, initially, is as a passive 'reader' of the relationship, and it is likely that, because of the quantity of the printed matter they receive, students will focus their attention on the texts that relate to the course, rather than on the more general university-level information. If students have had experience of university study, they may fill in the institutional background themselves. If not, then their understanding of the relationship they are entering into may be built from any of a number of prior assumptions. In due course, this understanding is refined by contact with a tutor, and perhaps with other students, but in the absence of buildings, offices, classrooms and other symbols of institutional existence, the entire experience of belonging, or otherwise, must be constructed out of self-positioning with regard to the texts and interactions which are the sum of the study experience.

In the global online postgraduate courses (Masters in Open and Distance

Education) discussed below, some of the printed matter is delivered electronically via the course websites, and interaction with tutor and peers takes the form of private email messages or comments sent to an electronic conference. Key institutional practices are thus constructed from a mix of differently mediated texts and procedures.

The operational, cultural, and critical engagements that students on these MA courses enter into with the university, their teachers and fellow students, are thus shaped not by any objective collective expression of identity or purpose, such as a building or set of occasions for gathering such as lectures, but by their subjective recognition of the meanings and values that these texts and practices enact. In the case of the majority of MA students, this recognition proceeds from prior experience of higher education and a professional background in education, but as Goodfellow *et al.* (2001) have shown, even in this relatively homogeneous group, cultural and linguistic differences produce sharply different interpretations of the relations of power governing whose meanings and values predominate.

The focus of these two examples is the exchange of written messages in the course electronic conferences. Students on these courses are expected to commit themselves to an average of 12–15 hours a week on course-related activity. Of this, 2–3 hours is to be allocated to accessing the conferences, reading and contributing messages. Tutors are required to meet the same level of online activity. There is, inevitably, an enormous variety in the practices of individuals, reflecting both personal preferences and circumstances and the different emphases put on collaborative work practices by the different courses. Each of the three courses that make up the MA programme, however, generates a minimum of 70–100 messages per tutor group (12 students) per course unit (8 weeks), with an equivalent number of private emails between individuals. Six groups of 12 students, as was the case in the second of these two examples, therefore create an archive throughout a course of approximately 2400 messages, with a further equivalent number of email exchanges unrecorded.

### **First example: A supportive exchange**

This is an example of a small-scale literacy event analysed linguistically. It illustrates the negotiation of norms of activity around an assignment. This is the kind of exchange which might be placed in a marginal category, for example, ‘task management’ or ‘socio-emotional support’ in coding systems which are concerned with identifying elements of the construction of knowledge or argument. However, I have tried to show here that the self-presentation involved in making even brief and informal comments on shared tasks can constitute significant social action, whether or not it is taken up in textual action by other participants. A student’s use of ironic self-reference and explicit awareness of operational limitations, together with implicit criticism of assignments, can constitute part of an ongoing dialogue of resistance.

The exchange is from the interactions of a tutorial group (about 12 people) at the mid-point of one of the courses. It shows how it possible to read even quite short exchanges in terms of operational, cultural and critical dimensions of the communication, and to apply this reading to an assessment of relations of social power amongst participants. Two students exchange comments on an assignment they are in the process of writing, which has required them to search the

internet for information about specific educational institutions, and critically evaluate their findings in a 4000-word essay. Both of the participants are female. One (here called A.) is a native speaker of English, resident in Hong Kong. The other (B.) is a non-native English speaker, resident in the United Arab Emirates.

*Message on 7/24 posted by A.*

**How far do you go? (a whinge)**

Well, here I am with all my information wondering if I've got 4000 words worth. I'm seriously worried about the amount of searching I've done. It's obvious that some people (yes you S!) have been surfing around for weeks finding lots of sites and generously sharing them. I on the other hand went into the office last weekend (because the connection's much better) and started with my own institution's web site because I knew it had some useful links (though when I come to evaluating it there are going to be some sharp comments!). I did this partly because I am really pushed for time, partly because evening surfing is really difficult in HK at the moment – there is one big cable connecting us to the rest of the world and it gets jammed up in the evening. But also, it seemed the most efficient way to do it. Once I'd decided what I was doing, there didn't seem much point in exhaustively looking for research papers for example, if all the obvious places hadn't yielded them. I'm now wondering if I took too narrow a focus. In fact I didn't find a huge amount of material about my chosen institution. Last week I thought that was OK, it was a valid point to comment on in the assignment. Now I'm thinking maybe it was because I didn't look hard enough or long enough.

Yuck. And it's 33 degrees here. Hot hot HOT

A. positions herself and her audience with the subject line of her message 'How far do you go? (a whinge)', which is cryptic and ironically self-referential, assuming a familiarity with colloquial English and also with self-deprecation as a rhetorical style. The audience is implicit – those who are engaged in the current assignment task – though it contains a humorous accusatory address by name to an earlier contributor ('yes you S!'), who has set a high standard for finding useful websites and posting links to the discussion forum. The register is personal, confiding and informal, although not excessively colloquial. It locates the writer in terms of physical environment (Hong Kong and very hot), recent activity (looking for web sites to share), and state of mind (doubting that she has been working as hard as others). It helps to construct several of the topics that recur quite frequently in these exchanges, e.g. comparative workload, personal working style, technological constraints, assessment, physical embodiment, critical compliance, etc. In particular, it relates to the ongoing negotiation of norms of contribution and background effort that is a frequent theme in the textual interactions of these participants, and indeed of online learners in many contexts. (Nesbitt *et al.*'s learners, for example, discussed earlier, also contested the appropriacy of time and effort put into online activity by others). Expected effort in terms of hours spent in the various modes of study required by the course and

the university are discussed in the printed course guide, but are also subjected to local recontextualisation by participants, especially regarding difficulties of a technical or operational kind which are perceived as creating significant inequalities amongst those who are geographically dispersed. A.'s self-deprecation and the apparently self-critical tone of the message, are common rhetorical moves in this continuing reassessment of the operational demands of the course. However, the explicit rationale regarding the underlying logic of the activity and the difficulties of internet access in Hong Kong convey confidence, rather than concern, an impression of control reinforced by the fluency of the linguistic expression.

A.'s message received a response quite quickly (later the same day), from B.

*Message on 7/24 posted by B.*

**You are not alone, A . . .**

A., I think we are all in the same boat. I feel the same . . . I don't know if what I wrote is worthwhile . . . there is only one way to find out . . .

Regards

B.

B.'s message is a personal response announced by a subject line which includes the addressee's name. It is very short but empathetic with A.'s predicament, implying that both are waiting to find out what the tutor thinks of their essays (the 'only one way' to know if what you have written is worthwhile). B. does not pick up on the slightly self-mocking tone of the original, instead adopting a straightforwardly supportive tone. In doing so, she appears to misconstrue the meaning of the original 'wondering if I've got 4000 words worth' which was more likely to be a reference to the required size of the assignment, rather than its quality. The overtly supportive intention draws a response from A. the next day:

*Message on 7/25/ posted by A.*

**Thank you . . .**

. . . B. – that makes me feel a bit better. I'm sure what you wrote is worthwhile. I hope what I'm writing (note tenses) is!

Regards

A.

This message signals its cultural appropriacy as a response to B. in a number of ways. It expresses approval, explicitly in the subject line, the body of the text matches B.'s reply in terms of conciseness and even linguistic structure (addressee's name first, short sentences with first person subject, same salutation). It returns the supportive sentiment using the same words in which B.'s

concerns were expressed ('what you wrote is worthwhile'). But A. also makes another elliptical verbal reference to the fact that she is finishing the task late ('what I'm writing (note tenses) is'), which is both a sophisticated linguistic joke, and a reappearance of the ironic self-deprecation that characterised the first message. This language-play dimension of A.'s online discussion style has been described as a characteristic feature of interaction in the medium (Herring, 1999: 17), but it is not a form of behaviour that is exhibited by all participants. This may be an important indicator of culture in the literacy of a learning group, as it is grounded in both linguistic competence and learned attitudes to the social and institutional context in which the interaction is taking place. B.'s responses in this exchange at no time take on either the wryness or the readiness to critique the context that A.'s messages display, although she does reiterate, in a further longer response, the theme of questioning whether what has been written in the assignment is what is required. She also comments on operational difficulties encountered whilst doing the web searches, specifically when 'the cursor refused to move' – a level of technical detail that does not suggest a deep understanding of possible causes of, or solutions to, the problems. A.'s final message in this thread was posted three days later, and moves the exchange onto a more critical level, although this is not subsequently developed.

*Message on 7/28 posted by A.*

**Phew!**

Hi B.

Well I finally got it done, but I have the same sorts of concerns. Actually the question was a bit vaguely expressed I think. And then I looked at the outline that D suggested but decided to do it a bit differently. Possibly a mistake! I do sympathise with you on having problems with the search. I am very lucky in that my Internet connection at work is excellent and even so I found it quite frustrating sometimes. If I had to rely on my home connection (sometimes very slow) I'd be a lot more frustrated. So, well done for persevering, and now on with the next Block. What indefatigable creatures we are.

Best regards

A.

A. ends the thread with a cryptic but encapsulating subject line ('Phew!'). The text returns to the more complex thematic and linguistic structure with which she began the exchange, combining supportive comment with references to workload, the assignment context (including the tutor D's advice), network issues, home/work context, and an emotive construction of the qualities of the learning group to which they both belong ('indefatigable creatures'). Most significant, from the critical perspective, is her assertiveness regarding the vagueness of the assignment itself, and the decision not to follow the tutor's advice. This

self-positions A. in quite a different relationship to the course, the tutor, and the institution, from the one that B. has projected, and it is perhaps no accident that the other aspects of the exchange have indicated that she has a greater facility with the available resources for communication in this context: the register of the exchange, the subtleties of English syntax, vocabulary, and spelling, the minimal visual element provided by the icons, and the background understanding of what causes problems with the technology. This is despite the fact that she is the one ostensibly with the problem (assignment not yet finished). B., by contrast, although the one initially offering support, takes up a much more passive position in acknowledging the problems of the assignment – a position which is unlikely to be accounted for simply by her relatively less-developed operational facility with English or knowledge of the technical complexities of searching on the web.

A.'s critical confidence and B.'s supportive diffidence are capable of a more specific cultural interpretation. Indeed, it might be tempting to view the contrast between the two online personas as stereotypically intercultural – Western individuality *vis-à-vis* Eastern reserve (e.g. Kim & Bonk, 2002) – although we have little knowledge of the individual cultural and national backgrounds of these participants, and few grounds for assuming that the differences between their styles of communication are due to anything other than personality. Nevertheless, cultural difference as an explanation of some of the things that go on in online exchanges has been explicitly postulated by other student participants in these courses:

In my group there was a lady who was from, I mean her background was Asian, and I really appreciated her, because she was so kind of responsible, she really showed lots of responsibility towards our tutor group, I don't know if this was a cultural aspect, but what I have experienced from lots of, I mean, also chatting with people, it seems to be part of their culture to . . . to . . . if you start something you really give your best, it was my idea from face-to-face courses in Britain, meeting people from Japan or from different countries, other parts of the world. (Goodfellow *et al.*, 2001: 75)

This quotation is from an interview conducted with another female student who was a member of the same tutorial group on the same course, as part of a research project (reported in Goodfellow *et al.*, 2001) conducted two years later. Whilst this reference was to people she engaged with on a later course, I refer to it here, in the context of this reflection on the conversation between A. and B., because it illustrates the way that background assumptions may be brought to bear on our reading of identities projected in quite short interactions online, just as they are in the contextual world. However, in the virtual realm such readings may be more persistent, as the messages remain in view whilst the contingent behaviour of their authors is only visible if it is enacted in further messages. The possibility of participants becoming 'invisible' is ever-present, not only because circumstances may prevent them from contributing to discussion from time to time, but also because it is the ultimate resort of those who have become alienated by the communication process in some way. This was the case with the author of the above quotation. At the time of the interview she was studying the third of the courses needed for her MA, and her views on the culturality of online behaviour

were clearly shaped by her experience of an online discussion during this course, in which cultural and critical dimensions of participant inequality did become explicit. This event is the subject of the next example.

### Second example: Conflictual exchanges

The second exchange is a larger online literacy event analysed from a participant perspective. It also illustrates the negotiation of norms of online activity, but it makes explicit the overlap of cultural and critical dimensions and brings the underlying dialogues of resistance into the open. It is taken from an interaction similar in some respects to the one described in Bonk *et al.* (1998), in which one person exercised a dominant role in the conduct of a discussion. Through a reading of the ways in which participants positioned themselves with regard to group, course, institutional and wider social contexts of interaction, I try to account for the intensity of an experience which led the same student quoted in the previous study to abandon online interaction altogether, and later to reflect:

in our last block discussion, that there was a rather dominating person who is excellent, but he simply can't understand why other people can't contribute in this way, and then he keeps nagging, why don't you post, why are you lurkers, things like this, and people feel so guilty, I mean, I did really feel guilty because I took part as well as I could and as much as I could, but other people sent messages explained, gave their reasons, and still he just doesn't listen. And this happened a few times also in non-online environments, that I think this is part of our culture, we simply, we want to get our ideas through, and don't really listen to other people.

This student, C., was a female non-English native speaker resident in Austria, and the 'dominating person' she was referring to was D., a male native-English speaker resident in the UK. At the time of the event, C. was completing the last of three courses leading to her MA, in all of which she had taken an active role in online discussion. As her remarks above make clear, the issue at the centre of the conversation, which caused her to feel guilt, was the question of 'lurkers' – those who read others' messages without contributing any of their own. This phenomenon in online communication was brought to the attention of the educational research community nearly a decade ago (Newman & Perkins, 1996) when it was recognised that passive participation may still be a legitimate contribution to online discussion. However, experience has shown that some people lurk because they feel constrained from contributing (shyness, intimidation, etc.), and others because they do not feel involved, have nothing to say, or simply lack the time to participate. In some educational contexts, this issue may be critical, as active collaboration in discussion may be considered integral to the learning process – even, as in the case of these MA courses, subject to assessment (Goodfellow, 2001). However, even with strong incentives to participate operating on everyone, there will always be considerable variation in the extent of individuals' involvement, and some will contribute far more (or less) than others.

C.'s comments make it clear that D. was regarded as 'excellent', by herself and other students. This judgement, which she and others elaborated on during the conversation, meant that he practised the kind of collaborative engagement that the course, through the printed course guides, presented as key to success. She

was referring to his contributions in the small online tutorial groups (12 people or fewer) through which the greater part of the course was conducted. For the final three-month period, however, the 70-odd students had been put altogether into a single plenary group, to discuss their final assignment – an essay on types of interaction in distance education. This combining of the groups was justified by the course director (also the present author) at the start of the discussion, on the basis that previous courses had shown that only a small proportion of the students would be likely to want to take part in continuing online discussion so close to the end of the course and the final assignment. The justification was contested during the ensuing conversation by D., who had considerable experience in a management training context. The conversation was spread out over 14 days, with 22 students taking part at some point, although most only peripherally, the main actors being a group of about eight, with D. prominent.

D.'s online presence was characterised by a number of operational and cultural features amounting to a particular communicative style, for example: he was almost always the first to respond to any other message sent to any thread anywhere in the conference; he often addressed his messages to individuals, using the addressee's name in the subject line of his messages; he often began messages with a statement of approval for others' contributions even if he then went on to criticise their views; his messages were often quite long (up to three screens-full of text) and always articulately expressed; he was consistently critical of the course and its technical environment; and he habitually described himself as an outsider to the educational community. The power that he brought to bear on the interactions of this group was derived from exercising knowledge and skills in the technical and informational domains as well as from his personal energy and commitment. He used the world of the web outside the course resources to provide examples, make points, support arguments. He referred to high status external contexts like BBC, CNN, University of Colorado, and reinforced this with URLs and hotlinks. He exemplified an operational mastery of screen-based texts, but also a cultural discourse based in connectedness, modernity and business enterprise.

D. initiated the subject of lurking in a message with the theme of how interaction amongst learners could facilitate learning. He raised the question why, one month into the final module of the course, only a proportion of the course population appeared to be actively participating in discussion. Another student replied in a semi-humorous, confessional tone ('... I confess. Mea culpa... I have become a serial lurker...') explaining his or her non-participation by the feeling of being left behind by the earnest activity of others. The message included the passage:

[Extract from 04/09 posted by E.] Please don't think me impertinent – I'm not trying to tread on anyone's toes – simply ignore this message if you think it is inappropriate. I'd just love to hear from all lurkers (either here or by e-mail: [address given] ) on your reasons for not contributing to the . . . discussions.

This message is explicitly concerned with appropriacy, in a cultural context where there are toes to be trodden on (either those of the course formal authorities or those of participants who have already expressed opinions on the issue).



The use of power-constructing language, together with the confessional tone of the message, and the invitation to confide privately, appeared to have a strong cultural and critical impact. Other students responded to it by elaborating on the theme of deflation and/or intimidation in the face of the quality of others' contributions. During the course of the subsequent exchange, D. explicitly identified himself as a possible cause of intimidation for others:

[Extract from 08/09 posted by D.] As I'm a potentially good case study for possible 'intimidation'/overwhelming activity on [course conferencing system], and as this potentially affects contributions and interaction, would anybody be interested in rating the following 'intimidation' issues?

This was followed by a list of 18 possible causes of intimidation online, such as: total number of new messages since last visit, length of messages, expertise of individuals, tutors exerting authority through messages or one-to-one email. The reference to tutors exerting authority apparently derived from an earlier occasion on which the tutor who was responsible for supervising the online discussion (male, English-native speaker, resident in UK) had sent D. a private e-mail, suggesting that he could reduce the length and frequency of his postings. This kind of intervention had occurred before in these courses, and was routinely recommended to tutors as good practice. The intention is normally to try and draw the prolific contributor's attention to possible side-effects for the less confident, without appearing to rebuke or discourage continuing engagement. It is a pedagogical strategy of intervention in others' communicative practices, an aspect of the culture of the conventional classroom or seminar group. It is also an exercise of power and thus impacts on critical dimensions of practice in the learning community. This is why such interventions are normally carried out privately, rather than publicly as they might be done in a non-educational context such as an internet discussion group.

D.'s response to the private email had been to post a public message in which he said he had received a 'warning'. This had prompted another student to express support for his contributions and urge him to ignore advice about what kind of messages to post. This in turn was responded to by the course director, attempting to have his own version of the events surrounding the tutor's email accepted, and pointing out that such exchanges effectively constructed the interaction as a site of tension between institutional power and authority (the tutors imposing norms of message length etc.) and individual creativity and originality (students posting the kinds of messages they wanted to). D. replied to this message warning that he would make public any further emails from tutors relating to the kind of messages he was writing. He concluded with the comment:

[Extract from 09/09 posted by D.] . . . we are now getting at some of the real [final course essay] and conferencing issues rather than dancing around the edges and tinkering with the course materials – at last, we are starting to have a few things on [the course conferencing system] that we can really get our teeth into if we wish.

His identification of the confrontation between himself and the tutors as 'getting at some of the real' issues was consistent with a theme in his contributions to the effect that the institutional and expert texts and structures of the university,

materials, tutors, assignments, etc. were at best irrelevant to the interests of the participants and at worst damaging to them. He presented himself as outside the educational community through a series of references to his background in management training, and by taking up this position he invoked a cultural dimension to his interactions with other course members which enabled him to claim simultaneous responsibility for, and distance from, the outcomes of any discussion. He made this position explicit on one or two occasions, remarking that others could 'take or leave' his contributions as they saw fit. His highly developed operational competence was recognised by his peers, and several people testified to the impression he made on them with his industry and his insights *vis-à-vis* the course content. His value to others in respect of the critical dimension was ambiguous, however. As C. commented at one stage in the discussion:

[Extract from 10/09 posted by C.] At the beginning of our Block 4 discussion I admired you as our 'virtuoso' who seemed to have read everything relevant, posted thought-provoking messages, was well-organised and able to motivate 'part-time lurkers' like me to contribute.

Now I don't like the atmosphere that has developed recently, it is totally demotivating for me . . . This is why I've decided to become a 'full-time lurker' for the rest of Block 4.

D.'s construction of his own online activity in challenging the power of the tutors and the course norms, as helping to empower other participants, is an echo of points made in Bonk *et al.*'s and Nesbitt *et al.*'s accounts. These authors also raise the possibility that provocative behaviour by participants might stimulate deeper and more critically engaged interaction. People do, however, get upset in such a process, as Nesbitt *et al.* show, and the present author can testify from his own and others' reaction to the conversation described here. C., herself a victim of the negative aspects of this exchange, suggests that such a focus on critical engagement at the expense of cultural sensitivity is itself a cultural feature of interaction in educational contexts:

I think, this is again my very subjective impression, that maybe also from my experience in face-to-face courses, that people from many non-Western countries listen to you and try to respond, so there is a real interaction, while sometimes we Westerners tend to kind of speaking to ourselves, we want to prove we are right and we want to make our point, and we don't really listen to other people, and this is . . . I think we can learn a lot from other cultures in this respect. And also respecting other people's views without being offensive or, kind of, insensitive, let's put it like this, showing a certain sensitivity towards your . . . other members in your group.

The last point is reflected in the view put forward by Mann (2003) in her comments on responsibility to 'the other' in an online learning group, though she sees it as an ethical rather than a cultural issue. D.'s rhetoric, particularly at the earlier small-group stage of work on this course, was very sympathetic with the need to facilitate the emergence of group cultural norms. But it is apparent that his critical awareness of the role of institutional (i.e. UKOU) power in constructing ownership of the online community through the actions of the tutors, did not

translate into cultural sensitivity at the level of his interactions with some of his peers. However, it is the institutional context of this exchange, rather than the characteristics of its participants, that shapes its cultural dimension. Much of the contestation going on between participants attempting to have their view of what is culturally appropriate accepted by the group, is actually the result of conflicting views of each others' relations with the course and the institution, and is therefore constitutive of a critical dimension to the literacy practices of this particular community.

### **Conclusions**

In this paper I have argued that online text-based literacies still represent, for distance teachers and learners at post-compulsory level, the most challenging aspect of the shift from print to digital-electronics, particularly where this mode of communication replaces all place-based interaction, as is increasingly the case in online distance learning. The disparate textual practices of individual participants in virtual interaction, and the evidence of strategies of resistance to socialisation into online learning communities, present an immediate challenge to the ideal of democratisation of education present in much of the current rhetoric of online teaching and learning.

Looking through a social literacies lens I have argued that reading, writing and sending messages in online classrooms is literacy in just the same way that reading textbooks, writing essays, giving lectures and making notes is. They are ways of doing things with texts that actively construct the learning environment, the very means by which we enact definitive roles such as teacher, learner, author, examiner, etc. Because such roles are already defined and constrained, in any particular situation, by a wider set of institutional relationships, then the texts that we read, write and send must embed relations of power that reflect those of the wider institution. I have suggested that it is important to explore the nature of these relations in order to account for, and perhaps address pedagogically, those aspects of interaction in online learning environments which result in the frustration, marginalisation or even eclipsing of individuals. I have suggested that we adopt a three-dimensional framework for analysing configurations of literacy, technology and pedagogy, focusing on operational, cultural and critical aspects of the interaction.

Current approaches to the evaluation and appraisal of learner literate 'performance' in online courses focuses on the operational and cultural dimensions, because of a concern with generalisable skills and the conditions under which warranted and useful knowledge can be created. However, this does not sufficiently take into account disparities that may exist in the way the institutional context is apprehended by different individuals, who are often attempting to reconstruct the values and practices of the school/university from inadequate textual evidence and personal unfamiliarity. Virtual life makes it very easy for such individuals to project presentations of self which are at odds with the cultural norms of the learning group, or even to 'disappear' from the community altogether. Alternatively, their self-presentation may become part of a struggle to define what is literate in the community's writing and reading practices.

There is a research gap in our approach to these problems. This gap falls

between socio-psychologically theorised studies of learners and teachers in online interaction, which look for effects in the relative minutiae of online 'talk', and socio-anthropologically theorised investigations of technologised communities in formation, which seek effects in long-term changes to the structure of participant relationships. In between, there is the social-and-cultural domain of online literacies, which may be viewed as the field in which institutional practice meets virtual reality, as manifested in the day-to-day enacting of both talk and practice through the production of texts. Research into online literacies needs to develop methodologies for describing the textual construction of the institutional context of online courses, for that is where the 'location' of their many practices is defined. It needs to foreground the role of institutional and social factors in shaping the writing that learners do to enact and recognise each other's views of the learning relationships constructed through online interaction. It needs to draw attention to, and explain the variety of individual intentions and normative and evaluative systems that coexist alongside the 'official' purpose of the interaction.

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