



Virtual Existence and the Virtual Organisation

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the implications of reifying the social form of virtual organisations by presenting the findings of a case study that explores the interactions of a group of people interacting within a virtual classroom. The study shows that socio-cultural and socio-technical knowledges play an important role in the shaping the actions of the participants. Specifically, culturally know ledge's are constantly shared thus strengthening the group's self-identification. This argument represents a challenge to the dominant representation of the virtual as the binary opposite to physical reality. Although virtual existence is not tied to a physical environment the experiences that can be shared form the nexus for virtual interaction and, consequently, virtual organizations. This paper argues that virtual existence offer a partial release from physically grounded realities, by providing - possibly momentary - experiences that do not require constant physically-oriented presence.

INTRODUCTION

Socio-cultural and socio-technical analysis are the predominant analytical positions for exploring human relationships to computers, organisations and Information Systems (see Avison and Myers 1995; Daily, Whatley et al. 1996; Gaine, Kelly et al. 1999). Socio-technical positions acknowledge the interplay of people and technology as tools for conducting social interaction (Hirschheim and Klein 1992). Similarly, the examination of the user, the developer, and other human components of an Information Systems is well established in Information Systems literature (see Brown 1998; Chan and Zhao 2000; Orlikowski 1992; Pawlowski, Robey et al. 2000; Sahay 1997). In the spirit of this tradition, this work uses a socio-cultural analysis to explore the interactions of a virtual classroom. This enables an exploration of the complex interplay between humans and technology in cultural processes (Hirschheim and Klein 1992). The complexities of reality construction are such that they are socially and culturally informed and draw upon the physical and emotional experiences of humans when they interact with technology, artifacts and other humans. From this perspective, it is the shared histories, norms and myths that inform users' perceptions of the virtual environment and is the analytical position used by this research.

Culture, in this research, is explored with a critical sociological definition. There is a growing plethora of sociological research that utilises Giddens' structuration theory to examine human computer usage (see Barrett, Sahay et al. 1996). These works explore the structures of social interaction and focus upon underlying ontological positions. The maturity of this analysis is evidenced in the balanced approach that works of this type achieve. However, the most predominant theoretical position exploring online interaction and via chat rooms are behavioral studies (Wilson, 2001; Arnold and Miller, 2001; Turkle, 1996). These studies recognise the significance of observing human behavioural interaction in order to gain insight into the psychological state of human beings, in these cited cases online and Internet behaviour. Socio-cultural positions in contrast draw upon social anthropology to explore the interactions of technology and people (Avison and Myers 1995). This research has explored the influences of artifacts, tools, signs, symbols and the written word upon the human contexts of the virtual environment. In this way, the virtual environment is understood to be a more technologically-enabled space that necessitates mediating devices such

as hardware, software, wiring and cables as well as newly acquired skills and knowledges to enable recognisable and fluid business, social and organisational interactions (Brown-Syed 1999). In short, virtual environments, including classrooms, are socially constructed. All environments of social practice exist within a continuum of less or more technologically enabled spaces (Greenhill, 2002).

This paper firstly presents the research site and methodology that was followed. This section explains the relationship of the case study to the theoretical positions explored by this paper. The study itself is presented using the collected transcripts. These are presented as exemplars of the socio-cultural and socio-technical engagements that were observed.

RESEARCH METHOD AND CASE DESCRIPTION

The empirical research was conducted in a virtual classroom of a large Australian university. This research examined how a group of people used a virtual classroom to communicate and share knowledge. The study was conducted in parallel with a subject delivered in 2001. This university has actively pursued a policy of increasing Web-delivered flexible learning and encouraged the delivery of teaching in this mode. As an examinable part of the course the students were asked to participate in a virtual classroom and then analyse the success of the virtual learning process. To achieve this learning objective it was necessary for all the online interactions of the students and lecturer to be archived. This collected together all the online interactions that occurred between February and May 2001. These interactions were acquired with the permission of all the parties involved and with the approval of the university. The technical platform was "Tutonet Virtual Classroom". At this time the University was trialling this application as an extension to the core flexible learning environment delivered through "BlackBoard". All 28 students enrolled in this subject and one lecturer took part in the study. During the period of the research all the students contributed at least once to the virtual environment, and many students posted many times. The virtual environment, itself, was made available from the university and from remote locations through the university's private dial-in network. The most utilised aspect of the virtual class room was the chatroom. The data gathered from the chat room is the primary focus of this study and containing 10650 individual postings. There was also a mailing board that had 87 messages which were accessed 1089 times by individual people during the study. Other features associated with the environment were less utilised and are not discussed in this paper.

METHODOLOGY

This study is both qualitative and interpretive. It utilises the technological capacities of the system under examination to store the interactions of those observed. Subsequently, a series of interviews with the student and staff participants were conducted. The gathered data was interpreted using traditional sociological methodologies. This meant that transcripts of all the communication were coded according to classifications based on type of interaction, for example: location, education, social, or emotional display, conflict situation, and the changing expression of individual over the duration of the study. "Tutonet Virtual Classroom" software also provided a diary of the times

KG-i've got a temprature
RN-interactive internet marketing
KG-this room is hot
KG-oh cause i'm in it
KG-he he
RN-come to mathan
RN-ha ha :P
KG-mathan?
SL-nathanb
RN-next to nathan
RN-sorry LOL

PLAY - GENDER AND INNUENDO

The group matured and was comfortable with the social, cultural and technical arrangements of the chat room and one another. Restrictions of physicality were effaced. The two most experienced members of the group morphed sex when the lecturer requested the presence of more women in the room.

GA-I wish there were more girls here ;)
RN-i'll try if u like
GA-I said you can tell anyhow
RN-so angela what shade of nail polish r u wearing??
JS-*j changes into a mini skirt and boob tube*
RN-*dressing gown and slippers with mad pack*
RN-*cucumbers on the eyes and shaved legs*
CW-Rob wot are you doing, you can't cross dress in a chat room!
RN-so now that i'm comfortable
GA-No I went to the gym so it's not a slippers and nail polish night
RN-i didn't i piked
JS-I'm not passing any lycra comments
RN-did u see dan there
GA-YOur crazzzy Jay
JS -*j stands on his head*
JS-just a lil
RN-wasn't insinuating you had nail polish on just trying to find common ground
RNhard to do when my panty hose are riding up
RN-must go guys
RN-have places to go and people to be

CONCLUSION

This study reveals how dominant socio-cultural, socio-technical and historical perspectives impact on the ability to understand the virtual classroom. Individual historical association with chatrooms reveal the ease that computer-mediated communication can become expressive. Acknowledging this history and educating other group members about the differences between online conversation and conventional typing can positively contribute to a group's acceptance of virtual existence. A shift from offline cultural practices was also observed within the group. This group provided a clear example of how physically bound socio-cultural references inform group members actions. Shared 'virtual' practices influenced their approach to this environment while physically bound references enhanced these same experiences. The groups understanding of the chat room developed from the shared socio-cultural awareness of physical location, play, ritualized interaction, emotions and feelings.

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