

Sociological Insights in Structuring Australian Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Sociology is well-known for analyzing institutions and social change (Holmes, Hughes, & Julian, 2007). Yet, a dearth of sociological research explores technology and distance education (DE) despite imperatives to include cultural issues (Jorgensen, 2002; Lum, 2006). Meta-analysis shows social studies scholars fail to prioritize technological research (Marri, 2007). Sociologists have examined Web-based instruction and anxiety levels (Gundy, Morton, Liu, & Kline, 2006), flaming (Lee, 2005) and the relationship between learning environment, pedagogy, social roles, relations (Jaffee, 2003) and unintended benefits of traditional classrooms using DE (Edwards, Cordray, & Dorbolo, 2000). This qualitative exploratory research looks at **asynchronous forum** (AF) and DE student experiences in Australia. Using social constructivism, learning is seen as *praxis*, or doing (Vygotsky, 1986) in contrast with ancient traditionalists' *tabula rasa* "blank slate" understanding of learners waiting to be filled with knowledge (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Case studies show how culture and learning environments affect **virtual communication** (VC) when *all* communication, student-teacher and student-student, is technologically mediated. Experiences from four 2005-2006 cohorts show social structure affects student perceptions' of learning, satisfaction and agency.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge is an interaction between learner and environment, subsequently reconfiguring both (Semple, 2000). What counts as knowledge is subjective and historically contingent. Advanced capitalistic societies are affected by information technologies (IT) in our "Information Age." In advanced capitalism, ownership and management of IT create global networks and change social interaction (Castells, 2000). This change affects education as technology increasingly facilitates dialogue across power structures and hierarchies (Sorenson, 2007). Virtual communities have emerged alongside, sometimes replacing, traditional communities. In **e-learning communities**, global citizens often use **virtual classrooms** (VCM). "Globalization of the world's economies is leading to increased emphasis

on internationalization of the curriculum" (Barjis, 2003, p. 1). AFs offer DE interaction opportunities that may be "an acceptable alternative to face-to-face [F2F] discussion" (Payne & Reinhart, 2008, p. 36). In VCM, **identity** is more complex than in F2F settings. Technology brings new cultural products and ways of thinking and acting. DE is a fragmented cultural product and pedagogic design and course management systems are contested as neutral (Payne & Reinhart, 2008; Sorensen, 2007).

The popularity of e-learning in post-2000 is growing. Technology has irrevocably altered business models and policies, including higher education worldwide (Stein, 2001). For example, the UK's OpenLearn project is "lead[ing] the learning revolution, experimenting with new models of content and technologies" as the introduction of tuition fees saw 15,000 less university entrances (NIACE, 2006, p. 4). E-learning is supplementing, and sometimes replacing, traditional classrooms as learners' age increases and universities add **flexible delivery**. In 2004, more than 130 countries were developing or offering DE courses, most using IT (Shields, Gil-Egui, & Stewart, 2004). By 2006, researchers claimed "Web-based distance learning environments is growing exponentially with no limits in sight" (Wijekumar & Spielvogel, p. 221). Adoption of IT for education exhibits great social change (Schifter, 2004) yet offers little consensus despite correspondence courses existing since the 1800s (Romeo, 2001). The global marketplace for e-learning varies widely among and within countries, courses offered and technologies available (Marcus, 2006) with DE shaped by cultural attitudes, communication, infrastructure and government policy (Bowles, 2004). Variation is compounded by multi-sector (education, corporate, government) involvement. As Ragusa (2007) cautions, excluding culture in the development, delivery and evaluation of education technologies poses undesirable learning, economic and communicative consequences.

In contrast with Webb, Jones, Barker, and van Schaik's (2004) quantitative analysis, much AF and DE research focuses on small numbers of graduate and professional experiences (Allan & Lewis, 2006; Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Christopher, Thomas, & Tallent-Runnels, 2004; Marra, Moore, & Klimczak, 2004). Content analysis is common (Lee & Berter, 2007; Im & Lee, 2004; Marra et al, 2004; Marri, 2007; Zhu, 2006) and supplemented by surveys/interviews. Even when qualitative text analysis of

forum data is proclaimed among “the most valued analytic techniques” (Figaredo & Diaz, 2005, p. 4), much remains positivist. Quantitative analysis of student satisfaction in synchronous e-learning (Chen, Wu, & Yang, 2006) reveals social norms and socialization impact learning satisfaction more than technological systems and learning tasks. Structural change draws attention to the role of student agency in DE structures, an issue receiving little attention (van Aalst & Chan, 2007).

This research adds to proponents of case studies (Allan & Lewis, 2006; Hlapanis, Kordaki, & Dimitrakopoulou, 2006; Schrire, 2006) for analyzing VC to augment quantitative analyses (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Au-Yeung, Ha, & Au, 2004; Hawkey, 2004; Webb et al., 2004). Simultaneously, it addresses the common e-learning research limitation of inability to isolate “pure” e-learning, “learning that relies entirely on information and communication technologies” without supplementary F2F interaction which “is rare in Australia” (Bowles, 2004, pp. 25-26). In the U.S., Web-based technologies frequently supplement F2F classroom learning (Wijekumar & Spielvogel, 2006). However, research in Wales (Packham, Jones, Thomas, & Miller, 2006), and this study, demonstrates increasingly online university programs without F2F substantive learning. These structural changes foreground the timeliness and fruitfulness of contextualizing DE in organizational practices and procedures.

AF AND DE IN AUSTRALIA: PRACTICE-BASED EXPERIENCES

Descriptive surveys and qualitative secondary data from more than 800 2005-2007 Australian DE undergraduates provide experiences, controversies and key issues on AF and VC. Anonymous student comments from two survey items (Q1 - *Aspects of this subject you found helpful to your learning* & Q2 - *Aspects of the subject you'd like to see changed*) a) reveal virtual realities are guided by communication norms/values and b) show identities are negotiated and recreated by computer-mediated communication set amid corporate policies and institutional cultures.

By comparing two DE environments, case studies show how social structure and culture impact perceptions, communication norms and identity formation. In Virtual Learning Environment 1 (VLE1) (2 cohorts: 2005, N=140 and 2006, N=15), students participated in instructor-driven AF with a peer-learning assessment item derived from their AF work. Virtual Learning Environment 2 (VLE2) (2 cohorts: 2005, N=280 and 2006, N=330) offered AF only as supplementary tool. This research argues VC *type* affects learner satisfaction, subject content and skills used. Findings are case-specific and nongeneralizable.

Main Findings

Research findings are presented in three general themes: 1) Structure and norms affect AF learning and dialogue; 2) AF require management of identities, cultural contests and unforeseen events; and 3) Variation in systemic practices affects AF success. Student perceptions and broader issues are presented by theme.

Structure and Norms Affect AF Learning and Dialogue

Variation in e-learning environments resulted in different learner practices (quantity and quality/type of forum postings, learning and teaching expectations and levels of professionalism). Examining responses from one 2006 third-year subject (N=15) in VLE1, 100% of respondents agreed: i) they enjoyed this form of online learning; ii) the subject forum was an appropriate way to support learning activities; and iii) their understanding of the subject improved because of the subject forum. This echoes experiences of 2005 first-year students (N=140). As one DE student and government employee wrote about her AF work, “this type of exercise mirrors how students would be asked to complete the work on campus and I think it’s a really good learning tool” (2005, August 15). According to another, “it really makes a big difference and I am finding that what would normally be for me a very difficult subject [is] very stimulating” (2005, August 26). This adds to Webb et al.’s (2004) quantitative finding that participation in integral e-learning dialogue positively correlates with learning. This study lends qualitative support for the centrality of e-learning structure to student satisfaction and learner practices. Framed by Wenger’s learning theory “as social participation in the process of active participation in communities of practice” (Sorenson, 2007, p. 165), students’ experiences are part of a macrolevel participatory and reification process requiring adoption of microlevel competencies through online VC engagement.

Debate exists in the course management software (CMS) literature over social control and power in VCM, particularly classroom architectures as instructor/administrator-managed or learner-driven with integrated participation (Payne & Reinhart, 2008). The Australian experiences show dichotomizing learners and instructors/facilitators circumvents the complexity of “control” issues because variation in structural preference also exists between students. VLE1 and VLE2 were organized to specifically address issues of control and student ownership of learning. VLE1 evaluations show students supported highly structured AF assessment tasks. Comments such as “the assessments were extremely beneficial and enhanced learning in the subject” (Comment 1Q1, 2005) and “I found the student forum to be interactive

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