Innovations in (Online) Reflexive Practice: Linking Theory with Technique within the Virtual Learning Environment

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Introduction: The Challenges (and Opportunities) of Online Reflexive Practice

- For educationalists, reflexive practice (RP) is an established aspect of the teacher's repertoire.

- It can be defined as a continuous process through which the **practitioner critically reflects upon their role** within the learning environment (Schön 1983).

- RP tends to be **embedded within a relational** (social constructionist) approach to learning, in which the nature and **quality of interactions** between members of the learning community are seen as pivotal to students' engagement in learning

- Since the 1980s, **several frameworks for facilitating RP** have emerged (Gibbs 1988; Brookfield 1998; Rolfe et al 2001).

- However previous authors have highlighted, there has been little research into how teachers **'Do'** RP (Stîngu 2012).

- Even less research in relation to how teachers engage in RP when **teaching online.**

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In addition

The higher education sector has witnessed the development of blended (or hybrid) pedagogies:

➢ e-learning technologies (**e.g. Moodle**) have been introduced within campus-based courses in an attempt to develop more flexible pedagogies (Gordon 2014)

➢ Delivering **educational content in formats** more suited to the needs of the digital native (Prensky, 2001) student

➢ Opportunities that e-learning afford are considerable, **equally there are challenges** when it comes to translating established pedagogical practices (such as RP) for use within Virtual Learning Environments (VLE).

➢ A key challenge identified within the pedagogical literature is that of **(dis)embodiment**.

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Background

In this study, we (Nick Jenkins and myself) describe a process of RP, whereby we drew on the practices of **qualitative ethnography** to analyse data readily available within the VLE:

- ✓ discussion board posts (Asych)
- ✓ recordings of webinar discussions (Synch)

- ✓ Also in-depth interviews

To critically reflect on the **quality of interactions (and learning)** that took place within a single, online, Masters-level course - International Approaches in Dementia **(IAD)**

MSc Dementia:
International Experience, Policy and Practice

The study was **funded by the PTAS** and was undertaken in semester one of academic year 2013/2014.

Presented in nano teach and poster format at the HEA Conference 2014

(Programme commenced in 2011, initially funded by DEI)

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Methods

Context

- Delivered over a period of 12-weeks**, IAD** is one of the first courses that students undertake on the programme.

- Aim of the course is to introduce students to **alternative ways of conceptualising dementia**, which can be radically different from those offered from within conventional biomedicine.

- Students are required (early on in the course) to reflect upon, question and (potentially) de-stabilise their *existing perceptions* of dementia.

- Hence, **facilitating transformative learning** is at the very centre of the course aims and objectives.

Methods

Using online ethnography (or *virtual ethnography* and *netnography*) we explored the social interactions that occur within the virtual and computer-mediated world as outlined by Garcia et al. (2009)

We drew upon key principles and practices of (online) ethnography in order to generate **robust evidence** that could be used to inform our reflexive practice.

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Methods

Participants

➤ 15 students (9 completed the course)
➤ Student cohort: UK, USA, Canada, UK, Greece, Mexico and Singapore

Ethics

✓ Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the Interdisciplinary Social Science in Health, School of Health in Social Science Research Ethics Committee at the University of Edinburgh.

✓ Each student was contacted regarding permission to use their online interactions and contributions from the course for the purposes of our research (6 responded – assignment period)

Data Collection & Analysis

• recorded synchronous (4 webinar events – cut and pasted)
• asynchronous (discussion boards) interactions were extracted (cut and pasted)
• In-depth interviews with students and programme team teaching team (2 members)

Methods

Data Collection and analysis

Data extracted from the VLE were analysed using an adapted version of **Goodall's (2000**) first level of Verbal Exchange (VE) framework.

The VE framework seeks **to interpret** the **types of conversation**, rhythm and personal meanings of key moments in exchanges creating, as

'evocative representation of the field-work experience'

Goodall (2000: 121)

Methods

Data Collection and analysis

Goodall's Framework	Adaptation of Goodall's Framework
1. Phatic communication or ritual interaction: 2. Personal narratives: 3. Ordinary conversation: 4. Skilled conversation: 5. Dialogue: "boundaries of self" moving to higher levels of spontaneous ecstatic mutuality (2000:103-104)	1. '*netiquette*', '*eprofessionalism'* 2. individual or mutual self-disclosure 3. in relation to 'real- world' theory / practice 4. In-depth / application of 'real-world practice and theory 5. 'Light Bulb' moments: Depicting conversation which transcends information exchange, occurring between individuals after in-depth skilled conversation(s) or post self-reflexive moments]

The dialogical development using an adaption of VE coding within the asynchronous and synchronous group discussions week-by-week

Methods

Data Collection and analysis

Of the nine students who completed the course, **six students** were interviewed via Skype and phone, all within six months of finishing the course.

Those students who agreed to take part in the interview process were also those who had **contributed** to the discussion boards on a regular basis.

Interviews were also undertaken with **two members** of the teaching team.

Data from the discussion boards and webinars were coded against the (adapted) VE framework.

Interview data was also subjected to a two-phased thematic analysis; initially by the application of **Values Coding (Gable & Wolf, 1993**), which reflects participants' **value, attitudes and beliefs** as a representation of his or her worldview perspective.

Followed by the **iteration method of constant comparison** (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Example quotations form Asych and Sync.

Weeks 0-3: The Role Ritual interaction, Personal Narratives & Ordinary Conversations in 'Binding' the (Online) Community

"I am a physiotherapist (of 25 years) interacting with many wonderful seniors in 2 long term care facilities. I am really looking forward to the next 2 years study simply because I keep hearing "Oh, she/he has dementia and bad behaviour". This drives me crazy! "

Weeks 1-10: From Skilled Conversations to 'light bulb' Moments

"As a Physiotherapist, I have to openly admit that I have spent the past 30 years living and breathing the biomedical model. For me to understand and grasp all of these psychological concepts, supported by some early research described in Kitwood's paper, is tough because of my life experiences to date, environment and background. Even more so, is that even today I witnessed again how we continue to stigmatise those living with dementia because we promote that we have a dementia care area, separate from all other elders. I'm not throwing in the towel, but I do acknowledge I have a lot to learn about the person living with dementia"

(George, Canada,)

Example quotations interviews

Students spoke openly about their reasons for choosing to study online, with some highlighting the flexibility that online learning affords as a key motivational factor:

"I really just jumped in, a great opportunity, to go for it and I can do it. I guess the flexibility of online learning that makes it so much easier."

(Samantha, America)

Others as well as the members of the teaching team spoke about anxieties relating to the VLE:

"I really wasn't sure what to anticipate as far as how the interactions were going to go. You know, how I would link with the instructors, how I would link with other students … "   (Charlie, Scotland)

Computer skills – *digital immigrants (mature students)*:

"Well, when I first started I was quite nervous because my computer skills are not the best. So I wasn't sure how I would manage the technical side of things and that has actually been very simple".

(Jane, Scotland)

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Discussion: Critical Reflections in brief

Primary findings: 1

Our interrogation of data from within the VLE highlighted that **ritualistic** and everyday forms **of interaction were common** throughout the course, and were particularly important during the initial weeks; serving to bind the temporary community by helping to define students' online identities as well as emerging values and social norms of the community.

➤ There was little evidence of more extensive or deeper supportive (emotional) relationships developing between students, beyond the sharing of personal narratives and their hopes, fears and learning aspirations.

➤ Our findings therefore raise important questions in the context of reflexive practice:

(a) how feasible is it for educationalists to nurture organic peer-to-peer relationships within the VLE

(b) how appropriate is it for the practitioner to do so?

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Discussion: Critical Reflections in brief

Primary findings: 2

Whilst **surface level interactions** were often initiated by the teaching team, interactions that formed part of students' **transformative learning** were invariably initiated by students themselves.

This prompts us to consider the role of the online educator within the VLE.

Previous studies have referred to the experience of transformative learning as akin to a state of **liminality** (see for example, Cousins 2006) in which the learner is positioned **betwixt-and-between** their pre- and post-course knowledge

Palmer (2001) suggests:

The truth or insight may be a pleasant awakening or rob one of an illusion; the understanding itself is morally neutral. The quicksilver flash of insight may make one rich or poor in an instant (p4).

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Conclusion

The period in which **transformative learning** takes place may be usefully conceptualised as:

an exercise in nomadic thought; characterised by a **war-like state** between the established and free-roaming aspects of the student's knowledge, values, sense of integrity and core beliefs.

Supporting students to manage this **complex entanglement** of thought and emotion within the VLE is likely to prove highly challenging (and far from linear), especially as pedagogical research has, to date, paid surprisingly little attention to the role and manifestation of emotion within online communities of inquiry (Cleveland-Innis and Campbell, 2012).

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Thank you
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