

## EDITORIAL

### **Being online: a critical view of identity and subjectivity in new virtual learning spaces**

#### **Introduction**

Being a learner, becoming a learner and belonging to learning communities are important themes for both educators and educational researchers. This special issue explores these issues, theorising and exploring how identities are developed online, and asks what the educational impact is. Here, we set the scene for this work, locating it in terms of wider educational concerns of identity, inclusivity and change.

#### **Changing identities in education**

From a sociological, structural perspective, the effects of social class, ethnicity and gender are well documented, and researchers have explored their influence on learner opportunities and experiences at school, college and higher education (Mac an Ghail 1988; Mirza 1992; Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Thomas 1990). However, structural accounts have increasingly given way to work that focuses on learners as agents in their learning, treating learning as 'being' or as situated in learning communities (e.g., by drawing on work such as Wenger 1998). The main premise of this tradition of work is that learning is a process of a learner becoming, say, an engineer or a teacher (as on a PGCE) or a researcher (as in a doctoral student), and identifying as such through engagement with the community and practices associated with that identity. Furthermore, in what Barnett (2007) calls an 'ontological turn', being a learner at more advanced levels can be seen as being about living with intellectual uncertainty and developing a will to learn. This entails an identity transformation that impacts upon all aspects of life.

These issues do not only affect students; there has been a parallel interest in academic identities in higher education. Academic identity is recognised as complex and particularly dependant on discipline and institutional status (Becher and Trowler 2001). However, shifts towards managerialism and accountability in higher education, together with the rising pressures in teaching, research and administration (Henkel 2000), have resulted in the renegotiation of academic identities, frustration with workloads, uncertainties about what it is to be an academic and mourning for a golden era of supposed academic freedom (Taylor 2008).

For all this interest, however, it remains difficult to say exactly what identity is. It is a troublesome concept and warrants a critical stance. For example, identity may be viewed as an essential quality, a biographical narrative, a performance, a discursively produced subjectivity or as membership of a large-scale social grouping. Whichever of these perspectives is chosen for a particular piece of work, it is necessary to be clear why, and be aware of what is lost or excluded from this perspective. Specifically, in education, it is necessary to problematise both identity and its relationship to learning. For example, in the shift towards learner-as-agent, it is easy for the dispositions that learners bring with them that might arise from their positioning in wider social discourses (e.g., of belonging to a particular social class) to become obscured. This has educational consequences. Developing a sense of 'belonging' to a learning community

is rarely straightforward, because identity performance in that group may draw on wider discourse and practices related to class, gender, age, disability or ethnicity. The exclusion/inclusion issues raised by the sociologists of education persist (Hughes 2009).

### **Being online**

Because learning involves disruption, challenge and identity transformation, a key area of educational interest concerns opportunities for new identity experiences and new pedagogies. Since the development of email and bulletin boards, learners have had the opportunity to interact online; the rapid growth of online learning, and more recently of social networking, virtual worlds and other Web2.0 applications has only added to this. However, while peoples' uses of these technologies may be evolving rapidly, research is struggling to keep pace; the body of work on this topic is growing, much of it focuses on hopes or 'potentials'; relatively little provides empirically grounded accounts of what is happening, and less still critiques or theorises this (Selwyn and Grant 2009).

Academics and students alike now have multiple opportunities to explore identities online as well as in more traditional educational spaces. Being online potentially provides all those involved in teaching and learning opportunities for pushing boundaries of traditional learner and teacher identities, managing contradicting identities, reconfiguring pedagogical perspectives and even challenging persistent educational inequalities. Challenges and criticisms remain, of course, such as the lingering debate about embodiment (Dreyfus 2001; Land 2005): what Land refers to as the 'incorporeal fallacy', that learners are somehow disembodied when learning online, subjected to an inauthentic experience that is risk-free and therefore meaningless. However, the emphasis now is on how rather than if such identity development happens.

But how far is this potential being realised? Policy makers and enthusiasts certainly extol the virtues of being online; sceptics and critics still argue that face-to-face is best. Between these two extremes, it is hard to gain a balanced picture of what kinds of identities and subjectivities are emerging in twenty-first century learning, much less of what their value or significance is. It is this problem that the work in this special issue addresses.

### **Advancing the debate**

This special issue brings together work by researchers who have developed theory or undertaken critical examinations about the experience of learners and teachers who are 'being online' for at least part of their formal educational lives. The emphasis for this issue is not reporting practice or providing case studies; while more work of this kind would be useful, some at least is available elsewhere (Selwyn and Grant 2009). Instead, the focus is on developing new ways of thinking about and explaining such practices. While some papers draw on empirical data, they do this to illustrate conceptual development. Collectively, they have been selected for the contributions they make to our understanding of teachers' and learners' identities in contemporary education. Most of these papers focus on Web 2.0 technologies, and ask how current practices break with older traditions of learning. All should inspire further debate about learning online.

In the first paper of this collection, Bayne explores the disruptive effects of being online for both teachers and learners through theorising the theme of the 'uncanny' in online spaces. She argues that the strangeness evoked in being online gives rise to digital pedagogies which enable the learners to become 'strangers to ourselves', to experience temporal disjuncture and to disrupt conventional relationships between texts and authors.

Papers which follow give some examples of disruptions to established pedagogic discourse that arises in new virtual spaces. Saltmarsh and Sutherland-Smith consider how being an online teacher, particularly in three-dimensional virtual spaces, might encourage educators to *stimulate* learning through new ways of being rather than *simulate* the classroom environment and its more predictable teacher and learner subjectivities. Savin-Baden also explores teacher experiences of immersive virtual worlds and considers how the shift to immersive worlds is for some an opportunity to take risks with exploring new identities as they transform themselves through creating avatars. There are possibilities for identity extension (enhancing aspects of identity through avatar creation), identity multiplication (interaction between many selves such as embodied self and avatars) and identity tourism to become what she terms changelings and shape shifters, where new identities are experienced in an immersive world – although, one could say, only partially. The question arising from both these papers is: what impacts do these extended and transformed identities have on pedagogies and on learners?

Others of these articles examine the processes of identity formation online. Kerwald, for example, takes a detailed look at online social presence. Rather than viewing this as problematic, as something lacking in online learning, he treats social presence as a continuum, with a person present in degrees rather than fully present or wholly absent. In examining the relationship between social presence and subjectivity he explores subjectivity firstly as a perspective of individuals and others; secondly as agency, for example in being able to make choices and interpret others; and finally in terms of intersubjectivity, as people define themselves in their interactions with others. He calls for more research into the question of being human online, which includes these perceptions of self and agency and not only the interpersonal activity which has been the focus of research to date.

Seery explores a related issue, also considering different ways of thinking about the self. He goes on to argue for a view of education as a process of formation of the self rather than merely being concerned with imparting knowledge and developing ‘skills’. Central to this is a debate about the relationship between public and private spheres of social engagement. New technologies, particularly those described as Web 2.0, can blur the boundaries between these, allowing for new, playful spaces in which learners can take risks. Seery suggests that, perhaps, the differences between this and formal education should be celebrated, rather than seen as a problem, since formal education offers opportunities for public spaces and embodied learning. There would, he suggests, be real value in deliberately not doing those things that have become the domain of new technologies.

In a different approach to the questions of subjectivity and agency, Carr provides a case study of deaf users in *Second Life* (SL) to demonstrate that disability is not a technological construction arising from the limits of technologies used in online communication, but is socially constructed through the discourses and practices of online interaction. She does this by providing insight into the sense of loss experienced by deaf residents when sound became available to the previously text-only communication in SL. Use of voice is privileged over text by SL communities although the technology continues to support the text option. All this leads to a consideration of what enabling pedagogies might be in new virtual environments.

Finally, identity construction using Web 2.0 technologies has brought some interesting new ways of contesting accepted academic practice. Kirkup discusses using blog writing and publication to explore the development of public academic identities online. She opens up the question about whether or not such writing should ‘count’ towards research output and measures of academic esteem and begins to challenge elitist strangleholds on knowledge production and dissemination.

### From new theories to new practices

This issue was proposed to draw together new thinking on the complexities of being online. The aspiration was that this would provide a counterpoint to the descriptive, case-based research being reported elsewhere and we believe that it has succeeded in this aim. Explorations of the theories and practices of virtual learning have much to offer debates about an ontological turn in education and to efforts to rethink pedagogies. As Bayne argues in this issue, being online is a 'privileged mode' rather than an enhancement to or replacement of being a learner in more conventional offline spaces. Authors in this volume have not only illustrated this privilege in numerous ways, but have also begun to ask new and provocative questions about relationships between teachers, learners and knowledge generation in the twenty-first century.

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