Is there a difference?:
Contrasting experiences of face to face and online learning

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Summary

In this paper we examine the differences and similarities of the participants' experiences in working in face to face and online learning environments. The descriptions of experiences in collaborative assessment are particularly revealing, in that the emotional content associated with the process is shared by the participants of both environments. We point out a difference in the way the online participants communicated with each other and believed that they had become more interpersonally aware and more interpersonally effective. This leads us to consider to what extent the online environment can support the extension of interpersonal communication skills, as equally or in greater ways than face to face. The work on Derrida on the speech/writing dichotomy, has provided a framework of analysis to understand writing as an equal form of communication for the expressions of thoughts and feelings.

Background

The MA in Management Learning at Lancaster University is a two year part time programme for professionals in management education and development. In the main, participants are computer literate but unfamiliar with communications technology other than standard e-mail. All of the participants attend six residential workshops spaced throughout the two years and in between they work in tutorial groups or 'sets' usually comprising 5 students plus one tutor. The intended purpose for the sets is to provide support for each individual to choose, plan and write course assignments as well as to discuss matters of interest arising from either the programme itself or from people's work or career experience. The sets are also part of the assessment process of the programme, which is collaborative and involves peer, self and tutor assessment of each assignment.

Participants chose during each workshop whether to work in a set that will 'meet' face to face or 'online' in Lotus Notes. The face to face groups meet together for a part day once every 5/6 weeks, very often in the place of work of one of the set members. The online groups, on the other hand, meet on a continuous basis in both their 'set' conferences plus in a general group conference which is open to every one on the programme. In this paper we will explore the nature of the difference in experience between those participants that chose to work in face to face sets and/or in online sets.

Methodology

The basis of this research is phenomenographic and draws on individual interviews, focus groups and observations of both face to face and online environments. Marton explains phenomenography as a research approach for understanding people's ways of experiencing the world. He defined it as:

> The empirical study of the differing ways in which people experience, perceive, apprehend, understand, or conceptualise various phenomena in, and aspects of, the world around them. (Marton 1994: 4424)

The aim of phenomenography is thus to describe qualitatively different ways of experiencing phenomena, in this case the experience of working in the two learning environments (face to face and online). The phenomenographic emphasis on *variation* of experiences is particularly suited to this research, as we aim to examine the differences and similarities of participating in the two learning environments.

Methods

This study examines the experience of one particular cohort of 18 participants. The interviews ranged from half an hour to one hour in duration and began with a request for the participant to talk about their experience of working in each learning environment. It is a feature of phenomenography to follow the line the interviewee is taking and bring in questions that provoke spontaneous reflection by the respondent on their own experience. The focus groups involved two informal sessions with a mix of face to face and online participants. This technique was used in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the experience and emotional content associated with the process of collaborative assessment.

Richardson (1999) in a recent evaluation of phenomenography research in education, argues for more attention to be paid to accounts given by participants in real-life situations. We believe the use of observation in the natural setting provides a richer perspective on accounts of experience which complements the interview. We conducted random, non participant observations in both the face to face setting during workshops and set meetings, and in the online settings during online interaction.

Differences and similarities

This section describes what participants told us about their experiences of working in either or both learning environments. The issues raised by the participants were related to the choosing, planning, writing and assessing their assignments and their experience of these processes in their chosen learning environment. An illuminating way of looking at these descriptions is to note the words that participants used during the interviews. The table below already provides some hints on the contrasting experiences of working in a face to face and online learning set.

Face to face	Online
"laugh" "high energy" "chatting" "spontaneity" "enthusiasm" "immediacy" "social" "emotion"	"jokes" "chatting" "crystallisation of thought" "reflection" "exciting" " rich dialogue" "flexible" "fun" "emotion"

Table 1: Language used by the participants

The table also shows some striking similarities, particularly related to the emotions experienced in both environments, as we will examine and discuss in more detail later on in the paper.

The face to face experience

In the face to face environment it appears that participants valued the social dimension of seeing each other, of chatting, of laughing and the immediacy of communication. The following statement describes in vivid language this experience:

> "I think the advantages in face to face are not to me learning advantages, particularly, there are other social advantages…The immediacy of peoples' responses, people are obliged to give you a quick response, pick up on signals that people give out that helps you draw people's ideas more, tone of voice, peoples' ideas are bouncing at each other in that room. You can see peoples' faces… In face to face, there is a build of energy, fun conversations escalates and becomes enthusiastic and exciting, there is laugh and people' body languages, and I value all of this very highly" (Glenda)

Participants who had not experienced the online environment seemed, none the less, to be aware that they had less contact with their set members. They spoke of how they believed that in the online sets, there was more sharing of ideas, work progress seemed more continuous, structured and timely. Interestingly, though these participants seemed to acknowledge the perceived disadvantages of their chosen environment they did also feel positive about working face to face. They believed that having regular meetings gave them a sense of good discipline, a sense of doing OK in their work and particularly a sense of not being on their own. They also speculated that through the process of writing in the online environment, spontaneity of ideas was lost and that communication became more formalised and time consuming.

The online experience

Quite a few participants had the perception that, in contrast to face to face communication, the online environment was likely to be a cold and lonely environment. However, the descriptions of

experiences from the online participants seemed to indicate the opposite. These participants felt that there was a sense of caring, and that chatting and humour as well as the 'village hall' (the general conference used for chat and exchanges not related to the completion of assignments), were mechanism for building relationships with people. One face to face participant who had observed some online interactions pointed out the following:

> "There is also quite a strong social dimension to it. Specially in the early stages a lot of the discussion was nothing to do with work... It seems to be possible to have discussion about anything really in exactly the same way as you would in a face to face set" (Peter)

It is interesting to mention here Derridas' work on the writing/speech dichotomy and particularly the notion of 'presence'. Derrida, we believe, provide us with a framework to understand the reason why online communication is often perceived as a cold and lonely learning environment, and somehow an inferior way of communication as we discuss later on in the paper.

The online participants reported that discussions were more reflective, and the dialogue richer than in the face to face setting. They expressed feeling a sense of working progress and continuous contact and feedback from the members of the set. Probably one of the most significant aspects of participants' experience in both environments is related to the feelings generated during the collaborative assessment process. Collaborative forms of assessment occupy unusual education territory. In addition to challenging conventional cannons of academic assessment, such approaches offer the potential to generate insights into individual and group behaviour in a crucial area of educational practice. We would consequently like to explore and contrast the emotional experience involved in operating in both face to face and online collaborative assessment.

The emotional experience of collaborative assessment

One of the intended purposes in the programme is, amongst other things, to encourage and support participants to become more critically reflective about their own practice in the professional context. This partially involves the development/extension of the necessary 'skills' to be supportive to fellow learners, whilst at the same time developing their skills in critically evaluating their work and those of others. This challenging process also involves the ability to articulate, recognise and check both their own and each others' feelings and thoughts. Working in sets and particularly during the process of assessing, is then a key opportunity to develop these skills. The intention of this section is thus to explore and contrast the emotional dynamics involved in face to face and online assessment. For some students, engaging in collaborative assessment is often emotional, anxiety provoking and at times painful as the following extracts from both face to face and online participants highlight:

Face to face experience:

> "There was a feeling of uncertainty. You feel a part of yourself is being exposed and being assessed, so there is a vulnerability" (Debbie)

Online experience:

> "The whole experience was very emotive, I felt pretty distressed about it" (Helen)

Vince (1996) argues that any consideration of learning needs to take account of the emotions experienced by learners in the learning context. Thus an experiential course should by it very nature touch participants' emotions. Of the radical attempt to address learner-teacher power relations within experiential learning he says:

> Approaches to learning that break free of dependency on the teacher, and place emphasis on the responsibilities of the learner, always create anxiety. (Vince, 1996:121)

The above accounts show the dissonance experienced by some participants. In the sense that participants felt unsettled and experienced uncertainty and anxiety. However, what is interesting to observe is that with the online discussion, the participants ultimately viewed the learning provoked by their experiences very positively.

> "On reflection it allowed me to develop two things, ... the ability to self assess subjectively, objectively and to think about the process... this sponsored interesting debates"(Alan)

Whilst the face to face illustration provide insights into continued uncertainty and fear.

> "My second experience was very difficult ... we seemed to go back to square one. We only had a brief discussion about the assessment process during the meeting before we circulated our essays, we did not agree on the process or criteria. It was just disappointing" (Glenda)

The experience of emotions in relation to assessment, is strikingly similar in both learning environments. However, it appears that the online participants perceived the process of assessment as a positive learning outcome. This difference in perception lead us to explore whether the intrinsic characteristics of the online environment enabled participants to become more aware of the interpersonal skills needed, to deal particularly with the challenges and emotions experienced during the assessment process.

Is there a difference?

We found that the participants who had chosen the online option for most of the sets, gave more reflective accounts during the interviews on how they have evolved ways to communicate with each other. The depth of these accounts was greater than those from the accounts of those participants that had only ever chosen the face to face option. The online participants were more likely to articulate the ways they believed they had 'learnt' to check other participants feelings and thoughts, and the way they had 'learnt' to express their own feelings and thoughts in the online environment. In several cases they spoke of how they believed they had become more interpersonally aware and more interpersonally effective.

The following entry demonstrates how one participant checked meaning with other participant to avoid misunderstanding.

> "If I am not sure what someone means, what the emotion that goes with a particular message is then I ask them. I reply with a message that says, do you mean this or do you mean this? Can you tell me a little bit about how you are feeling about it? so as long as I remember to surface those issues and deal with them" (Alan)

And how they had learnt to identify other people's feelings.

> "I have found that when you are working with people for a period of time you start to read far more than the words on the page. You get to understand the tone, the whole message and that builds over time just as a face to face relationship" (Alan)

> "I think people are beginning to be able to read how I am feeling because of the way I structure my words, anecdotes and things that go with it" (Brian)

We need to take into account that generally the participants on this programme, because of their professional background, are very often already experienced and skilful practitioners in the art of interpersonal communication. It seemed clear that when working in the online environment, the participants were applying skills already learnt in their professional practice. There was also an indication that working in the online space encouraged participants to rethink their interpersonal practice in the writing of their assignments as well as in face to face interactions. As one participant said:

> "During the last set actually I did not set out to write a paper that conveyed emotions and nuances neatly, but ended up spending a lot of time making damn sure that my paper did convey the emotions and nuances I wanted to say as neatly as I could possible do it" (Terry)

It seemed to us that the online environment supported the 'extension' and 'transfer' of interpersonal skills in ways that the face to face environment did not. It appears that the intrinsic characteristics of the online environment (i.e. asynchronous and text based) allowed people to be aware of their own and other people's contributions and to reflect upon the process of expanding their interpersonal skills. In addition the perception that the online environment may be more open to misunderstandings –due to lack of non verbal cues– might have encouraged participants to be careful about the use and choice of words as well as about the tone and frequency of their messages. The different challenges experienced from working in the online space, seemed to positively encourage participants to rethink their interpersonal practice. It could be argued that the face to face groups were not as confronted with the 'difficulties' of the intrinsic characteristics of online communication, since the environment they chose to work in was more familiar and consequently less overtly challenging. It is our belief that as well as the asynchronous nature of the online environment, writing as opposed to speech, is potentially a significant issue in trying to understand this difference in experience.

Writing versus speech

One of the reasons given by participants for choosing the face to face setting was because of the perceived coolness, loneliness and difficulty to convey emotions in the online setting. There is somehow an explicit and implicit assumption that speech is a superior form of communication, particularly if looking at communication that involves feelings and emotions. However, as we have shown, the experience of the online participants not only differs with this assumption, but it also points out to ways of enhancing interpersonal skills. At this point the work of Derrida (1967) on the speech/writing opposition is particularly illuminating and relevant to our argument.

Derrida confronts the argument for the priority of speech over writing which he claims is existent in Western thinking. He argues that through three millennia of Western philosophy from Plato and Aristotle to Rousseau, Hegel, Husserl and others, philosophers have emphasised speech as the privileged medium of meaning. Speech is superior to writing because it is seen as being closer to thought; whereas writing is seen as a weak extension of speech and a pernicious threat to the true carrier of meaning. Derrida claims that the notion of 'presence' underpins central assumptions of Western philosophy such as the meaning of 'being', 'truth' and 'reality'. Presence can be spatial (same place) and temporal (same time). In speech the speaker and the listener have to be present in space and time, however writing operates on absences and it is mediated. Derrida argues that the 'essence' of writing is the ability to order and articulate our perceptions and comprehension of the world, and not merely the script form of language. Thus, according to Derrida, writing is then not less natural and authentic than speech, writing does not follow speech but instead writing and speech are continuous and evolving processes. Derrida's theory of writing 'deconstructs' established canons and it encourages us to rethink the privilege of speech over online communication.

Conclusion

In this study we identified that collaborative assessment is a highly emotional process which is experienced by participants in both learning environments. However participants of the online environment appeared to become more interpersonally aware and more interpersonally effective in the ways they communicate with each other, in particular in relation to the expression of emotions. It is our view that the enhancement of these skills is partially provoked by being involved in the process of assessment and by working in the online environment. Derrida's work challenges the writing/speech opposition and brings in a radical way of understanding online communication. If we see writing as close to feelings and thoughts as we see speech, we can also speculate that the online environment –in perhaps a greater way than face to face– not only provides a milieu for the extension of interpersonal skills, but also provides a bridge to transfer these skills to other contexts of the professionals lives of the participants.

Acknowledgements

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