Students' Experiences of e-learning: a Virtual Ethnography into Blended Online Learning

Simone Krüger

Edge Hill

Krugers@edgehill.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses results of research-in-progress into students' experiences of e-learning at Edge Hill, which has derived from the researcher's virtual ethnographic research and active participant-observation during a blended online module, which was modeled on a social constructivist learning approach. In my ethnographic analyses, two broad themes emerged, namely motivational issues pertinent to e-learning in general, and issues of identity formation in asynchronous discussions. Focusing on both aspects, this paper aims to illuminate e-learning's potential for enhanced learning among self-motivated learners and those participants who succeeded in building motivation as a result of constructing social identity.

Keywords

Experience, virtual ethnography, motivation, asynchronous discussion, identity, gender

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses results of research-in-progress into students' experiences of e-learning at Higher Education and conceptualises the relationships between learning technologies and their capacity towards enhancing students' experiences. For this, I have been conducting virtual ethnographic research into a MA distance learning module entitled 'The Pedagogy of e-learning' since September 2005. While my approach involved qualitative research methods, in particular my active participant-observation in the e-learning environment, I aimed at becoming a cultural insider and viewing the situation from an emic perspective, which enabled me to reflect on my own personal experiences of e-learning. This approach allowed me also to participate together with other students in online discussions and to understand participants' complex and entwined experiences.

The module has been part of Edge Hill's CPD postgraduate programme and aimed at examining the relationships between pedagogies and learning theories within e-learning contexts. Ten adult students enrolled on this module, of which most were staff members at Edge Hill with a larger number of female than male participants. The module was delivered by supported online learning, using a Virtual Learning Environment WebCT. The course itself was structured into ten units, which included tutor-written materials, together with links to internet resources, e-journals and e-books. Adopting a social constructivist model of learning facilitation, the module utilised a series of activities, which required participants critically to reflect on their own teaching practice, while using the online discussion board facility (Figure 1). These asynchronous discussions were complemented by four face-to-face sessions, in order to support participants at critical points in the module.

The particular design of this learning environment clearly enhanced a high level of active participation and self-reflexivity of the participants, and met the generic design goals for creating constructivist learning environments (see Lefoe 1998:458), which included endogenous, exogenous and dialectical constructivist approaches (Dalgarno 2001). Hypertext and hypermedia, for instance allowed increased learner control and the opportunity to discover knowledge through active participation. The context has been realistic, for it drew on participants' real engagement as teachers and students. At the same time, the module utilised direct instruction, yet with learner control over the sequence and selection of content, whereby activities provided opportunities to put knowledge into practice and receive feedback, which came predominantly from fellow participants utilising the discussion board. Thus the idea of cooperation and collaboration was deeply anchored in the module's design, particularly through utilising asynchronous discussions (Figure 1).

The results for this paper have been drawn mostly from participants' postings on the discussion board during the first five weeks of the module, which surprisingly emerged as a particularly rich data source for ethnographic analysis. Participants were astoundingly vociferous in reflecting on not only academic issues, but also on their own, very personal e-learning experiences, both positive *and* negative. Certainly, the demography of participants (mature professionals) enhanced their willingness to conduct a high level of critical self-reflexivity, furthered by the module's particular content, which focused on issues pivotal to understanding the experiences of participants

in e-learning environments. In my ethnographic analyses, two broad themes seemed to emerge, namely motivational issues pertinent to e-learning in general, and issues of identity formation in asynchronous discussions. In the following, I will discuss both issues in detail while drawing on the voices of participants.
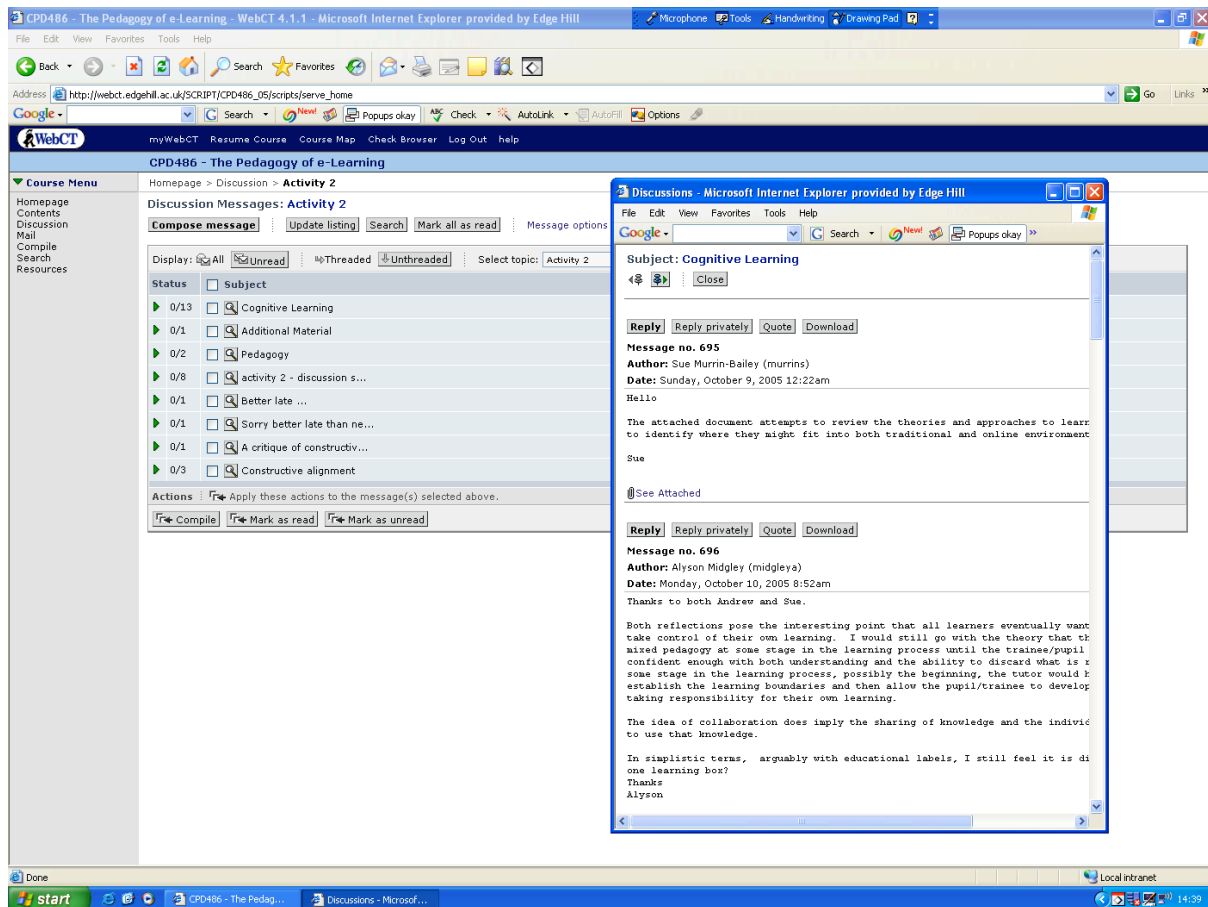

Figure 1: Discussion board, which shows created threads for activity 2 (large screen), and examples of participants' individual contributions (small screen)

MOTIVATION IN CONSTRUCTIVIST E-LEARNING

Enhancing independence through e-learning

As indicated earlier, the module has adapted a social constructivist model of learning facilitation, which is often deemed suitable for a more advanced phase of knowledge acquisition (Mergel 1998). A learning environment designed for constructivist learning must thereby facilitate the learning process and (subjective) self-evaluation of the learner. In this way, e-learning can delegate responsibility for learning away from the instructor and towards learners themselves, enabling them freely to explore and take control of their own learning, while enhancing self-directedness and independence. According to one participant,

> …there is still this need for the learner to be guided and to know if they are progressing towards the right goal. I suppose that the tutor is the security blanket. I like the notion that e learning can promote independence. [Alyson Midgley, Posting 702, 15 October 05]

During research, participants often commented on the heightened level of self-reflexive, thus enhanced learning experienced in this module. I often heard that participants printed all texts, including the discussion postings in order to highlight and comprehend pivotal points. The often lengthy postings reflected participants' thorough engagement with the subject matter. While this approach may loose some spontaneity, taking the time to absorb others' contributions and recommended readings certainly enhanced deeper processes of thinking and critical self-reflexivity. Through the constructivist model, participants could be led to a different way of thinking in order to see the 'bigger picture', rather than merely focusing on what is required for assessment. This way, most participants felt to have had a deeper, long-lasting learning experience. According to one participant,

> …preparing for and contributing to the weekly tasks and reading and responding to others has had a huge impact on my knowledge of e-learning… What it lacks in immediacy, it makes up for in

thoughtful postings from a group of individuals that surely must constitute a fantastic, collective resource… Another distinctive feature of e-learning is that it does make you take a long, hard look at yourself as a learner. [Lindsey Martin, Posting 745, 30 October 05]

Yet at the same time, e-learning is primarily intended for the individual learner with tasks to be individually completed. Thus online work and interaction are typically anonymous. While constructivist e-learning can enhance a greater level of student independence and individuality, this may only be suited to students with high level commitment, which according to some participants, usually are mature part-time students,

> Whilst I accept with most of our full time undergrads… tend to prefer the "traditional" lecture/seminar f2f model, this is not always the case with P/T Undergrads who have additional constraints whereby the greater flexibility that e-learning offers provides an educational solution… In the main the majority are also mature students in full-time employment and they tend to view their continued education differently to their younger full-time counterparts. There is also a greater element of self-direction, confidence, personal reflection and motivation across these P/T cohorts.' [Sue Murrin-Bailey, Posting 705, 13 October 05]

> My experience of working with part time and mature students [and as one myself] is that for the most part, there is more dialogue and collaboration with and between them as they actively test their understanding of new information. These are traits that seemingly lend themselves well to e-learning… [Lindsey Martin, Posting 707, 13 October 05]

Thereby constructivist e-learning does depend on a high level of independent learning and seemed to suit the mature participants, who brought with them some kind of self-imposed, intrinsic or 'self-regulating' (Alyson Midgley, Posting 712, 15 October 05) motivation. The key to their motivation was to achieve a pre-determined goal, while focusing on what is required and expected for assessment, and these participants seemed to pursue—without going astray—this goal with success. Participants succeeding in this way never commented on feelings of isolation or alienation. On the contrary, these self-motivated participants expressed a kind of satisfaction of being an isolated learner.

Motivation as a social construct

Yet only certain participants actively participated in the online discussions, while at the same time commenting on strong feelings of exposure and inhibition, for instance 'students sometime find it hard to express their views if they think they may be incorrect' (Alison Peters, Posting 720, 22 October 05), or 'on this course, I feel more accountable and exposed, as what is posted hangs around in the public forum' (Lindsey Martin, Posting 745, 30 October 05), particularly in situations of not knowing the audience. It seemed that some participants strongly felt under peer pressure and often commented on feeling isolated and being anxious about the loss of stimulus, contact and support from peers. To these participants, motivation seemed to depend on meaningful social interactions, of being a member of an online group. I often read that participants needed constant reassurance, praise and reward from others as a kind of motivational stimulus, as the following quotations show,

> I know that I have spent a couple of days checking whether anyone has replied to my contribution and have felt that perhaps my contribution has taken the wrong track. [Alyson Midgley, Posting 723, 24 October 05]

> Some students need constant reassurance that they are doing the 'right' thing. [Gail Burton, 26 October 05]

At the same time, some participants often stressed the fact that learning is a social activity and it may be questionable whether e-learning can compensate for—or even substitute—physical social interaction. Thus to many learners, motivation in learning derives not only from self-regulation, but is socially constructed. According to one participant,

> …perhaps e-learning is not readily engaged by some because face-to-face teaching may offer the social inclusion they lack outside. I have engaged with many of my students on this notion and they freely express that it is not just about learning in class, they "love" to see their class colleagues too. This may even extend to class colleagues becoming friends and meeting for lunch beyond face-to-face sessions. [Brian Smith, Posting 684, 4 October 05]

NEGOTIATING IDENTITY IN E-LEARNING

Speak up! Inhibition and disinhibition

It is often assumed that discussion groups are usually dominated by 'stronger' students. Yet in my research, I found that some participants who dominated discussions during face-to-face sessions did not necessarily find a voice to engage in discussions online. Being text-based, online discussions usually allow only those with stronger literate skills and experiences to feel confident more easily. In this way, discussion boards may become spaces, in which otherwise silent voices can now be audible. According to one participant,

> I have found many face-to-face classes in my own education career… to be quite frankly disappointing. Dominated by a tutor, or by a vocal student, I cannot make my point. I take longer to think through issues and cannot engage comfortably in the give-and-take of verbal discussion. I worry after the session about what I could have said… Hence my interest in asynchronous online discussion. [Andrew Sackville, Posting 727, 25 October 05]

> If I am honest too, I prefer to be an *invisible learner...* I think it appeals to my auditory sense of learning as well as allowing me to simulate what I feel is relevant. [Alyson Midgley, Posting 756, 7 November 05]

Yet other participants frequently struggled with written communication and reflected vociferously on their difficulties, for instance,

> Despite the quality of contributions and the thoroughness of the replies and discussion I've found it very hard to get into the activity. Having spent much of the day staring at the screen… [John Dickinson, Posting 713, 16 October 05]

> …I also am aware that my wording does not always convey the understanding that I might have or indeed be too simplistic. [Alyson Midgley, Posting 715, 17 October 05]

> My experience so far would confirm this – I can't create a tone of voice on a screen!' [John Dickinson, Posting 726, 24 October 05]

Contrary to the 'disinhibition effect' (Suler 2005) often observed in online environments, these participants indeed experienced a high level of inhibition by struggling with formulating effective written communication. Some participants suggested that text lacks many valuable communicative features and cannot clearly convey let's say, humour or frustration. Within this context, participants showed significant concern about mutual misunderstandings caused by the tone of the message and unclear written comments. Most participants agreed that in e-learning, many important non-verbal clues are simply missing. Some reflected on feeling awkward about not knowing what participants' reactions to one's own posting may be, or whether a reply had been too critical that would perhaps upset the other participant. Some participants worried about not matching other participants' input. Frequently questions were raised, such as: How might one's posting be perceived? Will it be perceived as rubbish? May it be insulting? Will it be understood?

Furthermore, the constructivist model of learning depends on the human interactions of learners, yet some participants emphasised that social construction cannot be developed through academic discussion alone, and that the use of web-based material always demands some kind of language formality. In such discussions, participants were often hesitant to reveal personal information. Thus, if e-learning environments only provide spaces for sharing academic discourse, they inevitably lack social possibilities, and besides their potential for flexibility and enhancement of critical self-reflexivity, thus 'deeper' learning, students often find themselves isolated, or perhaps even alienated. 'In the end, the learner is "alone"' (Alyson Midgley, Posting 693, 6 October 03).

Negotiating gendered identities

Thus participants in online courses may only succeed if they know each other well, and if the learning environment becomes a space in which mutual trust and support can be developed. During my research, I observed that particularly female participants were successful in becoming 'more comfortable with one another, in sharing ideas and experiences so less intimidating and stimulating' (Lindsey Martin, Posting 746, 31 October 05]. In order to succeed in e-learning, participants need to build trust and maintain motivation, and must develop a strong sense of identity within the group and a strong need to participate as a strong member. The success of female participants in my research may have resulted from their ability more easily to adapt to new ways of learning, while at the same time to negotiate and renegotiate their identity. Thereby the female participants

showed greater flexibility and intuition necessary to form trusting and supportive online relationships. By contrast, some male participants found it hard to engage with peers and suggested 'I rather do my own thing!'

Establishing such online relationships of mutual trust and support often involved representing oneself as being 'human', for instance by posting direct positive replies to another participant's contribution, which seemed greatly to contribute towards developing 'a sense of knowing the other participants and a sense of connectedness to the group' (Lindsey Martin, Posting 769, 19 November 05). To provide one example,

> Sorry to be late joining the party, as it were… The… [reason] has been my experience when faced with engaging with activity 2 and contributing to the discussion board. [John Dickinson, Posting 713, 16 October 05]

> Hi John, Not as late as me! Your experience mirrors mine as I have been struggeling with getting my thoughts together with this activity… [Lindsey Martin, Posting 713, 16 October 05]

> Hi John, reading your piece on a Monday morning, I can empathise with your problems of engagement… [Alyson Midgley, Posting 715, 17 October 05]

> Hi John, Don't worry you are not as late as me… [Alison Peters, Posting 718, 22 October 05]

> Thanks for your support regards john [John Dickinson, Posting 724, 24 October 05]

Some participants frequently commented that women are simply better at 'gossiping'. Inserting more personal and reflexive comments and being conversational in style certainly helped establish a picture of the personality of participants and significantly shaped the atmosphere of the discussion. Thereby acknowledgement has probably been the most important aspect in these online discussions, for participants often needed direct responses and replies in order to negotiate their own identity as a successful learner. Perhaps for this reason, predominantly female participants seemed to dominate the discussions by submitting activities first, 'having said everything that needs to be said' (Alyson Midgley, Posting 771, 22 November 05). Some participants compared this to some form of internal group leadership, others (particularly a male participant) even found this behaviour to be threatening, commenting for instance,

> …you pose the question what impact do your early posts have on others – well as Wellington (slightly misquoted) said, "I don't know what effect they have on the enemy but, by God, they frighten me!" [John Dickinson, Posting 774, 23 November 05][1]

By contrast, male participants did not succeed as easily as their female counterparts in mastering the new challenge imposed through this constructivist e-learning model. According to one participant,

> What I really want to say is… Who cares? You're all sad techno anoraks who need to get out and get a life. You log on at all hours of the day and night: where are your families, your interest in people who need contact and care and nurturing? When did you last attend a concert of live music rather than download it? Now is my tongue in my cheek…, or not? Please accept my resignation from your club. I cannot be a member in a club that accepts members like myself. [John Dickinson, Posting 774, 23 November 05][1]

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[1] After receiving participants' feedback about this paper, John showed some concern about the quotes and asked me to add a footnote. He stated, 'I was trying to be funny on both occasions and I am concerned the 'anorak' quote in particular comes over as hostile. This ambiguity was the point I was trying to make - who can really tell what is meant'.

Perhaps male participants need to come to terms with an innate need or particular wish to reaffirm their 'real-life' identity, marked by a particular professional status and masculine objectivity. The inner turmoil in search for an online identity of one male participant is clearly reflected in a final statement,

> I think there is a huge question unasked or unanswered about how and when we consider ourselves a member of an on-line group. It can be the same with a face-to-face group, yes, - but humans are social animals and there are many ways of defining and determining membership. I've always been persuaded by Tajfel's social categorization model of the importance of group membership where our standing and self-esteem are a consequence of the perceived status of our 'in-group'. Is such a social reality experienced in an online community? [John Dickinson, Posting 726, 24 October 05]

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have aimed at illuminating the experiences of mature students participating during the first five weeks of an online module, which focused on a social constructivist approach to learning. In my research, I have found that the online environment has been particularly suitable to enhance in participants a high level of active participation, (subjective) self-evaluation and deeper processes of learning. Thereby e-learning can promote and enhance independence and individuality through an increased self-responsibility for learners' own learning. Learning technologies thereby can greatly contribute towards enhancing students' learning experiences. In my ethnographic analyses, two broad themes emerged, namely motivational issues pertinent to e-learning in general, and issues of identity formation in asynchronous discussions. Focusing on both aspects, this paper tried to illuminate e-learning's potential for enhanced learning among self-motivated learners and those participants who succeeded in building motivation as a result of constructing social identity.

Thereby I found that only those participants experienced success in their e-learning, who brought with them high levels of self-regulated or goal-oriented motivation. Other participants however, strongly relied on motivation as a social process, through which they negotiated and renegotiated their learner identity. These participants frequently mentioned feelings of alienation and isolation in e-learning environments, together with inhibition to contribute to online discussions. They only succeeded in their learning, if they found effective ways to communicate online and to make their voices heard, which (in this research) worked out for the female participants, who, through verbally cherishing, acknowledging, responding and replying, were successful in creating trusting and supportive relationships with one another. In this way, the online environment became a space in which otherwise silent voices could also be heard, yet it excluded those who felt 'outside' the social group.

Due to time constraints, this research has been conducted during the first five weeks of the module only, yet to some extent the results already reflect a significant potential for virtual ethnographic research, which may clearly help to come to a conclusion about students' experiences of e-learning. I suggest that virtual ethnographic research enables the researcher more easily to understand students' experiences. For instance, besides writing personal reflections, I have been able to access a whole array of information due to 'ready-made' discussion boards, which emerged as rich data source for ethnographic analysis. Due to its inherent flexibility in form of access and participant-observations, which could be conducted at any time, virtual ethnographic research proved far less time- and labor-intensive as traditional modes of research, which usually require the personal and 'real-time' presence of the researcher. At the same time, the conclusions drawn from my analyses have contributed significant insights and knowledge about learner motivation and identity formation in online environments. While this project will be continued, my research-in-progress has thus shown that virtualising the ethnographic research mode may greatly enhance our understanding of the learner's perspective.

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