Learning Cultures in Online Education

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Abstract

This paper introduces the theme of culture in online learning and reviews some of the research in this field to date. It identifies and critiques a tendency to view culture solely as an attribute of individuals inherited from national characteristics, and the problem for online learning solely as one of appropriate design for cultural difference. A forthcoming collection of research is described, which problematises the essentialist view of culture and explores issues around the negotiation of 'learning cultures' specific to online environments. Two directions for future research are proposed: one involves the switching of attention away from the generalised characteristics of local consumers of global online learning products, and on to their possibilities for re-purposing these products; the other involves the investigation of learners' uses of the social web and the attitudes to learning that this is becoming associated with.

Keywords

Culture, online learning, online education, globalisation, postnational education, identity, e-learning research, online learning research

Introduction

The papers in this symposium are based on contributions to an edited collection of work that addresses the theme of 'learning cultures in online education', to be published by Continuum books later this year (Goodfellow & Lamy 2008 forthcoming). Research on online learning cultures is a necessary corollary to the use of e-learning to develop 'transnational' and 'cross-border' education markets (see Garrick & Verbik 2004) if the social and pedagogical benefits from these developments are to keep pace with the corporate and institutional ones.

Some observers (Rogers 2007, Mason 2006) claim that there is a dearth of research on culture in online learning, but work in this area has been going on for at least since 10 years, although it is dispersed across a number of different disciplines, including foreign language learning, the study of virtual communities, and the social-psychology of the internet. Much of the existing research is framed by a conceptualisation of culture that associates it primarily with nationality, and a conceptualisation of the 'problem' for online learning as being about communication between people of different nationalities, or about the suitability of materials or interfaces designed by people of one nationality for use by those of another. However, in initiating a project to bring together current research into a book we are responding to other drivers of change in online education as well. These include: the growth of 'widening participation' policies in higher education., which are intended to address the increasing diversity of learners and their family, community, educational and work backgrounds; the growing focus on 'Mode 2 knowledge production' in the curriculum (see Gibbons et al 1994), which responds to employability agendas and the developing interdependence between academic and professional and work-based learning contexts, especially in the 'new professions' (Business, Education, Healthcare, Engineering etc); and the spread of internet community, socialising, and informal learning practices, which are beginning to influence educational development through the incorporation of web2.0 technologies into course design.

These trends point to the likelihood of increasingly unpredictable configurations of learners, teachers, employers, content-producers, managers, administrators, technologists, researchers etc. coming together in online networks for educational purposes. Developing and applying the concept of 'learning cultures' is intended to be a step towards managing this unpredictability. Through exploring the concept in theory and practice we hope to gain insights into the way that 'postnational' online educational initiatives might go

beyond the furthering of national or corporate interests, towards a more genuinely global form of social transformation (see Roth 2006).

Research into Culture in Online Learning

Existing research in this field is broadly oriented as follows:

1) Concern with the influence on international learners' individual and group identity of prevalent 'western' approaches to online education (social constructivism, techno-rationalism), and the English language, both of which are being disseminated as part of the increasing internationalism of trade. For example, Wild's editorial for a special edition of the British Journal of Educational Technology that appeared in 1999 (Wild 1999) makes clear that the focus is on the problem of designs that originate in 'single cultural identities' being imposed on culturally diverse learners. The key issue is seen as how to provide 'culturally appropriate instruction'.

2) A desire to understand the ways that online learning is played out through language, where the presentation and disclosure of identities by learners is inflected by their own cultural backgrounds and/or by the reduced cues of the electronic medium, which hide indicators such as accents, appearance, age, gender etc. For example, Kim & Bonk's study of collaboration between American, Korean and Finnish university students (Kim & Bonk 2002), or Conoscenti's study of cross-cultural interactions in an online military training context (Conoscenti 2004). This orientation can also be said to characterise the considerable body of research that exists into online intercultural communication in the field of foreign language learning (see Levy 2007).

3) An interest in 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. For example, Pincas' contribution to a special edition of Distance Education in 2001 discusses the institutional and ideological construction of 'success' via assessment systems, and the important role of virtual communities of practice in the shaping of individual cultural identities (Pincas 2001). Similarly, Goodfellow & Hewling (2006) describe differences in the cultures of e-learning in two distance learning universities.

4) There is also a body of work building on sociological studies of virtual community which draws in the notion of culture, but here the concept is often somewhat generalised, and either has little specific relation to learning (e.g. Wood & Matthews 2005) or else is treated as a kind of proxy concept for communication and/or community in general (e.g. Haythornthwaite & Kazmer 2004).

Over the last few years there have been further contributions to the new virtual learning identities orientation, in the proceedings of the Cultural Attitudes Towards Technology & Communication Conference (CATAC), and in the journals Language Learning & Technology and The Journal of Computer Mediated Communication. Recently, however, a new collection of writing on culture in online learning appeared, edited by Andrea Edmundson (Edmundson 2007), which, whilst bringing together research on broad issues such as cultural theory, language and semiotics, instructional design, seems to have returned to the problems of designing and implementing e-learning for non-western consumers, with the majority of accounts coming from the US and other Anglophone contexts. This volume has an introduction by Hofstede and many of the accounts draw on the characterisations of cultural difference that he and others have developed (Hofstede 2001, Hall 1990), for example, between 'individualistic' cultures (focused on self interest) and 'collectivistic' cultures, (centred on the interests of family and the wider community); or between 'high-context 'cultures (using the entire social context of an interaction: physical location, status of participants, body language etc. to interpret its meaning), and 'low-context' cultures (focusing on the direct content of messages, seeking specific information and/or expecting particular responses).

Applications of such essentialist conceptions of culture to online learning, tend to treat it as a manifestation of individual behaviour and disposition, and to emphasise the need to tailor the design of the virtual learning environment to individual cultural preferences. For the management of unpredictable configurations of heterogeneous and dispersed individuals, however, this perspective is unhelpful. Whilst

2

it may be the case that collective national 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). The research collected in our forthcoming book has been selected because it problematises the view that culture is primarily an issue of birth or upbringing and seeks to apply the concept to a number of different manifestations of individual and collective behaviour which reflect the emergence of new systems of values and ways of communicating about learning, as well as attempts to reproduce engrained ones.

The book consists of 11 chapters, including an introduction and summary chapter by the editors. In this symposium we outline the structure and themes of the collection and then go on to describe two of the contributions in detail.

Conceptualising 'Learning Cultures'

The introduction of the difficult concept of 'culture' in this collection is undertaken by Charles Ess. Ess is one of the founders of the CATAC conference mentioned above and has written widely on the subjects of culture, education, and technology (e.g. Ess 2002, Ess & Sudaweeks 2005). His opening chapter provides a framing for the concept that is built on throughout the book. He critiques the essentialist perspective, arguing that cultural identity is hybrid (having many more dimensions than nationality and/or mother tongue) and too complex to be adequately characterised by systems of categorisation such as Hofstede and his followers have developed. He develops Koch's argument that 'online scenarios' are themselves 'culturally coded spaces', inviting the formation of "third cultures" (Raybourn, Kings & Davies 2003) in which individuals combine elements from the different cultural traditions in which they were socialized to form their own, new, self-created identity. In doing so, 'they transcend their own traditionally, nationally or ethnically influenced cultural ties in favour of constructs in which elements from different traditions are recombined to form a new cultural self-perception' (Koch 2006: 220). Because of this view that culture as a concept is too complex to be captured by existing theories of communication and ICTs, Ess does not explicitly address the idea of online 'learning cultures'. In fact, he concludes with a challenge to the designers of online learning spaces to recognise 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' (Ess forthcoming). The issue of the significance of embodiment to online learning cultures is taken up by Macfadyen in her contribution to this symposium.

A working definition of culture, for the purposes of the book, is provided by Charlotte Gunawardena and her co-writers, who address aspects of the playing out of cultural identity in internet chat spaces. 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). The definition they offer is adapted from Fine 1987:

> A system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviours and customs shared by members of an interacting group, to which members can refer, and that serve as the basis for further interaction….members recognise that they share experiences and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation they will be understood by other members…thus being used to construct a reality for the participants. (p.125)

The most important implications of this definition for a post-essentialist understanding of culture in online groups lie in the absence of any requirement for the 'interacting group' to have a recognised existence independently of their interaction (e.g. through their individual membership of some larger 'cultural' grouping), and the emphasis on members' recognition of the role of experience-sharing in the construction of their online world. Both of these dimensions of online culture-building have been highlighted in other work that takes a view of culture as negotiated in context rather than inherited (Reeder et al 2002, Thorne 2003). Again, this chapter does not address 'learning cultures' directly, although implications for designing online learning spaces are drawn, but instead focuses on the

interaction of national cultural characteristics with other dimensions of identity, such as gender and religion. The account shows how Moroccan and Sri Lankan women using internet chat spaces guard their identities as women, and in the process sometimes construct cultural stereotypes of other users, including men of their own nationality, just as some of the men stereotype their female counterparts. This work lays a basis for subsequent discussion of the ways identities are either enacted or concealed, as part of the process of negotiating norms of communication online.

Following this, a number of contributors give accounts of cultural identity-construction in a variety of learning contexts, including contexts in which face-to-face teachers and learners are moving online for the first time as part of new institutional e-learning policies. The identities of learners and teachers in these new learning cultures reflect both change and the attempt to adapt new media to existing practices. 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 (O'Dowd forthcoming). Similarly, learners may view themselves as emancipated from their 'student' roles through online social interaction, but 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 (Develotte forthcoming). Some discussion of a more culturally constructive role played by textual interaction in a completely virtual context is provided by Leah Macfadyen in the next paper in this symposium. Anne Hewling's subsequent treatment of activity in a multimodal workspace then argues for viewing the technologies themselves as constructive agents in the overall 'cultural ecology' of the online learning environment.

Some of the wider implications of 'new' cultural configurations in online education are discussed from the perspectives of social theory in chapters on postnational pedagogical genres (Doherty forthcoming) and popular media networks (Lemke & van Helden forthcoming). The online learners in the first of these discussions are characterised not by assumed national characteristics but by their relation to the providing institution, either as 'domestic' or as 'international' depending on the extent to which they share familiarity with the assessment processes and procedures that characterise teaching and learning in this particular institution. 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.

An even more radical position is taken by Lemke & van Helden, amounting almost to an anti-formal-education discourse in the mould of Illich's (1973) critique of schooling. Jay Lemke has written extensively on new media and education (e.g. Lemke 2005) and also on virtual culture. Here, he and his co-author argue that:

> Contemporary culture has become a heteroglot mix of marketed identities and media cultures in uneasy relation with the spontaneous productions of individuals and online communities. All draw on traditional ethnic/national, class/age, gender/sexuality, and other subculture resources and values in the creation of identities, preferences, and practices, but the results are far less well-defined and stable than the term "culture" normally implies. If we are to help design better learning support systems for the future, we will need to re-conceptualize both "cultural diversity" and "identity" in less categorical terms and analyze them more fully across multiple timescales. (Lemke & van Helden forthcoming)

This chapter focuses on younger learners living a 'globalized, individualized, lifelong-learning biography' and quotes research that shows they 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 addresses what education does not, and is meaningful for students in ways the curriculum is not (Lemke & van Helden op. cit.). 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, movies, suggests a different picture. Individuals and their informal communities

4

transform and re-appropriate media to fashion identities and subcultures that are often subversive of marketing messages and dominant economic interests (Lemke & van Helden op. cit.).

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 (Lemke & van Helden op. cit.).

Issues for further research

The research agenda on online learning cultures implied by this range of discussions and analyses is rather wide. Each of the contributors will obviously be following their own priorities in the future but I suggest that there are at least two 'key' issues of concern to the online learning research community in general:

Firstly, there is the issue of the continuing status of research which draws on stereotypical descriptions of national or ethnic cultural characteristics. From one point of view it is commonsense that people brought up in different societies and with different languages will view learning contexts, on or offline, differently. As Patrick Dunn, one of the contributors to Edmundson's book referred to above, observes in his blog: 'In my work, examples of learners in different national and regional cultures having difficulties with so-called "localised" e-learning are so numerous as to be overwhelming' (Dunn 2006). However, there is a question whether such difficulties could *ever* be resolved by attempting to embed the kind of simplified understanding of these national and regional cultures that Hofstedian-type frameworks propose, into the design of learning material. Many people regard the current anglophone hegemony in e-learning to be necessarily problematic for both global and local cultural identities, regardless of the sensitivity of its design (see, for example, Hawkridge 2003: p.2). To investigate local possibilities for the cultural appropriation and re-purposing of globalised learning provision is perhaps a more pressing issue for the e-learning community, than attempting to refine frameworks that describe its consumers. The take-up of free online open courseware materials such as those provided by MIT, the Open University, University of Osaka, and other institutions might be a suitable area in which to investigate this.

Secondly, a move away from a view of culture as an attribute of individuals, to one which locates it in the 'construction of a reality' problematises online learning in a promising way. Where an online learning context is created by its designers to reproduce an existing 'real world' model – a university course, a workplace training scheme, a community educational initiative - researchers tend to focus on evaluating how far it works in terms of this model. But where the context is defined by the activity of its participants, the research focus moves onto the participants, the media, and practices through which this activity is realised. Lemke & van Helden locate this shift of focus in the domain of popular culture media, and Macfadyen and Hewling illustrate it in their accounts of the ritualisation of textual interaction and the participative role of technologies. Work in the field of cultural-historical activity theory has long recognised the cultural dimension of technology use (see Thorne 2003, Russell 2002), and work in social and cultural educational theory areas such as academic literacies has recently begun to turn its attention to online learning (see Goodfellow & Lea 2007). With indications coming out from current research into learners' use of technologies, that some are resisting institutionalised virtual learning environments VLEs in favour of the 'social web' (e.g. Conole et al 2006), it is becoming clear that online learning cultures may be being constructed in more varied and informal contexts than we have previously considered.

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6

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