

Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures

Robin Goodfellow and Marie-Noëlle Lamy

The Open University, UK

It would be customary to begin discussion of a topic like ‘learning cultures in online education’, with a definition of terms. However, in the case of a concept like ‘culture’ we feel justified in sidestepping this task, because, as some of the authors who have contributed to this book, and many of those in the literature they refer to, have pointed out, it is simply too complex an idea to do justice to in a single definition. Why then, address it at all, when there are so many other less theoretically problematic aspects of teaching and learning in online environments waiting to be investigated? Well, in a sense, the whole project of this book is about answering that question. As editors, we have, through our shared background in the use of technology for distance teaching across languages and other domains of social difference, become convinced that cultural issues are inseparable from educational, linguistic and technological ones. Indeed, a review of past research that is focused on the cultural dimensions of learning with technology suggests to us that the cultural perspective necessarily incorporates consideration of other areas such as curriculum, interaction, collaboration, pedagogy, language or assessment, albeit it can be argued that these are more readily definable. In our view, discussions of theory and practice in all these areas usually leave implicit questions that a ‘cultural’ perspective throws up explicitly: who the participants are, what determines how they relate to each other, who values what and why, who has power and who has not. Further, our attention has sharply focused on these issues because of the international, multilingual and increasingly ‘global’ context in which we now work. Increasingly the technologies of online education are being used to extend teaching and learning policies and practices developed by

2 Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures

and for universities in the Anglophone world (Britain, North America and Australasia), to nontraditional and transnational audiences. This is a process in which issues of culture and cultural identity, however defined, are inevitably raised, but as the research literature also shows, are not often satisfactorily addressed.

Defining a new ‘gap’ for research on culture in online learning

Several observers have suggested that there is a dearth of research in the field of culture in online learning (e.g. Edmundson 2007: ix; Mason 2007; Rogers et al., 2007). It may be the case that there is not much empirical research, at least by comparison to some of the aforementioned areas (see, for example, the very considerable research literatures on ‘collaboration’ and ‘community’). However there has been a reasonable amount of discussion of issues and observation of effects over the past two decades, going back to Henderson’s cultural critique of the design of multimedia (Henderson 1996), then two seminal special journal editions on culture: the *British Journal of Educational Technology* (1999, volume 30, number 3), and *Distance Education* (2001, volume 22, number 1), and more recently Edmundson’s edited book on globalized e-learning (Edmundson 2007). And there has also been discussion and empirical work on culture-related issues in other disciplines – including the sociology of communication, organizational studies, foreign language learning and intercultural studies, the social-psychology of the internet – much of which is relevant to online education. The scope of this discussion and the cross-disciplinary dimension of the research are two other reasons why we hesitate to attempt a definition of culture in the early part of this book. Better, we think, to let the range of approaches to its problematization adopted by the contributors to this book tell the story.

In compiling ‘Learning Cultures in Online Education’, therefore, we are not looking primarily to fill a gap in existing empirical research, but instead to draw together perspectives that problematize the workings of culture in online education from a range of theoretical and disciplinary positions. This, we hope, will help define a gap that we ourselves, and others, may be motivated to try to fill empirically in our future research. We are also, in the interests of cross-disciplinarity in educational research, setting out to draw attention to drivers of educational change other than the purely instructional or pedagogical. In particular, we consider the following general educational and sociotechnical developments to be significant for our work:

- The growth of multiculturalism and ‘widening participation’ policies in national systems of higher education, which are intended to address the

Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures 3

increasing diversity of learners and their family, community, educational and work backgrounds.

- The rapid expansion of transnational e-learning, including enrolments of 'foreign students' and staff development of corporate, governmental, agency and other 'noneducational' providers.
- The spread of new media communication practices (i.e. internet community, socializing and informal learning practices), which are beginning to influence educational development through the incorporation of Web 2.0 technologies into course design.

Developments driving the need to problematize
'learning cultures' – the growth of multiculturalism

Many nations now have governmental policies on widening participation in tertiary level or higher education in order to increase the numbers of students from sections of society that traditionally do not continue their education beyond school-leaving age. In the United Kingdom this includes people from economically poorer areas, and those who have been out of formal education for some time, as well as those from identifiable ethnic backgrounds under-represented in university populations (Bowl 2001). Globally, there are additional groups that have found themselves excluded from educational opportunity at any level. For example, in India: the disabled, women, ethnic minorities, castes and tribes, prison inmates, senior citizens, nomads and migrants, the geographically isolated (Sharma Sen 2002). As a development of 'open learning' systems, which have espoused the educational cause of these marginalized sections of society (Singha Roy 2002: 269), online learning is now seen as one of the instruments of national policies of inclusion. However, for many of these nontraditional learners, formal education at university level itself represents a cultural challenge, further compounded by the 'digital gap' and the constraints of low IT literacy and unfamiliarity with online systems and pedagogies. A 'widening participation' approach to multiculturalism – which aims either at 'assimilation' or the celebrating of superficial aspects of 'diversity' – without acknowledging aspects of cultural difference that identify and separate minority groups from the dominant cultural mainstream – has been criticized by cultural studies researchers (e.g. Hall 2000; Eriksen 2006) who question the individualistic and neo-liberal perspective from which it emanates. In one sense societies and communities may be considered to be enriched by multiculturalism, a view that prevailed in 'the West' at the end of the twentieth century, as typified by a UNESCO report on 'Our Creative Diversity' (World Commission on Culture and Development 1995). Yet, in another

4 *Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures*

sense they could be thought to be divided by it, as is increasingly felt to be the case in the contemporary context of globalization, economic migration and religious and ideological intolerance (Eriksen 2006). We will develop this point further below in a discussion of essentialist frameworks and their association with 'Western' online learning practices.

Research in online learning in multicultural contexts has reflected these tensions around multiculturalism, and the meanings of cultural diversity (e.g. Goodfellow et al. 2001; Chase et al. 2002; Gunawardena et al. 2003; Goold et al. 2007). Henderson (1996), commenting on the design of interactive multimedia for use by groups including indigenous learners, critiqued three common attitudes of designers: an 'inclusive' approach, which incorporates cultural perspectives from minority groups but does not challenge the dominant model; an 'inverted' model, which designs from the minority cultural perspective but does not provide admittance into the mainstream culture; and a 'unidimensional' model, which simply denies diversity and treats everyone the same (Henderson 1996: 86). Henderson's work has informed researchers contributing to each of the special editions and the edited book mentioned above, in particular the work of McLoughlin (1999, 2001, 2007) who argues for a pluralistic approach to designing for multicultural learners, using constructivist online teaching techniques, which she considers are capable of adaptation to the degree of cultural inclusivity required. Others, however, taking the view that neither online learning technologies nor their associated pedagogies are themselves culturally neutral (Doherty 2004; Reeder et al. 2004; Hannon & D'Netto 2005) highlight the role that 'institutional needs, structures and strategies of implementation play in shaping learning experiences' (Hannon et al. op. cit.), and cast doubt on the feasibility even of pluralistic design as a solution to the problems of difference in multicultural learning communities.

As a further aspect of the institutional shaping of learning that is currently driving practice in higher education, we can point to the growing focus on 'mode two' knowledge production in the curriculum (Gibbons et al. 1994), which responds to employability agendas and the developing interdependence between academic, professional and work-based learning contexts, especially in the 'new professions' such as Business, Education, Healthcare, Engineering, etc. While this is not usually seen as a cultural issue, it qualifies for consideration here, in our view, because of the differences that arise in expectations, pedagogies, and literacies between traditional discipline-based academic practices and work-based and professionalized ones (see Goodfellow & Lea 2007, for a more developed discussion of this). In the context of online learning, some research has suggested that not only do 'academic' and 'business' values inflect learner approaches to online communication differently (Goodfellow 2004), but that differing institutional

Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures 5

values relating to the purpose and conduct of online communication can inflect patterns of participation differently in learner populations with otherwise similar 'cultural' profiles (Goodfellow & Hewling 2005). As work-based and professional development practices penetrate further into the traditional subject-based curriculum of the university, collisions of different value systems in the conduct of online learning are likely to become more frequent.

We would also incorporate, within this overview of 'multiculturalism' as a driver of research into learning cultures, the kinds of issues that have been addressed by researchers in the fields of language learning and intercultural communication, particularly those who have worked in the context of the European Community's notions of 'cultural' and 'intercultural competence'. Europe is keen to educate its citizens in mutual tolerance (because of the trauma of World War II), and through the Council of Europe (set up in 1949) it has funded much educational research into interculturality. However, the notion of intercultural communicative 'competence' that has emerged is a problematic one. Within applied linguistics and language learning and teaching research, intercultural communication has been not only an aspiration, but also an obstacle, to theoretical and pedagogical progress, because of a lack of problematization of the notion of culture itself. For instance, in research where a major component of culture has been ascribed to individuals' psychobiographies, Sealey and Carter (2004) found that: 'some of the key concepts used in mainstream studies of intercultural communication are vulnerable to criticism', in particular those that present culture 'as though it were an attribute of the individual, a property of – or possession held by – people as a result of where they live, the religion they practice, the colour of their skin and so on' (2004: 153).

In the practice of telecollaboration (putting pairs of language learners in different countries in contact via e-mail, so that they may learn each others' languages) that has grown up in the last few years, the construct of culture has been reinterpreted in social terms, leading to a preoccupation with 'intercultural', 'cross-cultural' or 'inter-discourse' communication, depending on school of thought (see Piller 2007). However, research into telecollaborative projects for language learning carries many stories of full or partial failure, not in the use of the code (French, Spanish, Japanese, etc.) but in the partners' understandings of each others' cultures. Such failures of intercultural communication are described through the rhetoric of 'styles' and 'genres', assumptions of 'culturally-contingent conversational styles' (Belz 2003: 82), or typified by observations such as: 'When computer users from different cultures communicate online with one another, they may have different views on what genre (discourse type and discourse style) is appropriate for the exchange' (Ware & Kramsch 2005: 191). In this

6 *Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures*

literature, even when cultural conflicts are welcomed as learning opportunities, the assumption that a coherent ‘genre’ or ‘style’ is characteristic of national cohorts is rarely interrogated. Robert O’Dowd, one of the contributors to this book, has faced up to the pedagogical implications of this problem by drawing attention to the frequency of ‘Failed Communication’ in telecollaborative exchanges (O’Dowd & Ritter 2006) and proposing a detailed remedial scheme for practitioners faced with intercultural communication failure. Yet O’Dowd and Ritter’s notions of ‘intercultural communicative competence’ at the individual level, and ‘communicative style’ at the socioinstitutional level, are themselves problematic. As Cameron (2002) shows, through an examination of communication in service industries, of increasing importance in neo-liberal economies primarily in the Anglophone world since the 1960s, the culture of ‘effective communication’, bears ‘a noncoincidental resemblance to the preferred speech-habits of educated middle-class and predominantly white people brought up in the USA’ (2002: 70). In this more critical understanding of culture, a socioeconomic view of intercultural communication, focused on the commodification of languages, is emphasized over the interpersonal.

Developments driving the need to problematize
‘learning cultures’ – the expansion of transnational e-learning

Socioeconomic development is to the fore in the second of the developments motivating our interest in online learning cultures at this point in time; that is, the growing use of online and distance learning by educational institutions to increase enrolments of ‘foreign students’ on programmes developed primarily for domestic use (Garrett & Verbik 2003), and by corporations and other organizations to support the learning of their staff around the world (Dunn 2007: 257). Garrett and Verbik’s analysis of data from the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency shows, for example, that there were over 101,000 students from all over the world taking courses from UK universities outside the United Kingdom in 2003. These student numbers are outstripped by those of corporations, many of the largest of which originate from the United States. According to Rogers et al. (2007), the Cisco Corporation has 400,000 students in 10,000 academies in 150 countries (figures taken from Dennis et al. 2005), and the Global University of Springfield has 600,000 students in 178 countries, teaching in more than 145 languages. Rogers et al. also draw attention to the global instructional programmes of international agencies such as UNESCO and the World Bank, which may be assumed to have more broadly social aims. Many of the students on these programmes are currently being taught face-to-face,

Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures

7

but it is clear that the deployment of online technologies and pedagogies is seen by these organizations as a key strategy for future development.

Research that focuses on the cultural implications of transnational online learning in these contexts has gathered momentum in recent years, as evidenced by Edmundson's edited book (Edmundson 2007), which has nineteen chapters on accounts and discussion under the heading 'Globalized E-Learning Cultural Challenges'. Much of this research is motivated by a concern for what Wild called, in his 1999 editorial for the special issue of the *British Journal of Educational Technology* (1999) 'appropriate' design for cultural diversity. This perspective puts a clear focus on the problem of learning designs that originate in 'single cultural identities' (Wild 1999: 198) being imposed on culturally diverse learners, and incorporates an awareness that the 'reach' of dominant cultures is being extended via electronic media. However, the approach tends not to concern itself with the institutional context of the learning, be it personal/professional development, employment training or basic education, but instead concentrates on the effect of differences between the learners, or between the cultural assumptions of the learners and those embedded in the design of materials.

The understanding of the notion of cultural difference that underpins most current research arises from a view of culture as the manifestation in individuals of all the values, beliefs and ways of thinking and doing things that come with the membership of particular national, tribal, ethnic, civic or religious communities. Culture, in this view, is a consequence of geographical, historical, climatic, religious, political, linguistic and other behaviour and attitude-shaping influences that are assumed to act on everyone who shares the same physical and social environment. It implies that individuals are habituated, or have their minds 'hard wired', through upbringing, schooling and the acquisition of language and social customs, and that they can be characterized by ways of behaving and interacting that are typical to people of that nationality or ethnic group. Much of the research into cultural issues in transnational e-learning contexts is framed by this kind of conceptualisation, often referring to the work of Hofstede and others who have developed categorizations of national cultural characteristics (e.g. Hall & Hall 1990; Hofstede 2001). These accounts determine differences between nationalities and ethnic groups by the use of categories such as: 'individualism' (focused on self interest) and 'collectivism' (centred on the interests of family and the wider community); or 'high-context' (using the entire social context of an interaction: physical location, status of participants, body language, etc. to interpret its meaning), and 'low-context' (focusing on the direct content of messages, seeking specific information and/or expecting particular responses).

8 *Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures*

Essentialist frameworks such as these (descriptions of individuals in terms of cultural attributes) have proved highly useful to researchers wishing to tailor the design of online learning to the assumed cultural preferences of individuals or groups. For example, Gunawardena et al. (2001) used the power-distance categorization initially to distinguish between US and Mexican students, before showing that online textual communications can equalize differences in status between the groups. Kim and Bonk's (2002) study of collaboration between US, Korean and Finnish university students drew attention to differences between the three groups in terms of individualism and collectivism, high and low context and task and relationship focus. Morse (2003) used the low-context/high-context categories to distinguish between the attitudes to online collaborative learning of students from the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand on the one hand, and Pakistan, China, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand on the other. Several of the contributors to Edmundson's edited book (2007) discuss these frameworks, and indeed Hofstede himself provides the Foreword to the book. As Edmundson notes (2007: ix-x), much of the research on culture in e-learning has been conducted by Westerners, and critics such as Fougere and Moulettes (2007) and Kim (2007) have pointed to the ethnocentrism implied by this. Fougere and Moulettes, for example, observe that so-called 'individualistic' societies identified in the research literature are implicitly presented as 'more technological, more legal, more urban, more educated, more literate, more wealthy, more democratic, more equal, more questioning, more socially mobile, etc.' (2007: 11). These are, of course, the same societies of the Anglo/North American/Australasian, English-speaking, ICT-intensive cultural paradigm whose economic and educational ideology and technology has framed the development of globalized e-learning. We will take up this discussion in our Conclusion chapter.

Developments driving the need to problematize 'learning cultures' – new media communication practices

The third development driving our interest in online learning cultures is the emergence of 'new' cultural and social identities in virtual learning communities, which draw on contemporary cybercultures of the internet as well as systems of cultural relations inherited from conventional educational or corporate settings. Whereas the phenomenon of community in online settings has been widely discussed in terms of its ability to generate human feelings and behaviours closely analogous to those experienced in physically located communities (see, for example, the collection of sociological accounts of virtual community in Smith and Kollock (1999), or

Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures 9

the more learning-oriented collection in Renninger and Shumar (2002), it is only relatively recently that internet cultures started to be theorized on their own terms (Gibbs & Krause 2000). Examples of such theorization related to learning can be found in social-psychological studies of virtual identity, which draw in the notion of culture, for example, Conoscenti's (2004) study of cross-cultural interactions in an online military training context. Yet currently there is, to our knowledge, little research that relates what might be called learner cyberidentities to cultures in online learning. Reeder et al. (2004) explored some of the implications of Western/Anglo 'values' embedded in cyberculture; Goodfellow and Hewling (2005) examined the role of 'cultural narratives of participation in online communities' in shaping learner behaviour; Bayne (2005) has discussed 'modes of identity formation' by learners and teachers online and the anxiety generated in the former by the multiple 'selves' that were available to be taken up. More recently, theorizations of new learner identities have to take account of new communication practices developing around technologies such as web logs (blogs), wikis (e.g. wikipedia), social networking sites (e.g. MySpace), user-generated content sites (e.g. YouTube) and other tools and environments collectively known as Web 2.0 (O'Reilly 2005). These are being explored in relation to younger learners and conventional school contexts (see Lemke & van Helden's contribution to this book), but have yet to surface in a significant way in research on the cultural dimensions of online learning.

New configurations of users

We believe these trends point to the likelihood of increasingly unpredictable configurations of learners, teachers, employers, content-producers, managers, administrators, technologists, researchers and others coming together in online networks for educational purposes in the not-so-distant future. However, as the dominant cultural influence in both the designing and the researching of these diverse configurations, is likely to be an Anglo/North American, English-speaking, ICT-intensive, pedagogically constructivist educational paradigm, we wished to produce a more reflective and critical perspective on the nature of culture in online education than is currently to be found in the literature on online learning. We were aware that there are a number of writers and researchers who are exploring the idea that there is more to the issue of culture in the online classroom than simply that which is brought in by individual learners from their national backgrounds. These writers try to reflect the fact that constructions of difference between groups of learners, whether framed as 'cultural' or more broadly social, are always ideological; that is, they are always part of wider

10 *Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures*

discourses of power and social identity. Asking the authors whose work is represented in this book to help us develop the concept of ‘learning cultures’ was a step towards such a perspective, one which we hope will help ensure that the social and pedagogical benefits from the trends and developments listed above will keep pace with the corporate and institutional ones.

Conceptualising ‘learning cultures’ – the structure of the book

A theoretical introduction to the complex concept of culture in online education is undertaken by Charles Ess. Ess is one of the founders of the Cultural Attitudes to Technology and Communication conference (CATAC) and has written widely on the subjects of culture, education and technology (e.g. Ess 2002a, 2002b; Ess & Sudweeks 2005). His opening chapter provides a framing for the concept that is built on throughout the book. He rehearses a critique of essentialist perspectives, arguing that cultural identity is hybrid and has many more dimensions than nationality or mother tongue, making it too complex to be adequately circumscribed by systems of categorization such as Hofstede and his followers have developed. Ess develops the argument that online scenarios are themselves culturally coded spaces, inviting the formation of ‘third cultures’ (from Raybourn et al. 2003) in which individuals combine elements from the different cultural traditions in which they were socialized to form their own, new, self-created identity. His view that there are no ‘well-grounded theory/theories sufficiently comprehensive to do justice to the multiple dimensions of “culture”’ leads him to challenge the very idea of online ‘learning cultures’. Instead, he concludes with a challenge to the designers of online learning spaces to recognize that face-to-face contact is essential to significant learning, since it is only when we encounter one another face-to-face that we ‘recognize that we are dealing with one another as distinctive human beings first – not simply as tokens for overly simple and overly generalized accounts of cultures and subcultures’.

The theme of online cultural hybridity is taken up by Charlotte Gunawardena and her co-writers – Gayathri Jayatilleke, Ahmed Idrissi Alami and Fadwa Bouachrine. Gunawardena was one of the contributors to the 2001 special edition of Distance Education mentioned above, and also to CATAC 2002, and has researched into culture and other dimensions of online communication (e.g. Gunawardena et al. 2003). In this chapter the authors address aspects of the playing out of cultural identity in internationalized internet chat spaces, via an empirical study. Although they are reporting on research with men and women of Moroccan and Sri Lankan nationality,

Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures 11

and the discussion takes account of the indirectness that they claim is characteristic of personal communication patterns in both these national cultures, their findings emphasize the possibility for hybrid cultural identities to emerge out of local systems of activity such as internet chat. In particular, they stress the role of the medium of interaction, the cyberculture, rather than the specific national cultural characteristics of the participants, in constructing the shared knowledge, beliefs and behaviours that make up an online group's reality. This lays a basis for discussion of the ways that participants' identities, including gender and religious identities, are enacted and/or concealed as part of the process of negotiating norms of communication online. The implications of the emergence of 'unique online cultures' for designers of online learning spaces are clearly drawn.

Other contributors address the concept of learning culture directly, drawing on this wider understanding of culture as an ongoing process of identity-construction through interaction, and relating it to different online learning contexts, including ones in which face-to-face teachers and learners are moving online for the first time as part of new institutional e-learning policies. Robert O'Dowd has published extensively in the field of language and intercultural learning, and is responsible for the ideas about 'failed' intercultural communication mentioned earlier. In his chapter he discusses the implementation of online learning in a Spanish campus-based university, and shows how the professional identities of teachers are implicated in the attempt both to adapt new media to existing practices, and to develop the new social constructivist practices which the tools claim to promote. For example, teachers who take up online practices may regard themselves as 'progressive' in the sense of having a commitment to learner-centred teaching. However, in the early stages, at least, they may use the environment to reconstruct conventional teacher-centred approaches, such as exercising covert control through the facility for student monitoring that the online environment affords. Through three case studies he demonstrates how learning cultures operate at several levels, including at the level of the community of practitioners (the faculty), the policy initiatives of the institution, and the wider discourses of educational professionalism, as well as in the self-positioning of the teachers themselves.

Christine Develotte addresses the same theme of induction into online learning cultures as O'Dowd does, but with a focus on learners, and on what she sees as 'significant moments' of pedagogical socialization, when there is a break between the kind of behaviour associated with on-site (face-to-face) learning, and that which is appropriate to online interaction. She uses a study of student reflections on the experience of taking an online in a course in Teaching French As a Foreign Language to analyze the characteristics of the 'discursive space', which the online learning environment has

12 *Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures*

represented for these learners, and to track their emotional and cognitive adaptation to the new 'job' of being an online learner. In her analysis, while learners may view themselves as emancipated from their 'student' roles through online social interaction, at the same time they experience online textual activity as socially demanding because it involves the production of writing, which is subject to critique by teachers and more capable peers. Nevertheless, she argues that the learning culture which is constructed in the process is capable of being more convivial, less competitive, having more connections between students and between students and teachers and having a different relationship to knowledge, than the more familiar, but less dynamic, on-site condition.

The textuality of online learning environments is further explored by Leah Macfadyen, in particular the relation of 'textual reality' to the idea (introduced by Ess) that significant learning necessitates physical embodiment. Macfadyen has been involved in the production of two seminal texts exploring postessentialist views of culture in online learning (Chase et al. 2002 and Reeder et al. 2004) and here she discusses online learning cultures as communities in which the 'rules of engagement' have to be co-constructed. This is a process that involves the performing of aspects of normally embodied identities, including age, status and racial or ethnic origins, via online textual rituals during which self-identity is necessarily reconstructed. She contextualizes this view of online learning cultures as constructed in context through an account of interactions between participants on an online course in global citizenship, some of whom came to realize that by participating in such a course they were indeed reconstructing themselves as global citizens.

Like Macfadyen, Anne Hewling explores the nature of 'textualized' interaction, and its role in the negotiation of culture in the online environment, taking up the concept of 'third culture' introduced by Ess, to describe the social reality that emerges out of interaction between online learners from different cultural, and indeed multicultural, backgrounds. Her argument is informed by observations from a study of students on an online Masters course in open and distance learning. Like O'Dowd and Develotte, she focuses on the appearance and functionality of the virtual learning environments in which online learning takes place, but she goes on to criticize the functional efficiency of the systems in practice, describing a number of ways in which the technology of a virtual learning environment can appear to be functioning autonomously, sometimes taking on a role as the site of institutional authority in place of the university itself. Unpredictable system functionality, when distributed over space and time, she argues, leads to a situation where, from the human participants' point of view, the technology appears to behave as a cultural actor. The combination of the unpredictable

Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures 13

technology and, for some learners, the unfamiliar pedagogy based on collaborative learning principles, proved to be a cultural challenge even when the learners' own national cultural backgrounds were the same as that of the host institution. The variability and unpredictability of system behaviour within the current generation of virtual learning environment platforms is now further amplified by recent developments in networking and mobile technologies, creating an even wider range of communicative possibilities for online learners, and an even greater impression of the technology as proactive in the interaction. Hewling's approach to theorizing these observations is to introduce the notion of cultural ecology as a metaphor for the ways in which the identities of the human participants in online education are in negotiation as much with the technology as with each other.

Some of the wider implications of 'new' cultural configurations in online education are discussed from the perspectives of social theory in a chapter on postnational pedagogical genres by Cathie Doherty. Doherty's most recent work has focused on the wider social phenomenon of internationalized education, and in this chapter the online learners are characterized not by assumed national characteristics but by their relation to the providing institution, either as 'domestic' or as 'international' students depending on the extent to which they share familiarity with the procedures and text genres that frame teaching and learning practices in this particular institution. Her study comes from an Australian university's online Masters in Business Administration course, and focuses on the 'troubling' of assessment procedures, and the rhetoric of self-description by students who are distanced from the local pedagogical conventions of the course by their 'transnational' life worlds rather than by their national cultural characteristics. Doherty argues that truly postnational learning cultures should position all students as international, regardless of the provenance of the learning material or the national identity of the participants.

Jay Lemke and Caspar van Helden's position on learning cultures is expressed as a critique of schooling reminiscent of Ivan Illich's (1971) well-known attack on formal education systems. Lemke has written extensively on new media and education and also on virtual culture (e.g. Lemke 2005a). Here, he argues that contemporary culture reflects an unstable mix of identities drawing on marketing and popular media as well as the traditional resources of ethnicity and nationality, class and age, gender and sexuality, etc. They argue that younger learners who live a 'globalized, individualized, lifelong-learning biography' find their formal education to be an obstruction to their development. For many of these learners and other users of internet-based resources, popular culture media and personal social networks (including online communities) have become key sources of identity models and cultural resources for affiliation and identification. This

14 *Introduction: A Frame for the Discussion of Learning Cultures*

addresses what education does not, and is meaningful for students in ways the curriculum is not. The authors go on to argue that although we may believe there is an imbalance of power between corporate media producers and distributors, and individual consumers, research on 'fan communities' around television programs, computer games and movies, suggests a different picture. Individuals and their informal communities transform and re-appropriate media to fashion identities and subcultures that are often subversive of marketing messages and dominant economic interests. The implications of this for online learning follow from the need to 'go beyond both the offline culture of schools and the online culture of media' and investigate how young people learn successfully outside the school and curriculum, including the role of passion, affect and emotion in learning, and the processes by which learners are motivated to identify with particular elements of popular culture, affinity groups and personal and social projects and agendas.

Summary

To sum up our approach to this book, then, we offer a frame for the discussion of learning cultures, by opening with a critique of the best-known frameworks available for cultural analysis outside the online world, coupled with a challenge to the very possibility of developing a notion of online culture. We go on to provide counterpoints to this, by showcasing six studies that claim that the online situation allows people to construct identities that would not be available to them in face-to-face situations, as men or women, as professionals (continuing and initial teachers) and as citizens partaking in the discourses of globalization, or trying to gain some purchase over the unpredictable, changeable semiotic effects generated by their interaction with IT systems. The range of learner types and data discussed allows multiple perspectives on the online learning experience (affective, cognitive, semiotic, symbolic, ergonomic, political) to emerge, suggesting ways through which the nature of 'learning cultures' can begin to be understood. Finally, while the first frame of the book showed how traditional theories of culture faced up to the social practices of the online life, through our final frame we turn towards the future, no longer asking what we know about online learning cultures but what the traditional guardians of learning do not know about the ever-expanding learning cultures of tomorrow's learners.