

# ***Life Behind The Screen: Taking the Academic Online***

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## **Abstract**

The prospect of taking academic life online offers a range of challenges and opportunities for staff and students in higher education. This paper focuses on some of the many transformative experiences encountered by academics in adjusting to, and participating in, networked learning environments. Moving on from our initial reluctance to ‘inhabit’ social networking spaces, we adopt the well-used metaphor of the screen to find a framework for evaluating and developing questions raised in an earlier paper. We use personal experiences of becoming disconnected from traditional practices while at the same time drawing on the familiar to enable an effective transition to networked learning. We have conceptualised our route as involving a projection towards a screen, adjusting our focus to negotiate barriers and optimise enablers. But before we are fully immersed in a virtual world, we still have a stake in the ‘real’ one. This has implications for our identity as academics when we find ourselves operating in both kinds of environment simultaneously. It affects language too as existing expressions become transformed or superseded to refer to new kinds of practice. It entails new relationships with time, where speed and lag both change the nature of the activities engaged in. And academic engagement itself must be looked at anew, amid competing demands for attention. Identity, language, time and engagement are viewed as both barriers and enablers in the movement from behind the screen to full participation online. We illustrate in the paper how we ourselves are adjusting to networked learning. We aim to capture snapshots of these transitional states to support our work as educational developers, anticipating a future where we have to take on roles as projectors of new forms of practice. The process is raising questions about the extent to which academics can or should replicate old practices, and how we disaggregate and re-aggregate academic habits and values. In exploring transformation in transition from traditional spaces to networked learning environments, we seek to highlight how academics are variously encouraged or discouraged, inspired or hindered, empowered or disconnected. A future paper will consider the implications of our roles as ‘projectors’ and complete our analysis of life behind, on and through the screen.

## **Keywords**

Screen, transformation, transition, academics, metaphor, language, identity, time, engagement

## **Introduction: the screen as metaphor**

In an earlier paper (Boon and Sinclair, 2009) we described our disquiet and discomfort in using social networking and its relation to networked learning. The first part of the title of that paper—‘A World I Don’t Inhabit’—was an expression picked up from a colleague in mathematics when we mentioned that we were exploring issues around Second Life and Facebook. Two years on, we are still thinking about our engagement with networked learning environments and felt that we should revisit the questions we raised in that previous paper. While we may still experience some disquiet in fully inhabiting these spaces, we are now participating more within them and have found the metaphor of the ‘screen’ has helped us to reframe our questions and move on.

Some might even argue that the modern ‘screen’ is not a metaphor; it refers to a physical item, a vital piece of hardware, that we all use in day-to-day life. Indeed, recent findings showed that adults spend roughly 8.5 hours a day—a large proportion of their waking life—looking at screens of one sort or another (Council for Research Excellence, 2009). Beyond the physical object, the ‘screen’ is a word with many connotations and denotations, offering us multiple ‘contextual overtones’ (Bakhtin 1981) to consider, some of which are metaphorical. The title of this paper intentionally echoes Sherry Turkle’s seminal work *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (1995), in which she prompts a range of associations (e.g. cinema, television, etc.) that might extend our analysis. These associations can have a powerful effect on academics’ perceptions of networked learning and, particularly, in how academics see themselves in relation to networked learners. For example, the play on words ‘screen or monitor’ in the title of a paper by Bayne and Land (2002) highlights issues of surveillance and power in the relationship between physical objects and their metaphorical associations. In this paper, we concentrate on the positive side of the screen metaphor rather than its Orwellian descendents, though the connection has to be acknowledged as we try to find the boundaries of our framework.

Our title deliberately adopts an alternative preposition to Turkle’s: we are looking ‘behind’ the screen, rather than ‘on’ it. More specifically, our focus here is on the transformation from ‘behind’ the screen to ‘on’ the screen with its attendant issues, challenges and opportunities. In a further paper, we will eventually extend this exploration to what happens ‘through’ the screen: a construction that we see as particularly relevant for the relationship between staff and students. Herein, however, we will focus on our experiences in engaging with online learning environments as both educators and students. In the two years following the publication of our previous paper, we have made progress in overcoming our initial feelings of discomfort and disquiet. However, the transition to online learners and educators has been neither simple nor seamless: rather we find ourselves surprised and intrigued by questions relating to our identities, the language that we use, our relationship with time and the ways in which we engage with online spaces. Reflecting on our own experiences, we will look more closely at these four sites of transition and transformation—identity, language, time and engagement—examining how they can represent both barriers and enablers and how they have shaped our actions ‘behind the screen’.

The transformative journey we embark on when we enter into networked learning environments is not unlike Alice’s journey in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871): we encounter all manner of people, situations and environments that may either attempt to replicate the familiar or provide totally alien experiences (e.g. Castronova, 2005; Wood and Smith, 2005; Bayne, 2008; Ball and Pierce, 2009; Boon and Sinclair, 2009). These experiences may challenge or trouble us, intrigue or entertain us, aid or inform us, but each of them singly or as a whole will go some way to transforming us and our relation to the world around us. Figure 1 below shows our conceptualisation of our own journeys and the relationships involved.

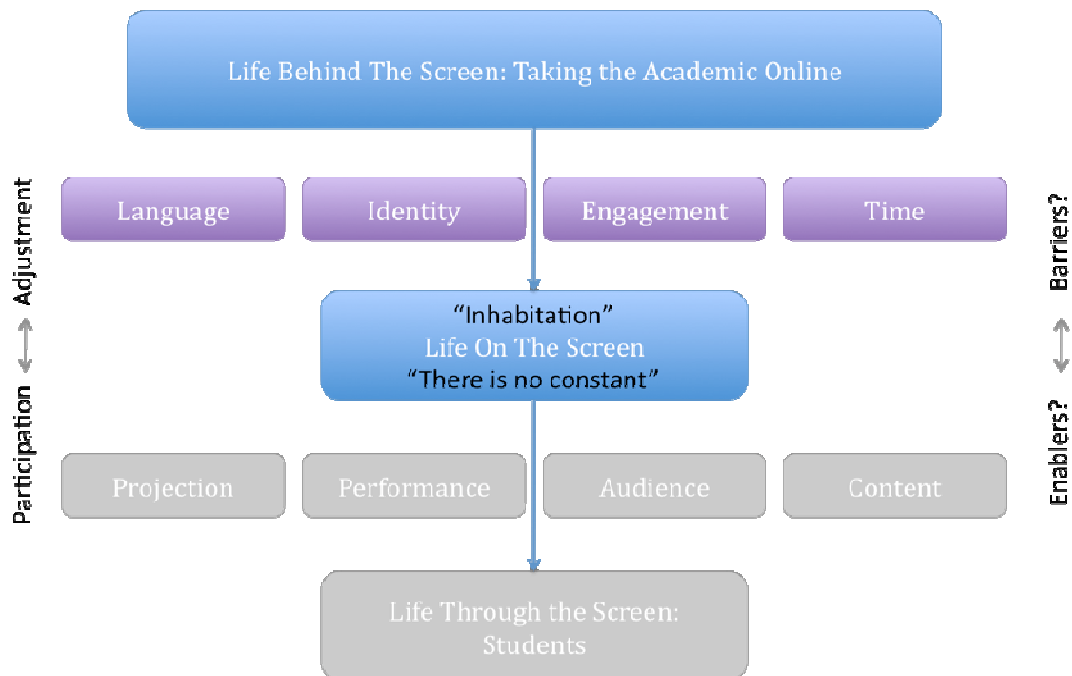


Figure 1.

As with our earlier paper, in this work, we use our own experiences as participants—as both students and educators—in online environments to illustrate and problematise these transformative experiences and encounters in networked learning. We use our immediate experience, recorded as reflections and as extracts from a [student's blog](#). This paper follows the journey of the first arrow in Figure 1 involving the transition from life behind the screen to 'Inhabitation' or life on the screen: we reserve the journey of the second arrow and its associated features for a future paper but are keen to anticipate it here.

Our use of the screen as both object and metaphor may be seen as an interaction with what Cousin (2005) describes as 'transitional objects'. Cousin points to the role of the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in providing a link between familiar, traditional classroom practices and the new opportunities afforded by networked learning. In our own experience, we have noted that there are a number of adjustments that academics must make in order to participate effectively in online worlds. As a transitional object, the screen—like Alice's looking glass—offers us passage through a liminal space in which our knowledge, our activities, and even ourselves are brought into conflict with the other. This transition and its concomitant transformation affect us directly, challenging the way we perceive and construct our world(s) and ourselves. In our own experience, for example, the seeming constants of language, identity, engagement and time were shown to be inconstant and made 'unfamiliar' through this transition or crossing. This inconstancy and unfamiliarity can be a very real barrier for academics and students alike. With one foot in the real and another in the virtual, users must come to terms with both difference and disquiet in order to participate effectively in networked learning environments.

### One foot in the real and one in the virtual: implications for identity

Identity in networked learning environments is an area of much interest, deliberation and debate (e.g. Mann, 2003). For many academics, the transition to networked learning involves a move from the familiar and comfortable identities and activities of traditional practice to a new arena of engagement wherein identity and activity must be re/constructed and re/negotiated. As we argued in our previous

paper, academics may well feel threatened by these processes and, in particular, by the need to edit identity. Amongst our colleagues, we still see open resistance to participation in online environments and not only with the more senior members of the academy.

As academics in networked learning environments, we find ourselves often inhabiting or simultaneously straddling two worlds. For many of us, as the reflections below illustrate, our roles, our work and our identities are in transition:

My day is divided now: in the morning I stand in front of a class full of students, teaching in a traditional classroom to a traditional audience, but in the afternoon I'm online and then it's all different—I'm a different 'kind' of teacher then with a different 'kind' of audience in a space that's anything but traditional.... The strange thing is that we're all the same people from morning to afternoon and, yet, somehow we're not. In the online discussions and activities, I've got one foot in the real and one in the virtual: I'm still the traditional teacher, but now I'm something else, someone else, as well. I'm stretching between the two. It has to be real and yet it's also unreal or virtual. In the end, it sometimes feels like I'm the thing that's become divided—or maybe multiplied.

What is clear is that working effectively in online spaces necessitates a willingness and conscious decision to engage with and accept both the opportunities and challenges offered by networked learning. This virtual blurring and re-focusing of identity, for example, simultaneously offers and threatens academics with potential changes in role, levels of engagement, and relationships between themselves and their students.

My relationship to the students is different as well. It is often surprising how different they are online. But then I'm different online as well. It's a new environment for us all, I think. But for the students, I suspect the virtual is much more 'home' to them than for me. For me, at this point in time, being there is still a challenge... but I see the opportunity too. It can still be strange from time to time. It's not uncomfortable usually—although I think it can be—but it requires a lot more work, a different kind of engagement, a different kind of knowledge, a different relationship and language. And, I guess, I'm still learning all that.

Taking the academic online thus requires a re-examination and perhaps even redefining of the academic identity. The learning journey from traditional to networked learning environments is a journey of change and transition: the challenge for educators is to be open to developing new ways of 'being' while taking advantage of opportunities for creating new relationships, roles and practices that augment and enhance our traditional work.

## Shifts in perspective transform our use of language

The metaphors we use to describe what is happening online reveal how we conceptualise what is going on. In looking from behind the screen and becoming ready to step through it, we are invoking a complex metaphor of place. We need to think about what is going on in the places we encounter. Goodfellow and Lea (2006) argue that academic work online should be recognised as sites of literacy practice. This conception entails that the new medium is not, as some people would claim, just a 'delivery truck' for content (Clark 1994), but rather is a place where identity and activity are constituted through textual exchanges. There are inevitable adjustments to be made, as illustrated by the following extract from a student's blog:

I'm thinking about speech acts - though I've known about these for over 30 years, I now have a new take on them. ... This issue [silence] is heightened online, through the whole idea of lurking and we're also very conscious of power structures and other effects such as the permanence of online text.

Not only is silence different online, we have given it a new name (lurking)—though it is one that is shot through with negative connotations from its previous associations. Because the student here is

clearly a (very) mature one, she has a wide repertoire of associations to draw on. The example shows how the 'new take' can be an enabler, seen as expanding current understanding. For some students, though, the challenge to what is in the existing repertoire might act as a barrier, especially if the new use has negative connotations. For some of their teachers, too, such a new use of old language can have the effect of extending a repertoire or threatening to topple it.

A different student (and, equally, a different teacher) might regard the online meaning of 'lurking' as the standard point of reference or definition. It might be the expression 'speech acts' (Austin, 1962) that is new to their repertoire. This student could also then have a 'new take' on silence. Arguably, the concept of lurking for the older student and the concept of speech acts for the younger could scaffold a similar new 'scientific' view of the everyday concept of silence (Vygotsky, [1934] 1987). Looked at in this way, learning how to bring the familiar and unfamiliar together has implications that apply to new forms of participation through technology as well as those encountered in the disciplines.

New meanings, new expressions and changed uses all have the potential to prompt a new take on something in the existing repertoire. At the point of encounter, there may be a response to this that is quickly forgotten. Another extract from the blog illustrates a point-of-encounter response and its theme is also pertinent to our deliberations in this paper. The initial stimulus for the reflections was a comment made by a respected colleague from another institution and an expert in e-learning. This was:

'Students should all be encouraged to use aggregators. It's an essential part of digital literacy.'

Aggregators are software or Web applications that collate web content such as RSS feeds. The comment about them prompted a set of responses recorded the following day in the blog:

It's important to record something I recognised yesterday as frequently happening to me as a student, not just of e-learning but always. Someone makes a valuable comment that potentially leads to a change in what I do and/or how I think about things—but I have a sequence of internalised responses that attempt to filter it before that happens. I think I can identify each one. They were experienced very rapidly—and they are part of the process in flight; that is they'll be forgotten when I've fully internalised it. I think I've captured all the stages below.

1. OMG, I don't do that.
2. Or do I? I perhaps do something a bit like it?
3. I didn't know it was called that.
4. I don't think I want to do it.
5. I'll find a rationale for not doing it.
6. Perhaps I should do it though.
7. I need to find out more about it - look it up, talk to other...
  
8. Well, X also suggested something on these lines but I hadn't picked up on it
9. I'm trying to imagine what it would be like doing this routinely and I'm slightly uncomfortable with the picture
10. I'm not sure that I'm the sort of person who does this
11. Here's a simile/metaphor for it [tickertape]

(Items 8-11 followed after further reflection on the following day.)

This extract illustrates how coming to terms with new ideas in a new medium uses previous knowledge of self, ideas and media in the attempt at assimilation. At the time of writing the present paper, the process of adopting an aggregator is still incomplete, but the word and its new use are becoming firmly established. Thus in revisiting concepts from a book that referred (challengingly) to the effects of 'disaggregation' (Brown and Duguid, 2002) with respect to information technology, a new connection was made to the authors' arguments. What began as a barrier is eventually becoming an enabler. And this observation has made us both ask questions about disaggregation and disintermediation from older forms of pedagogy that are followed by re-aggregation and re-intermediation with the new. We were

grateful to be alerted to potential shifts that are happening so quickly that they become second nature to some people before others even have the chance to encounter them.

## A time of change – and a change of time

Time, like identity and language, is invariably 'shifted' as we enter networked learning environments. One might argue that our relationship with time is one of the first things to undergo transformation when we participate in online spaces. To say that time is different online is to state the now obvious. There are frequent references in the student blog to this; here is a recent one highlighting a preference:

I've been very conscious of the synchronous/asynchronous dichotomy for a while, but it's starting to dominate my thinking at the moment.... I have concerns about dichotomies but they are often useful in pointing to an issue for exploration.... My own preference in learning is for the asynchronous—blogs, discussion boards, reading—over the synchronous—instant messaging, Second Life, talk. But I wouldn't like my whole life to be asynchronous! I love to meet people face to face and talk things through with them. Part of that pleasure, though, is knowing that the ideas will keep developing.

Information technologies, the Internet and the blending of asynchronous and synchronous communication make it possible for us to be perpetually networked. The online presence of the academic need never sleep. Our Facebook profiles, for example, are ever-present and very nearly immortal. We are virtually godlike, but at a cost. Here again opportunity and challenge, barrier and enabler, are intertwined. While the common complaint amongst academics that working online takes up too much of their time and effort certainly factors into the perception of time as a barrier to participation (Mac Keogh and Fox, 2008), our interest focuses on how time is transformed in networked learning environment and what temporal adjustments academics must make to function effectively in online spaces.

Networked learning provides us with the potential for unparalleled connectivity and new levels of engagement but at the cost of compressed time and increased complexity and fragmentation. In *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow Time in the Information Age*, Eriksen (2001) argues that our use of information technologies has led us to adopt a logic of acceleration wherein time and events are compressed forcing us to alter our relationship with time and with one another. Periods of slow time, where we can think and communicate without interruption, he suggests are ever diminishing, as more and more aspects of our lives are taken online.

In networked learning the 'tyranny of the moment' might be expressed as the constant pressure to be online and available, to be fast in responding to students' needs, and to always be up to date. Time in online environments is inherently fast time. Lag—a reduction of speed, which might also be seen as an expression of slow time—is not acceptable and a source of much frustration for users. This is closely connected to the cultural need to 'keep up', if not accelerate further, and can lead us to experience and perceive our own lives in the real world as lag. In that way, the virtual can begin to degrade the real, making it seem slow, uncoordinated, and out of touch. It is not uncommon, for example, to hear academics express the feeling that they should be online 24 hours a day and to even express guilt when operating in the real world. Statements like these can, in turn, lead others to dismiss the opportunities provided by networked learning environments, focusing only on the negative.

The challenge as academics is to find a balance between the demands of transformed time and the possibilities it provides us for facilitating and supporting student learning. We suggest that it may be important to acknowledge differing preferences in relation to time, especially in the synchronous/asynchronous spectrum to minimise barriers to participation, for example through under-engagement or over-engagement (Savin-Baden and Sinclair, 2010).

## Engagement in online practices

Networked learning very clearly changes the rules of engagement that we've grown accustomed to as traditional educators and traditional students. We have new environments, new means of communication, and new relationships to negotiate and contend with (e.g. Wallace, 2003; Wood and Smith, 2005; Anderson, 2009). Amongst our colleagues, this novelty and difference is to some an opportunity to side-step tradition and engage in creative discourses and undertake innovative projects, while for others it is troublesome and uncomfortable, time-consuming and onerous.

In our own experience, the move to networked environments of engagement has added an extra dimension to the way we interact both with students and staff. By engagement here we are not simply referring to academics acquiring the skills to 'put things online'; rather, we focus on social exchange—for example, the role of immediacy (e.g. Baker, 2010) and presence (e.g. Picciano, 2002)—which has implications for language and academic identity. Effective engagement offers a new track for learning, but requires some getting used to:

Engaging in a class or module online is significantly different, I would say. It feels different—it is a different kind of experience. I always feel like there's a lack of contact, or an imposed distance, but there's definitely less immediacy. It feels disembodied somehow. A little unreal. That throws things into confusion a bit for me.... I can engage fine, but it's not the same as face-to-face. I have to work harder to make sense of things. Maybe it is just a matter of getting used to it. I can see the point of it, thankfully, but I'm not sure I like the stress involved. I can see that it offers a different way of learning and it seems to work. I just need to find a way to make it less stressful and more meaningful for me.

Interestingly, the reflection above could be that of either a student or educator. As with other points of transition and transformation, engagement can be seen as an enabler, a barrier or both. Devoid of familiar signs, signals and processes, networked learning requires foremost a willingness to adjust and to engage and participate differently. Like identity, language or time, effective engagement in networked learning environments relies on our openness to learn new ways of thinking, of being and of practising.

## Discussion

These sites of transition and transformation—language, engagement, identity and time—may, as noted throughout, appear to us as both barriers and enablers. It is the position and stance of the individual academic that informs whether these sites are encountered as opportunities or challenges or both. We ourselves find that our experiences are variable: our language, the way we engage with one another, our relationship to time and even our understandings of ourselves are in near constant flux in these networked environments.

In order to function successfully in networked learning environments then, the academic must come to terms with this new alien landscape and, perhaps more importantly, find a place in it for themselves. Our own experience has shown that many academics still prefer—knowingly or otherwise—to replicate the 'real' in the virtual world, rather than unfetter themselves from tradition and the familiar and create new selves, constructs, relationships and opportunities for engagement. It may yet take time before we as a profession overcome the alienation and otherness of online spaces and fully embrace the potential offered therein.

Academics who cannot make the necessary adjustments may find their progress halted by these barriers. Those who can make the adjustments may find that those self-same barriers are transformed and become enablers, offering academics new opportunities for interaction and involvement in networked learning environments.

## Conclusions

Twenty-first century academic identity entails a number of roles. Both of us are simultaneously lecturers, researchers and students and educational developers who support other lecturers, researchers and students. We come from two generations, but there is a third generation now attending our university and we have to find appropriate ways of communicating with them. Like many of our colleagues, we are stepping out from behind the screen, but with a foot still in the old world.

Not only have we appropriated Turkle's metaphor of the screen; we have also revisited some of her concerns about the tensions between the virtual and the real. At the time, she wrote that in 15 years the meaning of the computer had shifted from 'a modernist culture of calculation toward a postmodernist culture of simulation' (Turkle, 1995: 20). Another 15 years has passed since then and we feel that we are now going beyond simulation toward projection of a new, albeit re-aggregated, reality. Like Turkle, we believe that as we do this, we should not leave behind our values as human beings. But there is now a new context and this may also demand a new set of values.

In the (re)aggregation processes that may be required for current digital literacy, we may be buying in (both financially and politically) to particular ways of viewing the world—and projecting those ways to other people. This is the subject of a future paper and a step beyond our attempt to 'inhabit' the virtual.

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