

Christine Sinclair

University of Strathclyde, United Kingdom

"Can you do an online version?" Challenges in, from and about elearning (0182)

Programme number: M10

Research Domain: Learning and Teaching

Creating an online version of a course might seem a good way to overcome contemporary pressures of time, space and student numbers. But an elearning course is likely to be a very different experience from a face-to-face one with the same title. The research question explored here developed from what an online student noticed about changes in language practices when talking in and about elearning. Blogs, discussion fora and other records of student activity examine the student experience first hand, supplemented by research with senior academics and managers. I have analysed what we can say in elearning as well as what we can say about it. The traces left by elearning provide an opportunity to render visible – and challenge – some of our tacit assumptions about teaching and learning. They also suggest that in elearning we may be engaged in a new form of activity.

"Can you do an online version?" Challenges in, from and about elearning

There are plenty of precedents for the claim that what we are doing changes when we change the technology: from Socrates' concerns about the effects of writing on memory (expressed, of course, through Plato's writing) to McLuhan's famous maxims about messages and media (McLuhan, 1964). Yet we persist in talking about online and face-to-face "versions" of courses as though they are the same thing. This is understandable: at the very least, we need them to be broadly equivalent, so that we can award the appropriate credit. There are studies that demonstrate such equivalence (Bernard et al., 2004)

An emphasis on learning outcomes, prevalent in many countries, will support a potential proliferation of different versions of courses: online, face-to-face, blended. It is tempting to suggest that it does not matter how we get there; the learning outcomes are what count. From this perspective, a computer may simply be seen as a tool to achieve these outcomes more effectively and more efficiently. We can automate some aspects of practice – such as marking multiple choice questions – and students can access materials whenever suits them, without having to make expensive trips to the campus. There may be economies of scale for the institution too: those same outcomes may be achievable with fewer rooms, books, timetabling constraints and tedious aspects of record keeping. There may even be the need for fewer people to administer or "teach" the outcomes. Quality assurance reassures us that the outcomes are the same or equivalent. By using technology to automate routine practices, we should be able to accommodate more students, from a wider range of backgrounds, more efficiently and more cheaply and still achieve the same learning outcomes.

I aim to show that there are various potential problems with this view, only some of which relate to assumptions about technology (for example, that its main impact is through automation). This characterisation also entails underlying assumptions about students and learning outcomes. In this

study, I use dialogues about technology – and also dialogues through technology – to bring to the surface some changing practices in education. A benefit of technology may be that it causes us to temporarily suspend or “bracket” our beliefs in the real world (and return to the real world enlightened with greater understanding. Evans uses this suspension of belief to explore the issue of democracy, highlighting that:

the Internet puts into relief what is also true of the actual world – that we exist as participants in a dialogue. That which separates us into distinct interlocutors – the dialogue – simultaneously binds us together.

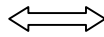
(Evans, 2000 p5)

I propose to use the Internet similarly to put into relief what is true about language use in education, drawing on Evans’ “binding” dialogue to explore pedagogical issues.

Using my experiences as a student (on an MSc in elearning) as a starting point, I have identified a number of features where I have noticed significant differences between online and face-to-face speaking and writing – and, consequently, educational practices. In Figure 1, I highlight the features and the reasons for my interest in them. These are the basis for a series of dialogues with experienced teachers and managers, including some who are pioneers in elearning and others who would not regard themselves as involved in elearning. The research investigates the tension between carrying over existing practices to the online world or not (Nicol, Minty, & Sinclair, 2003). It also considers the other direction: the subsequent effects of emergent online practices on traditional campus environments.

The observed features in Figure 1 refer to broad themes and, when drawing them up, I anticipated generating a range of observations and responses from my interlocutors. I am equally interested in what people say and in what they are *able* to say because of the boundaries established by the medium of the education being discussed. I am particularly keen to highlight potential contradictions and tensions with respect to online and face-to-face “versions” of courses, as these suggest opportunities for development and expansion. In taking this perspective, I am borrowing from activity theory (Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamäki, 1999) – and perhaps pointing up new areas of research for groups of educational researchers to explore together. Indeed, I hypothesise that it may be not only appropriate but also *necessary* to regard elearning as a different form of activity from traditional education.

The dialogues that form the main part of the study are still to happen at the time of writing. I would like to report the findings and engage in additional dialogue at the SRHE conference in 2009.



| Observed feature | Issues prompted by elearning | Issues prompted by classrooms |
|---|--|---|
| Student silence – how to interpret | Lurking and invisibility. Value placed on participation online. Traceability of participation. | Difficulties in tutorials and seminars. Speaking in front of peers. Immediacy of interaction – synchronous. |
| Tacit aspects of learning | Presence, embodiment, belonging to an institution – how these are expressed. Sharing knowledge from other practices. Noticing how tutors participate online. | Chat with fellow students about management of learning. Noticing how tutors approach the subject. Academic “tribes”. The hidden curriculum. |
| Changing meanings of words | Digital – divide, native. E(learning) – what is it? Viral practices – neologisms. Instant linking to definitions and sources. | Information literacy. Understanding academic jargon. Effects from the Internet – e.g. use of wikipedia to gain understanding of new concepts. |
| Changing use of the written word | Converging writing styles. Synchronous and asynchronous writing. Politeness – flaming. | Academic writing practices. Students reading less. Influence from other writing practices, especially texting. Plagiarism. |
| Language used in and about feedback and assessment | Writing for a computer; automated feedback. New forms and genres. Joint assessments: blogs, wikis | Reliability – what assessment means. Use of feedback for self-regulation. Why essays - relevance of assessment. |
| Referring to oneself – issues of identity and socialisation | Who is speaking – the student or the avatar? Social networking. Effects of the many identities people hold online. Fragmentation. | Use of first person. Taking on an academic persona. Relationships with previous experience – existing family and friends. Alienation at university. Meeting new people. |

Figure 1: Different emphases in elearning and traditional education

- Bernard, R., Abrami, P., Lou, Y., Borokhovski, E., Wade, A., Wozney, L., et al. (2004). How Does Distance Education Compare With Classroom Instruction? A Meta-Analysis of the Empirical Literature. *Review of Educational Research, 74*(3), 379-439.
- Engeström, Y., Miettinen, R., & Punamäki, R.-L. (Eds.). (1999). *Perspectives on Activity Theory*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Evans, F. (2000). Cyberspace and the Concept of Democracy. *First Monday, 5*(10).
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. London: Routledge, Kegan and Paul.
- Nicol, D., Minty, I., & Sinclair, C. (2003). The social dimensions of online learning. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 40*(3), 270-280.