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Re-conceptualising Culture in Virtual Learning Environments: From an 'essentialist' to a 'negotiated' perspective

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Abstract:

The notion of 'culture' as an essential attribute of individuals and groups, owed to national or ethnic background, is critiqued in this paper as unhelpful to the project of understanding how diverse participants in virtual learning environments (VLEs) individually and jointly construct a culture of interaction. An alternative conceptualisation of culture in VLEs is proposed, which views online discussion as just one of the sites in which the culture of a VLE is negotiated. Other sites are to be found in institutional practices of teaching and learning at a distance, and in the wider cultural narratives of the Internet. Examples from two online Masters courses in online and distance education are used to contextualise this concept of culture, exploring the differences in patterns of participation that are produced by contrasting institutional cultures, despite the fact that such participation is explicitly valorised as the means and the subject of the learning that goes on in both these courses. Some implications for the understanding and management of student diversity in these environments are considered, in particular the need for emerging cultural narratives around VLEs to reflect all aspects of student engagement in distance education, not just those which relate to online interaction.

Introduction

The equation of cultural difference with differences amongst nations and ethnic groups has underpinned many studies of 'inter-cultural' and 'multi-cultural' educational contexts, particularly in societies with significant national and ethnic minorities (North America, South America, South Africa, Australia), international organisations such as the European Union, and global corporations such as IBM. What motivates the exploration of issues of culture in research on virtual learning environments (VLEs)? We suggest that there are three main perspectives which, whilst overlapping, imply different orientations to the conceptualisation of culture.

Firstly, there is the view that educational technologies, like the English language, constitute a colonising influence in societies where 'western' online education is marketed as part of the increasing internationalism of trade. This viewpoint informs many of the contributions to the 1999 special edition of the *British Journal of Educational Technology* on culture (e.g. Wild 1999, Lauzon 1999), as well as subsequent work (Chambers 2003, Ess 2002, Pincas 2001). Broadly speaking, this perspective does not seek to problematise the notion of culture as a differentiating factor between individuals and groups. Rather it seeks to identify and redress what are seen as social inequities arising from a bias towards 'dominant' cultural value systems embodied in teaching methods and materials.

Secondly, there is a focus on cultural difference as a cause of miscommunication amongst participants in online learning, which makes collaborative learning problematic (Chase et al 2002, Kim & Bonk 2002) or creates exclusion (Mavor & Traynor 2003). This perspective also treats the concept of culture as unproblematic, seeing it as rooted in national or ethnic backgrounds or identities which give rise to characteristic ways of thinking or behaving that can be misinterpreted by people brought up in different national or ethnic contexts. The focus is thus on the need to remedy inequities brought about by the application of pedagogical approaches arising from one cultural context, i.e. social-constructivism in European and North American educational thinking, to groups or individuals whose thinking and behaviour is shaped by wholly different philosophical traditions.

Thirdly, there is a perspective in which, rather than focusing on the cultural identities of communicators, attention is drawn to shared ways of symbolic meaning making (Reeder et al 2004), the "...critical processes of cultural construction and negotiation that take place at the virtual intercultural interface..." (Macfadyen 2005). This perspective draws on more recent work on intercultural communication (Thorne 2002, Scollon & Wong-Scollon 2001), the social conditions of virtual community (e.g. Jones 1998a; Werry & Mowbray 2001), and ideas around 'cultures of cyberspace' (Poster 2001). In this view, virtual learning environments are seen as social and cultural phenomena in their own right. As virtual communities, VLEs might be expected to exhibit similar processes of cultural production as the new kinds of pan-national and pan-ethnic 'cybercultures' that Poster (2001 *op. cit*) and others describe. However, as sites of formal educational practice they are

also bound into pre-existing, conventional systems of cultural relations inherited from the non-virtual world. Thus the concept of 'culture' is problematised in two ways through this perspective: in the way that it is inscribed in the characteristic practices of online communication, and in the way that it constructs the same online interaction as educational.

In this paper we set out to problematise the notion of culture in VLEs, beginning with a review of the background to the first two perspectives described above, and a discussion of their adequacy as perspectives on the kinds of cultural issues that we have observed in our own practice, teaching Masters courses in online and distance education to multinational groups of students. We then explore aspects of the wider discourse of the Internet, viewing it as a 'cultural narrative' which frames the processes of negotiation of norms and values in VLEs, particularly for the educational practitioners who are our own students. We focus on the discourse of 'participation' and its use in the construction of a cultural model of education. We explore the relation of this model to patterns of participation in the two online courses in which we teach, and to the institutional approaches to distance education and flexible learning adopted by the host universities in the UK and Australia.

In problematising 'culture' as something that is produced out of interactions in these VLEs, rather than being brought to them by individual participants, we hope to find ways address issues of practice and theory in our own teaching, and in particular to come to grips with what we see as contradictions arising from the underpinning of distance education by, on the one hand, the principle of flexible learning, and on the other hand, by social-constructivist pedagogies and the ideals of online community. This perspective reflects our recognition of the complexity of the wider social contexts that shape our educational practices, and which are implicit in much of our teaching and learning, both virtual and otherwise.

'Essentialist' and 'Negotiated' views of culture in online learning

For researchers investigating online learners interacting across distinct national groups, the conventional approach has been to develop generalisations about cultural learning styles, based on an analysis of national cultural characteristics (Abdat & Pervan, 2000; Gunawardena *et al.*, 2001; Marcus & Gould, 2000; Kim & Bonk 2003). Kim and Bonk (*op. cit*), for example, looked at 3-way interactions between classes of Korean, Finnish and American students, and applied notions of national cultural difference derived from Hofstede (2001) and Hall (1976) to the characterisation of these groups. Hofstede, working within the context of the worldwide IBM business community, defined national groups in terms of their collective differences and predispositions, such as 'individualism vs collectivism'. He described US nationals as individualistic, i.e. focused on self interest, and contrasted them with nationals of many Asian countries whom he classified as collectivistic, i.e. centred on the interests of family and the wider community. Hall (1976) and Hall & Hall (1990) placed national cultures on a continuum between 'high' and 'low' context. According to them, Japan, China, and certain Arab countries are high-context cultures, using the entire social context of an interaction: physical

location, status of participants, body language etc. to interpret its meaning, whereas German, Scandinavian, and North American countries are low-context, focusing on the direct content of messages, seeking specific information and/or expecting particular responses. Kim & Bonk thus determined that Koreans are more social and contextually driven online, Finns are more group-focused as well as more reflective and, at times, theoretically driven, and Americans are more action-oriented and pragmatic in seeking results or giving solutions. For Kim & Bonk, there are implications in these differences for the way that online activities should be organised, for example, space should be given for social interaction at the beginning, so that high-context students have the opportunity to satisfy their cultural needs.

There have been some useful insights derived from studies that have adopted this approach. However, from our perspective, which is to understand the production of culture in VLEs where interaction takes place between individuals who are nationally heterogeneous and globally dispersed, this 'essentialist' conception of cultural difference is of limited value. Firstly, as Macfadyen (2005 *op. cit*) points out, the assumption that individual members of national groups must necessarily exhibit the characteristics of the collective is not necessarily justified. Whilst it may be the case that collective characteristics are emphasised where large groups of nationals are working together, they may not be exhibited at the smaller interactional level, particularly where the interaction is cross-cultural. As Scollon & Scollon (2001) note, 'cultures do not talk to each other; individuals do' (p.138). Culture conceptualised in terms of nationality or of ethnicity is of limited usefulness in understanding interpersonal interaction, because of the complexity of influences and determinants within the individual.

Secondly, there is a danger with this way of conceptualising culture in learning environments, that it may develop a normative dimension. One can already detect, in Kim & Bonk's characterisation of some students as action-oriented, pragmatic, etc., an echo, albeit unintended, of a judgemental comparison of 'can-do' mentality with more passive, reflective modes of thinking. There are examples in the literature of quite overt normative judgements being made against non-western cultural styles on the basis of characterisations of this kind. Wong & Trinidad, for example, describe a 'whole generation' of Hong Kong learners as "...shy, passive, reactive, inarticulate, non-collaborative..", in contrast to "...western learners, who are more proactive, articulate, collaborative, and eager to challenge traditions.." (Wong & Trinidad 2004). Other examples of normative interpretation of so-called cultural characteristics can be found in the literature on high and low context cultures (Hall & Hall *op. cit*). O'Hara-Devereaux and Johansen, for example, distinguish between 'polychronic' (high context) cultures (such as Mexico) where promotions in work tend to be based on "...somewhat subjective criteria linked to one's network of relationships..", and (low-context) "Canadians and Americans" who "link promotion to achievements in the near past and likely success in the near future" (O'Hara-Devereaux & Johansen 1994). Whilst characterisations of this kind may not be inappropriate as large-scale generalisations about geographically or ethnically-based populations, it is our view that at the

personal and interactional level they could well become the basis for prejudice.

Thirdly, identifying the locus of cultural difference with learners who are in some way marked as 'other' with respect to an assumed norm, runs the risk of constructing the very problem that it is intended to address. In an earlier study (Goodfellow *et al.* 2001) of the performance and attitudes of students across the Open University Masters programme which is discussed below, it was evident that the range of types of relevant distinction amongst individuals that could be made on a cultural basis was quite wide, incorporating native language, place of birth, place of upbringing, current place of residence, academic background, class, gender, and occupational background. In attempting to generalise across all these categories of difference we found that we fell back more and more on the students' own constructions of difference, including a characterisation of the 'anglo' cultural style of the teaching which some claimed to find difficult to adapt to (Goodfellow *et al. op. cit.*: 74). In other cases, difficulties of assimilation and feelings of inadequacy in online communication were expressed by students whose background was significantly more 'anglo' than others who expressed no such reservations. Another study (Hewling 2004), suggested that distinctions in the online behaviour of students in a multi-cultural group could be associated with the study location of individuals, completely independently of their supposed cultural identities. In this study, students who were accessing the VLE from abroad showed preferences for logging into the communication areas, whereas those accessing it from within the country of its host university tended to log in to the content areas.

In our present work, which focuses on virtual learning environments which involve participants who are professionally concerned with distance learning, and who are from diverse national, ethnic and occupational backgrounds, we have taken the view that an analysis of pre-existing cultural dispositions of individuals or groups of learners is unlikely to help us to explain the nature of their participation in online discussion. To borrow Macfadyen's quotation from Asad (1980), "it is the production of 'essential meanings' – in other words, the production of culture...that is the problem to be explained", not the nature of culture difference itself (Macfadyen *op. cit.*). Further, we do not treat the nexus of cultural production in the VLE solely as the online discussion itself, as do Reeder *et al. (op. cit.*: 89). Instead we locate this in the whole range of interactions and negotiations amongst the users of the VLE, including invisible ones mediated by background technologies such as databases and web servers, and implicit ones embedded in relations with local institutional practices and in relation to the wider discourses of online learning in the 'information age' (see for example, Garrison & Anderson 2003). These wider discourses have a particular hold on the imaginations of ourselves and our students, because they speak to our professional identities as educators and educational technologists. But they also overlap with wider cultural narratives of technology and the Internet, such as the narrative of the 'death of distance' (*cf.*: Hara & Kling 2000), or of the emergence of 'techno-literacy' (Selfe 1999), and as such we believe they speak at some level to all who are involved in learning in virtual environments, whatever the subject matter they are learning

or teaching. In the following section we frame our consideration of patterns of participation in our own VLEs by what we think is one of the key 'storylines' in the cultural narrative of the Internet, that of participation in online communities as a new form of social action (Baym 1998, Jones 1998b, Werry & Mowbray 2001).

Online participation as cultural narrative

Participation as a pedagogical synonym for learning, has long been a key feature in the discourse of computer-mediated communication in education (see, for example, Grooms 2003 who quotes sources going back to 1989). Within the wider cultural narrative of online communities, participation is also wrapped up in what Burbules calls 'a warmly persuasive mood' (Burbules 2000) which may be partly owed to inscribing these place-less and face-less online gatherings with the (idealised) role that local communities traditionally had in social creation and integration (Jones 2002: 371). The convergence of pedagogical and ideological narratives of participation can be seen very clearly in some of the current literature on online learning communities. In, for example, Paloff & Pratt's insistence that in distance education, "...attention needs to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the learning process to be successful" (Paloff & Pratt 199: 29). The participant in the virtual learning community is idealised as independent and autonomous, participating fully in, and benefiting from, online discussion with peers in an unthreatening collaborative environment. Even where the community has a formal educational purpose, tutors and other authorities act more as friendly facilitators ('guide on the side') rather than as authoritative didactic figures ('sage on the stage'). Within this perspective, the non-participant (or 'lurker') not only fails to do what is best for themselves, but also threatens to undermine the efforts of the community to learn collaboratively.

The valorisation of participation (and the demonisation of non-participants) plays into the culture of VLEs in other ways too. Collaborative online learning has come to be seen as an important site for the development of skills in teamwork and the use of communications media, that are key requirements for employability (Peters 2000). A futuristic narrative presents a more-or-less direct association between personal competence with technologies as knowledge tools, and individual or organisational survival in a knowledge society where competitiveness and success depend on performance with these tools. According to Romiszowski (1996), societies in the 21st century will be characterised by 'conversational networks' in which knowledge workers '...collaborate participatively toward the same set of global objectives..' (*op. cit.*:26). But a corollary of such an emphasis on collaboration is that participation develops a regulative function. In Garrison & Anderson's words : "...it is clear that students must perceive participation in eLearning discussions as a major component of the programme of studies" (Garrison & Anderson 2003: 95). However, it has long been recognised that students at university level do not, as a rule, participate very intensively in electronic discussions (Lipponen et al 2002). Thus, assessment comes to be integrated into these activities in order to make them compulsory. This leads to devices such as

specifying minimum levels of contribution (University of Phoenix Online, for example, specifies a minimum number of postings per week), and the introduction of guidelines as to what constitutes a 'good' message, and other kinds of advice on interaction.

Because of the practical difficulties of monitoring every student's contribution in an on-going discussion, the onus for demonstrating the value of their contributions may then put back onto the student, sometimes through requiring them to 'reflect' on discussion at a later point, in order to provide evidence of their learning, or to demonstrate outcomes from problem-based learning or group collaboration. Such use of assessment as a means of rewarding, and thus promoting, participation in online discussion is now very common in the world of online learning and Garrison & Anderson observe that many online courses now offer 40-50% of overall course grade for participation. Nevertheless, the narrative of community continues to pervade discussion of such practices, which is an indication of what Hodgson and Reynolds (2002) refer to as 'community as sentiment', i.e. the ascribing of positive values of consensus and social solidarity to contexts where cohesion, if it exists at all, is contrived solely to meet an external objective.

The importance of this cultural narrative of participation to the study of culture in VLEs is clear, as it shapes both the ideology and the practices of community, through which participants' identities as learners are supposed to be constructed. However, few of the research studies which explore the characteristics, cultural, pedagogical or otherwise, of student interaction in online environments, are explicit about the ways in which this aspect of the culture of a course is initially presented to students by course directors, tutors, or the institution as a whole. Rather it is taken for granted that this is done in some self-evident way, or at least that students somehow come to be aware that they are expected to participate, perhaps through the way that learning activities are constructed, or by observing the behaviour of others.

In the two Masters courses that we are using to exemplify this discussion (below), the participants are supposed to be reflexively aware of the narrative of participation and their own role in learning collaboratively, because they are themselves educators, learning about online learning among other things. They are thus confronted explicitly with the question of participation in principle and in practice. Of all people they might be expected to privilege the discussion forums as a site for the negotiation of essential meanings, i.e. the culture, of the course. In the following sections we examine and compare their patterns of participation, and consider the relation of these 'visible' interactions, to the implicit ones that we have hypothesised are equally to be regarded as sites of the production of culture.

Online Participation in 2 Masters in Education courses

The (British) Open University's MA programme in Online and Distance Education, and the (Australian) University of Southern Queensland's MA in Education programme are comparable in a number of ways. Both teach contemporary syllabuses which include distance learning, flexible learning

and educational technologies, to postgraduate students. Both have courses which deliver materials via the web and conduct tutorial interactions online, both recruit students who are practitioners, both recruit students internationally, from various national and ethnic backgrounds. There are dissimilarities too, which will be discussed in more detail later, the most important being that the University of Southern Queensland's programme includes courses which are taught in both print-correspondence and online modes, and in some cases can contribute to other programmes within more conventional face-to-face settings on a university campus, whereas the Open University's entire programme is taught at a distance.

Here we compare patterns of participation in online discussion on two courses, one from the OU and one from USQ, which cover similar parts of the Masters syllabus relating to concepts of flexible and distributed learning. The OU course (hereafter referred to as OUMA) was taught in 2004. It is one of 4 modules in the programme, any 3 of which make up the Masters degree. It lasts 30 weeks and is taught entirely online, although there is a substantial element of the learning material that is in print and is sent to students by post. The 2004 presentation of this course had 27 student participants, 25 of whom completed the course. 8 of the students were non-UK nationals and 12 were studying from countries outside the British mainland, including in Ireland, Scandinavia, Mainland Europe, USA, and the far East. The course had 2 tutors and a course director. The USQ course (hereafter called USQME) was taught in 2002. It is one of 12 modules in the programme, 8 of which are required to make up the Masters degree. It lasts for a semester (16 weeks) and is taught entirely online, with no separate print or other components (students download course guides and set texts from the course website). The 2002 semester was taught to 32 students, 29 of whom completed. 9 of the students were non-Australian nationals and 11 were studying from countries outside Australia, including Singapore, Canada, the UAE, and the UK. This course also had 2 tutors and a course director.

Both courses explicitly promoted online collaborative discussion for learning purposes, but in different ways. For OUMA the issue was broached formally in the introduction to the course guide, which is posted in print form to all students and is also accessible in electronic form from the course website. The course guide locates the rationale for its social constructivist approach in the identity of its international, professional student body:

"[course name] is a global course and you will find that your colleagues on the course are situated in different professional contexts, from around the world. We believe that this is one of the strengths of our courses, since students bring a wide range of experiences to their study and share them with their colleagues on-line."

The importance of student active engagement is then emphasised, both as a social responsibility..

"...we expect conference debates to be initiated and led by students in the group. The debates are a collaborative learning resource and, the more people put in, the more they will get out of the on-line debates."

...and as a compulsory component of the course, integrated with overall assessment system...

"...contributing to these activities is a compulsory part of your study of [course name]. You will find that the tutor group activities are integrally related to the assessment processes, in terms of your tutor-marked assignments...your written assessed work for each block. In completing the [tutor-marked assignments], you will be expected to show that you have engaged with relevant tutor group debates, as well as with the other course resources available to you."

Discussion activities were structured into both the printed reading material, via questions inviting reflection and conversation with peers, and into the online tutor group management, in the form of structured group tasks at set times. Individuals' contributions to these discussions were evaluated by their tutors at the time that written assignments were submitted, and up to 10% of the mark for the assignment was allocated for this evaluation.

For USQME, the approach to online participation was outlined by the course leader in an early announcement contributed to one of the course discussion boards. Here the rationale is located in the claim that student online dialogue, whilst not compulsory, is associated with a positive learning experience, and with success in assessment:

"My past experience...assures me that your dialogue will contribute significantly to the value of your experience. Whilst participation is not compulsory in this course, my experience clearly asserts a likely correlation between participation and standard of assessment achieved...I remain confident that participation in discussion groups is a positive source of engagement."

At an early stage in the course participants were invited to reflect on the issues of shared understanding and commitment to online discussion in the course. This reflection was to be expressed through responses to a series of prompts:

"I would ask that you respond in this forum to one or more of the prompters.

The role of the unit leader in discussion forums is

I think people should make a post when.....

When people don't respond to my posts I think

A good discussion posting is a post that.....

...etc...

Please consider a response. Your input to these prompts will have a bearing upon the success of our semester together."

Subsequent discussion activities were then based on the invitation to respond to further 'prompt' questions posted by the tutors to topic forums at regular intervals. There was no explicit linking of online discussion to the assessment of written assignments.

Patterns of Participation

Figures 1 and 2 indicate the numbers (derived from system logs) of contributors and contributions to topic discussion forums (as opposed to social forums) on each of the 2 courses over a 4-6 month period.

Both courses show a characteristic (for most online courses) fading in both numbers of participants and volume of contributions, from the earlier to the later stages of the course. The fall-off in postings is particularly marked in the USQME case, with the greatest part of overall activity occurring in the first third of the duration of the course, in contrast to OUMA where it is spread more evenly over the first two thirds. The drop-off of contributors is also more marked in the USQME case, with the total number of active posters halved by week 4 and then rapidly dwindling to a handful. In the OUMA case, an active core of about two thirds of the course population is maintained at least until the halfway point and then does not decline considerably until the penultimate month.

Fig 1: USQME participation in online discussion

Fig 2: OUMA participation in online discussion

These different patterns can only be taken as indicative of relative participation, because they do not represent the length of contributions, only the numbers of them, and because the USQME figures are, in any case, estimates. The message numbers also fail to show the proportion of contributions at any particular point that have been made by individuals. And they obviously say nothing about the content of contributions - it may be the case that many of these messages were not topic discussions, or that topic discussions took place in other forums as well.

However, if we were to regard the production of culture on these courses as occurring mainly in these forums then we would be likely to view these indications as significant. On this evidence we would be more likely to find substantial negotiation of meanings going on in the exchanges of the OUMA students, if only because there are more of them involved for a longer period of time. But, as we have already pointed out, the existence of interaction does not necessarily equate to the production of forms of socialisation, especially where the interaction may be an artefact of the assessment system, as is the case with OUMA. Nor does the absence of interaction of this kind necessarily point to the absence of a course culture, as we have argued.

Further analysis of a qualitative kind would be necessary to explain exactly how two courses sharing so much in terms of method and rationale could produce such different profiles in a crucial arena of cultural production. A conventional pedagogical approach might point at the differences in the design and management of the online interaction, or look for evidence of differences in the skill and experience of the teachers fostering it. Essentialist cultural interpretations might seek to explain it through differences in the disposition towards interaction of individuals or groups of learners, especially those whose national or ethnic backgrounds are different from those of the managers and teachers of the courses. Both these approaches seem to us to look through too narrow a lens. From the point of view of culture as a negotiated outcome of interaction, the differences in participation patterns actually constitute an important aspect of the cultures of these two VLEs,

negotiated across a range of fields of cultural production that goes wider than just the written exchanges of participants on course discussion forums.

These negotiations do not have to be explicit. A decision by a student to pass a course by working alone and taking no part in online discussion is an implicitly-negotiated advantage made possible by the conditions adhering to assessment regulations in the case of the particular course. Such a successful negotiation will still, however, play a role in the construction of a course culture, with attendant consequences for the experience of other participants. Equally, a disposition on the part of another student to post frequently and at length to online discussion areas will set up an implicit negotiation for advantage with other contributors. The nature of the advantage is determined by the extent to which it is the cultural narrative of online participation, or the cultural field of the subject area that informs the discussion. (Goodfellow 2004 gives an example of just such a negotiation amongst students on another of the OUMA courses. In this case at least one of the participants went on to interpret the negotiation in essentialist cultural terms).

The Institutional Cultures

The narrative of participation is not the only narrative informing the production of the cultures of these two courses. Other systems of valuing are present both implicitly and explicitly. For example, the absorbing of printed material as part of the study process is a key feature of these courses just as it is for any course at this level. So also is the production and assessment of written assignments. However, there are significant differences between the courses in the ways that these processes are managed and thus in the way that norms in respect to them are negotiated amongst participants. In the USQME case, all the reading material for the course is provided online for students to download, which means that they have print it out if they want to work away from the computer. In the OUMA case, reading material is primarily in print form, including four published set books, which is sent to students by post, along with printed course guides and a lot of background information about studying with the Open University and about assignment and examination regulations.

The difference in approach to course set texts can be seen as an example of cultural difference between the two universities: Open University conventional (i.e. non-online) course syllabuses are often shaped by the desire to provide students with a complete set of resources, so as not to discriminate against those who cannot get access to libraries or other sources of text. This feature of general course provision has been inherited by more recent online courses such as OUMA, which views the students' own use of the internet, or the OU Library's online resources, as integral, but secondary to their use of the core materials. In contrast, USQ's commitment to flexibility leads to an embracing of the resources of the internet as complementary to the course online set texts, and the students own use of the web and the university's online library as of equal importance. The difference between these approaches from the student's point of view has been remarked by one of the current authors, who

has been a student at both USQ and the OU. For her, the experience of being required not to use sources beyond the course set texts, in an OU course, was like being 'punished' for her flexibility.

Within the broader cultural narrative of participation in online community we could identify differences in interpretation between the OUMA and USQME courses, that are owed to larger institutional framings. One such difference is an orientation to a more conventional distance education culture on the part of the OUMA, in contrast to the more contemporary 'e-learning' orientation of USQME. The key to distinguishing this is in the two courses' attitudes to flexible learning. Both courses have the words 'flexible learning' in their titles and both teach about its importance as a principle underlying the development of teaching and learning in the widened and increasingly internationalised arena of higher education. But there are fundamental differences in the amount of flexibility that each course offers learners.

OUMA is one of only 4 modules each providing 30% of the credit required to gain a masters degree in education, to be achieved through a 30-week part-time commitment, for a fixed fee with almost no opportunities for deferral of studies to a later point. There are very limited options for the transfer of credit either into or out of the programme, which tends to lock learners into a relationship not only with the Open University but also with the particular faculty which 'owns' the OUMA courses. Learners are also locked into a particular textual environment through the course set books (as we observed earlier), and into a relationship with a particular virtual cohort of students and tutors, for the duration of their studies. The terms of interaction with this cohort are largely determined by structured group online activities which occur at specific times, and which are subject to formal assessment, effectively making participation compulsory.

USQME, by contrast, is a smaller module, one of a dozen offering up to 12% of the credit for a masters degree in education, achievable over a semester, but with the opportunity to defer coursework into a second semester. Fees are variable depending on the location and circumstances of the student, Credit may be transferred into the programme from prior degree-level qualifications, or out of it into other USQ masters programmes. Learners may opt to engage in online discussion, which has no direct relation to assessment, or to simply download course material if they prefer. The set texts are online and learners are encouraged to use the internet and the university's online library resources to provide their own supplementary material.

It seems clear that USQME is characterised by a high level of individual flexibility. It provides a customisable service to its learners, who may participate in social learning sporadically or not at all, who may determine many of the material sources they wish to use, who may select among different possible outcomes (pass the module and use it towards an M.Ed, use it towards another degree, defer the coursework, change to another module etc.). It represents a culture of individualisation, despite the rhetoric of collaboration, and this is surely instrumental in the production of its somewhat sketchy profile of online participation. By contrast, OUMA is characterised by

a high level of community. Its collective focus, and standardised procedures and outcomes, act to operationalise its own rhetoric of participation. This is reflected in the more sustained online interaction that the course participants maintain. The patterns of participation, in both cases, are simultaneously produced by, and productive of, the respective course cultures.

Summary & Conclusions

In this paper we have looked at the way that 'culture' is conceptualised in the study of learning in virtual environments. We have critiqued what we see as an unproblematized view of culture that associates it primarily with a disposition towards ways of thinking and acting in interaction with other VLE participants that is due to national or ethnic upbringing. Our argument is not that this view is wrong, because research does show that there can be collective similarities in the ways that groups of people from the same national or ethnic background perceive and act on social contexts, including educational ones such as virtual classrooms. Rather, we argue that, by itself, it is too simplistic a view to adequately account for the perceptions and behaviour of individuals in online classrooms, or to characterise interactions where these contexts involve people from a variety of national or ethnic, or social class or occupational, backgrounds.

We have suggested that there is an unacknowledged reflexivity in studies of cultural effects in online learning, that needs to be brought out into the open. The principles underlying the design of a VLE, and the research methods used to explore its cultural dimensions are themselves cultural artefacts which have a very strong bearing on the way that activity in the environment comes to be understood. We used the specific example of the role in the teaching of online educators, of the concept of online participation. This functions as a pedagogical principle in the wider discourse of online learning, as a regulatory principle in the management of specific credit-bearing courses, as the engine of social presence in the interactions of learners with the learning material in those courses, and as a measure of engagement and an indicator of the effectiveness of the courses' activity design. We showed that overall levels and patterns of online participation on two courses of very similar design and social and cultural provenance could differ markedly. We identified two other factors which we believe are implicated, along with students' own cultural pre-dispositions, in the production of 'course cultures' in these two VLEs. These are: i) the wider cultural narrative of online learning, which influences these courses both implicitly, because they take place in virtual learning environments, and reflexively, because they are courses for educators, and ii) the institutional culture with relation to distance learning in each of these two universities, which includes the scale of the systems set up to deal with the distribution of materials and the marking of assignments, and the particular configurations of resources and systems of communication among students and tutors, and between students and the institution.

In terms of our own practice, as educators involved in teaching in VLEs, these explorations are leading us towards a re-appraisal of why we wish to promote collaborative discussion, and what our attitude is towards those learners who

decline to participate. We see our learning activity designs as expressions of distinct pedagogical cultures which are involved in creating social capital in two, not always compatible, ways: i) through the creation of online communities, in which cultures of learning are negotiated with all the other active participants in the environment, and which can become the sites of considerable constraints on the flexibility of individuals, and ii) through the development of practices of flexible learning which give the maximum opportunity to individuals to negotiate their own engagement in the cultural practices of the institution, but which may bring them into conflict with dominant narratives such as the cultural narrative of participation. Finally, we see the engagement of students from various cultural (In the 'essential' but not exclusively national/ethnic sense) backgrounds, with each of these two over-arching pedagogical cultures, as presenting a further challenge to our ability to construct courses which can contribute to the emergence of new 'multi-cultural' narratives for the world's virtual learning environments.

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Figures

Fig 1: USQME participation in online discussion

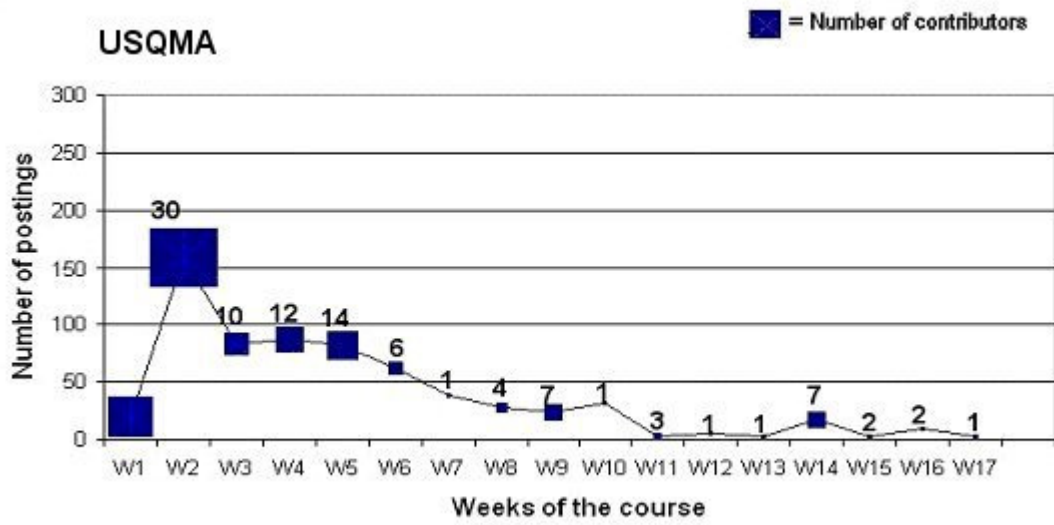


Fig 2: OUMA participation in online discussion

