

# ***Disrupting the illusion of sameness: the importance of making place visible in online learning***

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## **Abstract**

This article challenges what the authors consider to be the potential for ‘illusions of sameness’ in online learning in higher education. Drawing on the work of Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2005) and Sidhu and Dall’Alba (2012) on disembodied education, and on work by Ross *et al* (2013) on ‘making distance visible’, the authors consider strategies for ‘bringing the outside in’ in digital education. If we accept that the local context of the student is important, and recognise the significance of bodies and embodied knowing, particularly in relation to professional practice, in online learning environments, the authors ask what strategies educators might adopt in terms of recognising and communicating bodies and locales in digital spaces. How might the illusion of sameness be disrupted? Two examples of disruption from the MSc in Digital Education at the University of Edinburgh are outlined: the participant map, and the digital postcard.

## **Keywords**

Place, space, cosmopolitanism, online learning, distance, visibility, difference, embodiment.

## **Introduction**

Online education environments and practices represent the bodies and contexts of students in a range of ways – for example, through the proliferation of visual icons and avatars, the pinning of geographical locations on digital maps, the text-based profile, and at the start of courses when teachers invite students to say something about themselves by way of introduction. These are times and settings when embodiment and place is acknowledged in an online learning context, but what meaning is made of these moments, by students and teachers? How quickly do they slip out of sight, to be replaced by an illusion of ‘sameness’ (James and Busher 2009), which allows the day-to-day business of the course to unfold without the disruptiveness of visiting and revisiting possible points of dissimilarity and inequality? In this short paper we propose that online teaching and learning practices may tend towards containing difference, maintaining an ‘inside’ in which equality and community is based on perceived sameness. This tendency is problematic because it is inherently limited in its ability to deal with and move beyond narratives of distance learning as disembodied learning. Online educators need strategies for designing and teaching courses that ‘bring the outside in’ by acknowledging and working with embodiment and locale in a sustained, critical way.

This paper emerges from work both authors have been doing on the meanings of place, space and time in online education. Sheail, in work in progress, argues that a continued emphasis on distance can be problematic when online learners may be as likely to be based on the university campus as on another continent, therefore requiring universities to develop a more nuanced understanding of ‘distance’ education. Indeed, other ways of conceptualising distance, such as in recent work by Ross *et al* (2013) on ‘making distance visible’ in online programmes, can open up opportunities for educators to recognise ‘nearness as effortful’ in distance learning (p64), and see that students’ engagement with their programmes and peers can and probably will oscillate over time. Ross *et al* make a case for giving students opportunities to ‘bridge their professional, personal and academic worlds’ (*ibid*), which Sheail, drawing on Rye and Stokken’s (2012) exploration of the local and global in online education, considers part of the student ‘locale’, influencing the *where* and *when* of digital education.

## **Education without bodies**

The problem with narratives of disembodied, placeless education is outlined by Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2005) and Sidhu and Dall’Alba (2012). Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2005) question the relationship between online learning and ‘embodied knowing’ (p726), suggesting that the ‘ostensible absence of the body’ in online learning

environments has the potential to ‘reinforce conventional learning models’ (p726) in which knowledge and skills are ‘decontextualised from the practices to which they relate’ (p720). Looking at international education and what the authors term ‘(dis)embodied cosmopolitanisms’, Sidhu and Dall’Alba (2012) critique what they perceive to be a dominant narrative of ‘...international education as a series of disembodied flows, largely unmediated by the practices of nation-states and simply a response to ‘globalisation’” (p414).

...conventional discourses about pedagogy and curricula for a globalised world have taken up a minimalist cosmopolitan imaginary based on the notion of a citizen of the world who moves freely across borders. (p419)

These narratives gloss over or elide the “complexities [students] encounter as raced and gendered subjects” (ibid), and normalise what should be contested - the globalisation and marketisation of education (ibid).

Viewing international education as an ‘export industry’, where host countries are given ‘brand identities’, Sidhu and Dall’Alba (2012) make a case for the replacement of what they call ‘corporate cosmopolitanism’ with a cosmopolitanism which is ‘embodied’ and ‘grounded’ (p428). However, Dall’Alba and Barnacle (2005) are clear that promoting embodied knowing does not require a process of ‘re-embodiment’ students who are ‘already embodied’ (p740). They argue rather that online course design should demonstrate an understanding of ‘the nature of human-technology relations’ and ‘the practices that are both encouraged and delimited’ by the use of technologies, with attention focused on ‘the ways of being, and of framing the world, that emerge’ (ibid). How these proposals might be put into practice is the focus of the rest of this paper.

## Encountering difference

In Massey’s (2005) work on the ‘making and contesting of time-spaces’, she describes a distinctive aspect of space as being ‘...the condition of both the existence of difference and the meeting-up of the different’, whilst going on to describe the ‘social organization of time-spaces’ (in this case using examples from her earlier research into the time-spaces of the laboratory and the home), as ‘...attempts to regulate...the range and nature of the adventures and chance encounters which are permissible.’ p180

If we think of each online environment as a temporal and spatial design for learning, where the ‘meeting up of the different’ is foregrounded, and bodies and locales are considered significant to the education space, what kind of environments and activities might we, as educators, develop? What are some ways this can be accomplished without over-privileging an agenda of disclosure, of “archival fixity” (Land and Bayne 2005, p172), that may work against the potential of the digital to offer new configurations of subject, object, language and place? Two examples of self-representation from a postgraduate digital education context – the MSc in Digital Education at the University of Edinburgh – may help illuminate some of the factors involved in ‘bringing the outside in’: the participant map; and the digital postcard.

### Mapping bodies

Digital maps may sometimes serve to mask or erase difference and specificity even while appearing to foreground it, by converting locale into a pin on a map. The MSc in Digital Education (formerly E-Learning)’s programme networking space offers a Google map, ‘Our World Map’, where students may add digital pins to places which are *important* for them. This is deliberately different from many tasks of this sort, where participants may be asked simply “where they live”, and the difference in the framing of the tasks has produced a richness of response that is revealing. Students (and staff) often choose more than one place to pin on the map, and the pins for the same student are not always in the same region or continent, emphasising the postgraduate demographic of the course – those students who have may have moved around over time between geographically distant places, but who maintain personal or professional connections with other places. Indeed, some students engage with the programme from a context of considerable mobility (Ross et al, 2013), taking advantage of its online nature to study on the move. To articulate these complex mobilities, many students have associated icons, text and, occasionally, images with the pins to elaborate on why each place that they map is of particular importance.



**figure 1: “our world map”, MSc in Digital Education**

In some cases mini-autobiographies begin to develop across the map. These are often presented with a temporal dimension, 'I lived here...'; 'I attended a conference here...'; 'I spend every other Wednesday here...'; 'As soon as I arrived...I knew I would love it' (student comments on 'Our World Map'). This layering of the map allows students to cross paths and travel continents, but also to show how they got from 'there' to 'here' and to indicate the micro journeys they make in their daily lives.

In this case the 'thickening' of the map is a texturing of geographical space, layered with a textual and visual narrative. However, and as one reviewer of this paper noted, this is a particular kind of map, chosen for its interactive potential, but also offering a particular representation of the world and a limited number of icons (digital 'pins', for example, referring to their analogue predecessors). In Dall'Alba and Barnacle's (2005) terms, the digital map brings with it a set of mapping practices and associations which are 'both encouraged and delimited', adapted and reframed by the technology. In the context of the current programme the map is offered as a social, autobiographical space, but it also offers many potential opportunities for discussion, exploration and critique in the context of a course.

In the next example, we look in more detail at the 'locations' of students.

### **Surround Sound**

As part of a 'New Geographies of Learning' research project at the University of Edinburgh, in which Ross was co-investigator, students on the MSc in Digital Education were invited to become research participants, and to generate narrative and visual data on themes of place, home, and institution. One form this data took was the "digital postcard", depicting a place from where participants commonly engaged with the programme. In order to reflect the multimodal nature of the programme, each postcard comprised a photograph, a short audio 'field recording', an explanatory message and a note of the geographical location presented within the visual and aural data. Using the data from the 21 digital postcards that were submitted, the researchers created short videos. These video postcards, subsequently 'pinned' by the research team to digital maps of the UK and the world, begin to add contextual layers, in the form of image, audio and text, to the study locations of students<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> <http://edinspace.weebly.com/postcards.html>



**Figure 2: “New Geographies” project digital postcard map of the UK**

We have observed that bodies and voices in the postcards are unusual. Despite the option provided by many digital devices to photograph the photographer (the mimetic 'selfie'), most students have chosen to remain behind the camera. The result is a set of images depicting computers, desks, chairs (the material elements of the study space) and 'window views' of an 'outside' beyond the study space. Only one student body is visible in the current set of 21 postcards (although two cats, the bark of a dog, and one peripheral child's voice, are included), but even in this case the image is taken from behind the head of the student, with its focus on the screen of a tablet computer.

These postcards show us an extension of the interface – representations of locale that take account of the relatively standard points of connection (devices, chairs and desks) with the programme, but go further to represent animals, children, rural and urban sights and sounds. They build on and 'thicken' the map to expose some of the material conditions that make up the learning experiences of digitally mediated, geographically dispersed teachers and learners.

## Revealing Bodies

Whilst we remain in agreement with Dall'Alba and Barnacle (2005), that what is required in addressing disembodiment is not an exercise in digitally re-embodiment the always-embodied learner, we have begun to suggest ways in which place might be thickened without enforcing disclosure, or insisting that bodies (or even faces) are always in the frame. At the same time we recognise, after Massey (2005), that these spaces are both 'made' - in the examples above, through specific human-technological interactions - and 'contestable'. What we are calling for is a re-visiting of the learning space as one which not only comprises the assemblage of maps and pins, desks and computers; but one which also begins to take into critical account aspects of the view through the window and the body behind the lens.

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