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The Online Student: Lurking, Chatting, Flaming and Joking

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Abstract

This paper looks at the use of online conference interaction as a part of a web-based distance-learning course. There has been much debate surrounding the potential of educational technology, particularly online conference interaction, to support teaching and learning yet little attention has been paid to student experiences and understandings of the online learning environment.

Drawing on data from auto-ethnographic fieldwork the paper identifies 5 categories of participation in asynchronous online conferences: lurker participation, member participation, expert/experienced participation, flamer participation and joker participation. Through an exploration of these forms of participation the paper attempts to understand and illustrate the complexities and contradictions of situating conference interaction alongside the demands of study. The analysis highlights the role of online conferencing as a space for 'interaction work' distinct and separated from existing repertoires of formal study. The paper concludes by suggesting that pedagogically successful use of conferences as part of distance learning needs to understand the challenges and demands of remediating existing practices.

Keywords: Distance Learning, Auto-Ethnography, Online Conferencing

Introduction

1.1 Higher education institutions are increasingly making use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and synchronous and asynchronous online discussions or web-based ‘conferences’ have become an integral part of new models of online teaching and learning. For distance learning in particular, networked communication enables geographically dispersed students to participate in online discussions and group work with their tutors and peers and has the potential to reduce isolation and engage students in independent study (Yakimovicz & Murphy 1995).

1.2 Despite an extensive literature in the field of educational technology and on the use of conferencing to support teaching and learning, empirical research which has concerned itself specifically with *student* experiences and understandings of online learning environments and interactions is limited. Indeed, the pedagogy strand of the JISC e-learning programme suggests that there is a scarcity of studies of the learner experience; in particular of research that expresses a ‘learner voice’ (Sharpe and Benfield 2005).

1.3 Drawing on auto-ethnographic data and focusing on conference interaction as a central part of online learning, this article explores the experience of being an online student. Five patterns of conference interaction and participation are identified which suggest that rather than being oriented specifically towards course content and academic debate the pedagogical relevance of conferencing was secondary to its role as a virtual space for interaction work and acted to separate the spheres of independent study and conferencing.

Online conferencing and computer mediated communication in distance education

2.1 Constructivist models of learning advocate learning environments supported or mediated by technology and stress the potential of computer conferencing as a medium for encouraging student autonomy and independence and for fostering intellectual development. In the context of distance learning the collaborative sharing of knowledge and experience is seen to be an enriching aspect of learning and extensive and sustained interaction is argued to be of critical importance in the pedagogical success of online courses (Kearsley et al 1995). As a component of online courses research has primarily focused on the role of conferences as spaces for reflexivity, the exchange of personal stories and for community building. Conferences are seen as important arenas for sharing and validating course experiences (Gay et al 1999), for facilitating deeper reflection on ideas and concepts and for increasing student understanding of course content through the articulation of ideas during conference participation (Hooper 1992, Littleton and Whitelock 2005). Online discussions also act as textual refuges for students to confide anxieties and expectations (Rovai 2002) and to experience a sense of camaraderie and belonging (Brown 2001). This creation of an online community of learning (Wegerif 1998, Haythornthwaite et al 2000) draws on well-documented understandings of virtual communities developed through interpersonal online interaction (Rheingold 1993, Baym 1998, Wellman and Gulia 1999).

2.2 The drawbacks of conferencing as part of online learning are also well documented. Students may be resistant to or unaware of the pedagogical purpose of online interaction and group work (Kirkwood 2006) and discussion may lack academic focus. Low levels of participation and motivation may limit and constrain interaction (Tomlie and Boyle 2000, Gal-Ezer and Lupo 2001) while, conversely, the sheer volume of emails and postings in conferences may intimidate and alienate students (Hara and Kling, 1999, 2000).

The (virtual) auto-ethnography

3.1 This research draws on nine-months of auto-ethnographic fieldwork during which time I was registered as a student on a credit bearing distance-learning course at a UK university. In reflecting on the conflicting and contradictory literature surrounding student experiences of conference interaction what auto ethnographic participation provides is a detailed and in-depth understanding of the processes and patterns of conference interaction and participation rather than, as Goodfellow argues, masking the realities of social practices in these spaces by conflating them with notions of online communities of learning (Goodfellow 2005: 124).

3.2 My concern was with student experiences of technology use and with gaining an understanding, through ethnographic participation, of how distance education presented in an online form and supported by online conference discussions enables or constrains student learning. I participated fully in the course, completed all assignments and assessed work and was active in the synchronous and asynchronous conferences and tutorials. The methodological advantages of this auto-ethnography were twofold; I was able to experience the practicalities and realities of participating in the course, what Hakken (1999: 39) has defined as an ‘embodied understanding’, and I was able to reflect ethnographically on my role as student in an understanding and account of how the technology was experienced in the context of its use. The course content was unfamiliar to me beyond the entry requirements of computer literacy and basic HTML web authoring knowledge and this unfamiliarity enabled me to engage with the course material as a student and researcher as well as confront the critique of auto-ethnography as simply ‘ethnography of the familiar’ (Delamont 2007). Thus the technology became both a research tool and an object of study and my role as student *and* researcher demanded a thorough ethnographic immersion in the field and a high level of participation in the ongoing study requirements of the course. In line with ethnographies of the internet that have established online spaces as ethnographic field sites (Baym 1995, Danet 1998, Donath 1999, Reid 1996) I use Hine’s (2000, 2002) notion of virtual ethnography as an ethnography that is in, of and through the virtual.

3.3 Virtual ethnography challenges spatial and temporal locations and is, necessarily, partial, interstitial, highly reflexive and lacking the physical co-presence which characterises much ethnographic fieldwork (Hine 2000). This disembodiment has important implications for how the field site is defined and experienced. Ethnography through and in the virtual made possible any time and any (networked) place data collection. Access to a 24-hour field site provided the in-depth engagement that ethnography requires, yet a presence visible only through interaction meant I was both present and absent in the field.

3.4 The conceptual and practical difficulties of defining and managing a virtual field extend to and have analytical implications for the production of the ethnographic account. Textual ethnographic accounts have traditionally relied on the concepts of travel, experience and interaction for their authority (Hine 2000). This poses some interesting challenges for the virtual ethnographer and for the production of an auto-ethnographic account. Without a physical presence in a disembodied field site how can ethnographers claim authority and authenticity? In line with Hakken (1999) and Hine (2000) I suggest that the authority and authenticity comes *from* the online nature of the research setting. An online field provides an opportunity for innovative and creative ethnography and creates a methodological and analytical environment that challenges ethnographic practice and encourages a reflexive ethnography based on accounts of its own sites of production. The interaction between the field site as both a tool and object of study and the overlap of researcher and student roles demanded a highly reflexive hybrid of virtual and auto ethnographic forms.

3.5 Auto ethnography can therefore be redefined as an ethnography in which the researcher is a full member of the research setting, is visible in the text and is committed to developing sociological understandings of a wider phenomena (Anderson 2006). Accordingly, rather than the production of an evocative, personal narrative the auto ethnographic account is an ‘analytic auto ethnography’ (Anderson 2006).

3.6 In the production of the ethnographic account detailed field notes, primarily at the lowest level of inference, provided an account and chronology of the ethnographic experience. These field notes were coded and a reflexive representation of the personal narrative was developed through grounded thematic analysis. The field note data that I draw on here and the ethnographic account produced is therefore a textual representation and analytical reconstruction of my ethnographic participation.

Ethics in the virtual field

4.1 Ethics are a major issue in academic debate relating to research practice in cyberspace and the methodological strategy of a virtual (auto) ethnography necessitated a process of ongoing ethical, methodological and analytical reflection. Online ethical concerns often lack exact offline analogs and can create ambiguities in discerning ethically appropriate conduct, particularly relating to the difficulties in obtaining informed consent and a blurring of public and private spaces (Thomas 1996, Ess 2002). Ethically my role as researcher was inextricably tied to my role as student in complex and often contradictory ways. The purpose of my registration on the course was to gain an auto-ethnographic understanding of what it was to learn in this medium. However, the interactive and collaborative nature of the course meant that my experiences, and the resulting ethnographic field notes, were co-produced with and influenced by the other participants in the research setting. The online interactions informed my field notes and the sharing of experiences was invaluable in a reflexive ethnographic engagement. However, I also participated in the conferences and in substantive discussions of course material as a student. These dual and often conflicting roles required continual ethical reflection and an ethical strategy that acknowledged unforeseen moral problems, dilemmas and ambivalences as an inevitable part of fieldwork, demanding different contextual approaches and solutions (de Laine 2000).

4.2 Informed consent is a particularly challenging ethical consideration in online research as a result of the transient and ephemeral nature of the online population and environment. The large course-wide conferences, containing thousands of students and hundreds of posting each day, were an environment where gaining informed consent was highly problematic as simply maintaining a presence as anything other than onlooker and occasional participant was itself a demanding activity. Maintaining meaningful informed consent would have required ongoing and regular posts explaining the research and requesting the consent of other participants. In an online forum this kind of message would disrupt the natural flow of the interaction and significantly alter the nature of the environment and, as Reid argues, it is not always practical to gain informed consent from all the users that you interact with online:

> “It was not practically possible for me to inform all members of a MUD [Multi User Dungeon] of my research interests without disrupting the normal social flow of each system, since the fluctuating member base meant such announcements would have to be prominently made every few days. This meant that if I were to carry out my research some measure of deception or non-disclosure was inevitable.” (Reid 1995: 170)

4.3 An alternative solution to posting regular announcements of research and requests for informed consent is the use of a ‘signature’ at the end of each posting. Signatures are files automatically added to messages and contain text or images used as a unique, individual identifier. Participants in a conference or newsgroups can add personal details or any other content to personalise their online representation of self. However, to condense an ethically appropriate description of the research which would not create difficulties for my own online interaction as a student was highly problematic and to *assume* informed consent from either solution would be premature, representing what Rutter and Smith (2002) have described as a ‘naturalistic mode’ of consent which transfers the responsibility of reading the message onto the participants, thereby exonerating the researcher from responsibility.

4.4 The course team had given me permission to participate as a student and researcher on the course with the understanding that no data was to be collected from other students without their permission, but with no requirement to overtly declare my status. This was ethically manageable in the highly populated course wide conferences but the roles of researcher and student were more blurred and demanding in tutor group conferences and in situations where I was involved in smaller discussion groups and collaborative subgroups. During these interactions I identified myself as both ‘student’ and ‘researcher’ and was continually overt regarding my status and participation. While the ethical management of the field work was a source of ongoing anxiety for me the diverse nature of those studying on the course, as distance, primarily part-time students meant that some kind of conflict or duality in role was not uncommon and my status as ‘academic researcher’ was accepted without comment in a setting where many members were also juggling other responsibilities and commitments with that of being a ‘student’.

Conferencing and the online course

5.1 The course used the web as its sole delivery and tuition method and web-based content was supported by an electronic mail and conferencing technology that enabled communication through asynchronous online conferences or bulletin boards, synchronous real-time online chat and e-mail messages. Course tutors moderated the conferences and boards and participation was an essential part of the course and compulsory for some assessed exercised. In addition to a main course notice board and a generic conference space each course module had it’s own conference board subdivided into smaller topic areas. Students also had access to a conference titled the ‘virtual café’, designated as an area for non-academic chat and socialising. Conference moderators monitored and ensured that postings and questions were directed to the most appropriate conference, however students also guarded the topic boundaries of the conference and inappropriately posted messages quickly received student responses redirecting the post to the relevant area.

5.2 Following the initial period of interaction, where we were invited to introduce ourselves to other students and become acquainted with the conferencing environment, the volume of postings in the conferences increased dramatically and participation became a time-consuming task. Although discussions were asynchronous the speed of the postings and responses meant, at times, the debate had a synchronous quality and the dynamic social environment of the conferences placed considerable and often contradictory demands on my time and were not simply a space for pedagogical, critical and reflexive discourse.

5.3 Detailed thematic analysis of the ethnographic field notes taken during the course and a thematic and content analysis of my own conference postings highlighted the shifting patterns of my participation in the conferences and five categories of participation can be identified; participation as the 'active lurker', participation as the 'member', participation as 'expert/experienced', participation as the 'flamer' and participation as the joker'. Membership of these categories continually shifted throughout the course and across different conference areas and each category of participation required different levels of time, motivation, involvement, knowledge and interest.

Patterns of conference interaction: 'The active lurker'

6.1 Participation in the conference as a lurker was a dominant form of participation in the conferences and acted as my default mode of interaction. As a lurker I would read messages and postings and follow strands of debate but not necessarily contribute to the interaction. Lurker participation in the conferences formed the starting point for all other forms of participation. Lurking is a term derived from CMC (computer mediated communication) literature describing the common and accepted practice of spending time in an online space observing interaction patterns and reading postings. Lurkers are seldom active in discussion through choice and are participants through their passive attention rather than their active contribution. In contrast the active lurker re-defines this view in both its purpose and intent.

6.2 The derogatory and inactive implications of the word lurker belie the time and work required to participate in this background manner. Just as researchers have advocated the methodological benefits of lurking; to acclimatise to the field site and to become familiar with the culture and norms of behaviour and interaction prior to participation in an online environment, (Sharf 1999, Ward 1999, Mann and Stewart 2000), involvement in the conference environment as a student *and* as a researcher required periods of lurking to become familiar with patterns and practices of debate. My participation in many threads of debate was that of lurker, either as a result of a lack of time in which to get involved in the discussion, a lack of interest in the subject area or a lack of knowledge and information about the topic. With the quantity of daily postings that the conferences received a more active role than lurker was not always feasible. Lurking allowed me to keep track of the strands of debate occurring, follow discussions on topic areas which interested me or that I knew little about and sustain a level of involvement with what was going on in the conferences, increasing my levels of participation if necessary or desirable. Rather than losing track of the content of the postings and the type of interaction going on in the conferences, lurking functioned as a comparatively quick and easy way to manage and sustain an (invisible) presence in the various forums. However, the quantity of postings in the forum also mean that even as a lurker the investment of time required to maintain this presence was substantial and I had to allocate around 2 - 4 hours of online time per day in the conferences to sustain this fairly minimal level of involvement.

6.3 Thorough lurking was also of value in building up an awareness of what had been covered in debate and a knowledge of what had already been posted and answered was extremely important in joining discussion threads. Postings that repeated or reiterated previous strands of the debate were ignored, redirected to earlier messages in the thread or, with varying levels of civility, informed that debate had moved on. In this sense lurking was an active and necessary part of conference participation but not, as Black (2005) suggests, an interactive or communicative activity:

> 'If a student does not actively participate in the online discussion, he [sic] does not exist. Therefore, student participation is vital not only for the sharing of ideas and reflection, but also for the validation of each student's membership in the classroom community.' (Black 2005: 14)

6.4 The importance of the lurker role and the demands of managing and participating in online conferencing is obscured by this kind of emphasis on students' visible participation and on the communication and exchange which takes as part of online learning. A concern with an understanding of learner experience hints at the importance of empirical research focused on less visible forms of participation that underpin and are central to online discussion as a part of online learning.

Patterns of conference interaction: The Member

7.1 Member participation in the conferences was a second common form of interaction during the ethnography. Conferences were host to highly focused debates relating to course content, the processes of learning online and social or non-academic chat. Member participation, which I have defined as an involvement in this type of conference interaction, was characterised by multiple daily postings and an ongoing involvement in asynchronous debate. Member participation required high levels of commitment and time and was contingent on regular conference contributions that sustained the pace of the interaction.

7.2 I have purposefully employed the term 'member' in a description of this type of participation to invoke the notion of belonging and membership; groups of students were involved in the asynchronous discussion and for the duration of the debate formed a sub-group within the conference. As the thread of messages developed the members of the group became self-referential and inclusive, citing earlier points made in the discussion and directing responses or questions to other members of the temporary sub-group by name.

7.3 Unlike lurker participation it was crucial to maintain a visual, textual presence in the conference in order to remain a participating member of that discussion and the length and quality of messages proved less important than consistent posting and online visibility. In contrast to literature which suggests that the asynchronous nature of the medium encourages meaningful interaction by allowing more time to reflect on postings and compose responses than in face-to-face discussions (Goodell and Yusko 2005), I found that any lengthy or considered responses were out-dated before they could be articulated as a post and that involvement in debate often meant rushed and concise contributions and my own and other postings often required reformulation or clarification.

7.4 Member participation could range from very short messages indicating agreement with a previous posting, to detailed and lengthy messages outlining an argument or opinion. Regularly returning to the conference was vital and involvement as a member frequently lasted from an afternoon to several days and was a time consuming and demanding role to manage, both as student and researcher. Member participation in a conference relied on regular contributions, without which participation in the debate returned to that of lurker. Maintaining this consistent level of posting in academic discussions was crucial in keeping up with the content and direction of debate and in remaining an engaged and involved member of the discussion. This consistency and visibility was perhaps even more important in social or non-academic discussions when the cultivation of an online textual presence was required for member participation. Without regular posting to the social conferences it was often difficult and at times impossible to join in with jokes or receive responses to non-academic and more informal postings.

7.5 The inclusive, committed and self-referential nature of membership participation, while beneficial for those that were part of the discussion, also acted to exclude ‘non-members’ which itself was the source of much debate within the conference. On seven occasions during the nine months of the course conferences were host to reflexive discussions surrounding the nature, benefits and drawbacks of the online interaction that was occurring. One usefully illustrative debate focused on student concerns with the speed that discussions moved and how the nature of what I have defined as member participation resulted in students feeling unable to get involved in conversation, feeling intimidated by what was perceived as the cliquey nature of the interaction and feeling disappointed and frustrated by the conferencing aspect of the course; issues that were especially salient during instances of expert/experienced participation.

Patterns of conference interaction: The ‘Expert’ and the ‘Experienced’

8.1 Expert/experienced participation was an involved and in-depth level of participation in the conference, specific to a strand of postings that focused on a single topic or debate and was a form of participation that I periodically engaged in during the ethnography. Expert/experienced participation was concentrated over a short time-span, usually between one and five days of intensive discussion and, like member interaction, demanded high levels of participation and knowledge of or interest in the subject area. Characterised by postings which responded to queries and questions as self-appointed authorities or experts on the subject matter, this kind of participation was closest to the sharing of diverse experiences and knowledge that constructivist writers suggest enrich the online learning situation and bring about new learning possibilities (Yakimovicz and Murphy 1999, Tam 2000).

8.2 Students who had completed other relevant courses as part of a wider degree course or students with some experience of the course content frequently posted answers to questions posed to the conferences, often prompting extended and in-depth debates about specific issues. While these responses may have provided useful answers and represented the constructivist model of collaboration, perhaps more analytically compelling were the debates that arose as a result of these postings. An example comes from a discussion in the conference two months after the start of the course. As part of a second assessment we were required to write a report on the significance of operating systems (OS) in the development of the PC specifically and the computer industry more generally. Several postings to the conference requested a clear and simple definition of an OS and multiple replies, varying in detail and specificity were added to the conference. Over the following 3 days a long and complex discussion developed in the conference surrounding very specific technical details and definitions of what constituted an OS. The messages posted, debate which I have defined as expert/experienced conference participation, were punctuated by responses from other students complaining that their own, previously clear and secure understandings of an OS were now confused, leaving them lost and unsure of themselves. A second strand of discussion entitled ‘keeping to the course material - lets stay sane’ developed as postings requested that in-depth and ‘expert’ discussions were for a minority and should be moved to a new conference area in order to avoid further misunderstandings. Through lurking and following expert/experienced discussions I found it was easy to get confused and lost in debates of conflicting and contradictory definitions and information.

8.3 This confusion and misunderstanding is analytically meaningful as it created a lack of trust in the information that was being posted by other students. Rather than the creation of a collaborative learning environment, the sharing of knowledge and experience between students created uncertainty and ambiguity, frequently resulting in moderator intervention. Moderators posted to the conference to provide clarification and ‘correct information’, a role that students in the conferences felt was required as a virtual replacement of the teacher/instructor in a ‘real’/face-to-face classroom; questioning the notion in the literature of collaborative student-centered learning and a shift in the role of the teacher from ‘sage on the stage’ to ‘guide on the side’ (Lebow 1993, Gibson 2001).

8.4 Expert/experienced participation also occurred as a result of interaction between students at various stages of working through the website, set texts and course exercises. The course website set weekly study guides indicating the general pace at which we were expected to be working, which in turn was intended to guide the discussions in the course-wide conferences. However, the flexible nature of this kind of online learning meant work could be planned and structured around other commitments and as a result one could be a week or more ahead or behind the study guides. While this kind of flexibility was of great value during the completion of the course, the divisions that were created in the conferences as a result were more problematic and the asynchronous interaction did not allow newcomers to easily enter the debate at different stages in its development. Postings to the conference relating to course content would come from students at varying stages of progress and being ‘too far ahead’ and discussing course content from a later study week was cited as a cause of frustration and anxiety when working to the study guide schedules or if one had fallen behind.

8.5 This raises interesting questions for the compatibility of the flexibility afforded by distance learning and the use of online conferences. While self-directed study enables distance learning students to balance academic commitments with wider responsibilities, the highly linear and structured approach of the course, reflected in the conferences, created an environment which challenged the collaborative and supportive role of the online discussions and failed to take into account issues of pace and development. This distanced the online interaction from the course readings and material and undermined and separated the relationship and connection between independent study and online interaction.

8.6 However, academically and socially participation in the conferences at the expert/experienced level bore the closest resemblance to constructivist principles of motivated, student driven, pedagogically beneficial online interaction supported by a community of online learners. Participation and debate as expert/experienced was limited to a small numbers of students, who through their high levels of knowledge or interest in the topic under discussion created an exclusive and often inaccessible clique. Participation as expert/experienced fostered a sense of involvement, commitment and excitement that, although very time-intensive, was a valuable part of the online student experience and an example of sharing and co-operation during online interaction; identified by Rheingold as a 'gift economy' (Rheingold 1993) in which help and information is freely offered without the expectation of reciprocity[1]. Expert/experienced participation also highlighted less altruistic motivations, which Kollock (1999) has defined as a desire for status and high visibility in an online group:

> 'High quality information, impressive technical details in one's answers, a willingness to help others, and elegant writing can all work to increase one's prestige in the community… The inherent nature of online interaction already means that helpful acts are more likely to be seen by the group as a whole. And the powerful effects of seemingly trivial markers of recognition…have been commented on in a number of online communities.' (Kollock 1999pg 228)

8.7 Similarly, Lampel and Bhalla (2007) argue that the construction of a digital status and online 'celebrity' is an important part of online communities. The directing of questions to specific students as 'experts' and the consistently high visibility of some members of the conference suggest that Kollock and Lampel and Bhalla are accurate in identifying status and prestige as an important motivation in online interaction; a type of posting that I have categorised as expert/experienced.

Patterns of conference interaction: 'The Flamer '

9.1 In addition to the categories of participation and interaction already outlined, the conferences were also host to regular instances of arguments, misunderstandings and flaming.

9.2 'Flaming', a term emerging from popular discourse surrounding CMC, is used to describe aggressive, hostile or profane online interaction. In their comprehensive examination and reconceptualisation of flaming O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) argue that precise conceptual definitions of flaming have not been established and they point to the multiple definitions of flaming that appear in the literature: as negative and destructive instances of antisocial interaction, as hostile verbal behaviour, aggressive emotional outbursts, non-conforming behaviour, incendiary messages and as a metaphorical flamethrower used by the sender to 'roast the receiver' (O'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003: 70). The conference boards advised on principles of netiquette and guides to online interaction on the course website provided a definition of flaming and suggested communication principles which students should follow to avoid flaming spirals: to thank, acknowledge and support people freely, to acknowledge before differing, to speak from your own perspective to avoid misunderstandings and to carefully phrase controversial or contentious statements.

9.3 This section of the paper deals analytically with flaming as a separate and distinct form of interaction within the conferences that posed a challenge to interaction during the course and that poses an analytical challenge to literature which stresses the collaborative nature and pedagogical value of conferencing in online education. During the nine months of the course there were regular instances of flaming spirals, misunderstandings and postings that caused offence, ranging from academic disagreements, arguments while socialising and antagonism and hostility between groups and individual students. As moderated conferences messages that the moderators deemed offensive and inappropriate were removed or blocked, but despite this heated arguments, disagreements and flaming were common.

9.4 Flaming as a commonplace activity is well documented in literature surrounding CMC (Lea et al 1992, Herring 1996, Kayany 1998, O'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003) however, studies of online interaction in the context of learning have been overwhelmingly restricted to *educational* uses of the medium or to quantitative or content analysis of posting type, rather than in-depth empirical explorations of participants actual understandings of use. The experience of being an online student has highlighted this as a significant omission in the literature and the need to deal analytically with flaming emerged from the analysis of the ethnography.

9.5 An illustrative example of misunderstandings in the conferences is provided by an instance of academically based flaming following the results of our first assessed exercise. On receipt of assessment marks, students in the main conference shared their excitement and pleasure at receiving a good mark for their first piece of work. As more students collected their results similar messages appeared in the conference and we exchanged congratulations and commiserations on our successes and disappointments. One student expressed discouragement with their mark of 75% posting that they were frustrated that they had worked hard and yet not received a 'good' mark. This apparently innocent post was the start of 4 days of angry messages, arguments and flames in the conference as students who had achieved less than 75% and were very pleased, now felt that their mark had been demeaned and was, comparatively, low. Those students who had achieved higher than 75% posted that they were angry that they could not celebrate their success for fear of being accused of gloating or showing off. While such debate may seem trivial and rather inconsequential, angry and upset messages escalated to the degree that moderators blocked postings due to insulting personal remarks and inappropriate language and debate became focused on the fact that rather than a shared and open space the conference had become a place of cautious and censored speech. This has important implications for student development in online distance learning as fear of censure prevented what Crook and Light (2002) have described as a valuable opportunity to benchmark one's own progress. If online interaction is unable to manage personal reflection and evaluation the connection between course content and online discussion is further distanced and individual study and online interaction become distinct and fragmented spheres rather than an interconnected and coherent learning environment.

9.6 A similar instance of flaming occurred in the café conference following high profile media coverage of the disappearance of two schoolgirls and the subsequent investigation into their murder. As coverage of the case developed it was discussed in the café conference and following the identification of suspects by the police a series of messages were posted in the café advocating a return of the death penalty for the suspects and for those found guilty of similar offences. This prompted a week of conference discussion as students advocating and opposing capital punishment exchanged opinions, personal stories and anecdotes. This debate resulting in heated textual arguments, flaming and an unwillingness to reach conciliation on a deeply emotive subject. The discussions were concluded as other students in the conference intervened with postings suggesting that for the sake of the conference as a whole those involved in the debate should temporarily remove themselves from the café as a civil resolution was apparently unobtainable and any other interaction was increasingly impossible.

9.7 Perhaps what was most interesting about this episode was not that students in an online educational environment face the same differences of opinions and flaming patterns as participants in other online spaces (and indeed the same communication difficulties as students in offline spaces), but the strategies that students employed in the construction of their postings. The conferencing software allowed students to set up a profile of personal information and also provided a limited web-space. As the course required a large amount of work to be completed online it was common for this web-space to be used as a home page hosting course notes and personal details. During the debate surrounding the schoolgirls' murder details in postings indicated that students were accessing the profile details of other students and using information from them in the construction of messages and arguments, for example pointing to the fact that a participant had no children so would have a different opinion than a parent. The technological availability of personal information enabled students to include value and character judgements about other participants in their construction and interpretation of messages; questioning literature that suggests that problematic online messages and flaming arise as a result of the *impersonal* nature of conferencing environments which lack non-verbal cues (seeO'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003).

9.8 Herring (1994, 1996) suggests that participants often list intimidation as a reason for not participating in online discussions and the course conferences were at times an unpleasant, intimidating and hostile environment; indeed postings often announced that a participant was removing themselves from the conference as they were upset or angry at the interaction occurring. My own dual role was particularly challenging during these periods as the demands of an online presence for virtual ethnographic research often conflicted with my desire to step away from some of the conference interaction in my role as a student. Again this has important implications for the use of online conferences as part of web-based distance learning. Intimidating debates, hostile interaction and the use of personal information combined to continue the separation of conference interaction from the core activity of course study, undermining the benefits of group discussion afforded by the environment.

Patterns of conference interaction: Flaming as fun

10.1 O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) suggest that flaming is overwhelmingly characterised negatively and is framed as a problem of the *medium.* They argue that flaming needs to be understood within the context of complex and evolving frameworks of interaction norms and the multiple possible interpretations of messages. In their emphasis on the relational nature of communication O'Sullivan and Flanagin stress the need to consider the interpretations and intentions of the sender, the receiver and the third party reader, suggesting that researchers coding message content may be mislead by hostile or profane language and apparent insults. Rather than being examples of flaming behaviour they are perceived within the group as instances of appropriate language use and in line with group interaction norms:

> 'Most current conceptualisations of flaming appear to be based on a transmission model of communication, insofar as they assume that communication is the efficient transmission of unambiguous information from one individual to another. This is exemplified by conceptualisations of flaming that assume a third party's interpretation of a message will be the same as that of the interactants. However, as many communication scholars have noted, the communication process is far more complex and nuanced than this perspective implies' (O'Sullivan and Flanagin 2003: 77)

10.2 The ethnographic participation and involvement in the conferencing groups enabled an insider perspective, invaluable in understanding the context of message content. While the methodology does not enable me to make claims about the intentions and perceptions of the other participants in the group, the reflexive nature of our discussions in the conferences following arguments and flaming provided an insight into the understandings of other participants. The two examples of flaming outlined in the previous section were instances that were subsequently discussed in the conferences as unpleasant experiences that had caused stress and anxiety for those involved in the discussion and for those students who followed the debate by lurking. However, conference flaming also had the potential to morph into a recreational and entertaining online activity. As O'Sullivan and Flanagin suggest, other instances that may appear to be examples of flaming behaviour to those not involved in the conferences could, through ethnographic involvement in the group, be understood as instances of shared humour and fun. During the course students regularly posted jokes to the conferences and while the majority of these postings were greeted unproblematically, misunderstandings and miscommunications did occur. The final section of this article will outline an instance of humour, flaming and group norms, which highlights the value of context and ethnographic participation in understanding student experiences of conference interaction.

10.3 The conferencing software allowed image and sound files to be attached to messages and posted to the conferences, a capability that was frequently utilised for sending jokes. On one occasion a students posted a message to the main conference containing a joke that included an image of a naked man. Several postings took offence to the content accusing the student who sent the message of inappropriate and pornographic conduct in an educational conference. Following some angry debate it was decided that any messages containing material which some may find offensive was to be titled accordingly in the subject line so that participants could make an informed decision not to download or view the contents of the message. Following the creation of this group norm a message was posted entitled 'Do not look at this message if you are easily offended.' The posting did not contain a joke or any offensive material but a message stating that in the light of the recent moral outrage and concern about inappropriate postings it would be interesting to see who looked at a message clearly labelled as containing potentially profane or offensive content. The student posted that they had done so as a hypocrite hunt having discovered that the conferencing software had a message history function that listed every user who had opened and viewed the message. The student then posted the list of all of the users who had opened the message, a list which contained the names of several who had condemned and flamed the sender of the original 'offensive and pornographic' message. The incident was taken with surprising good humour in the conference and prompted a discussion on the ease with which misunderstandings occurred and flaming spirals arose. Five similar instances of tricks and traps occurred during the remaining six months of the ethnography and deliberate misunderstanding and flaming as a form of recreational interaction became a part of the social life of the conference; flaming became gaming in what O'Sullivan and Flanagin (2003) have defined as intentional norm violation. Misunderstandings and arguments were then framed by the students in terms of the experiences that they would expect in a 'real' classroom, unpleasant and stressful disagreements and the sharing of flippant jokes and socialising were events that would be expected in a face-to-face educational environment and their existence in the online space was, accordingly, discussed as normal and to be expected.

Conclusions

11.1 Conference interaction is positioned as an integral part of the online distance learning experience and is fundamental to constructivist principles and models of learning which advocate the pedagogical benefits of technology for collaborative academic work and the social value of student support in the development of an online community of learners (Hooper 1992, Kearsley 1995, Wegerif 1998). That the technology *enables* interaction, flexibility and collaboration does not mean that this is an environment where participation and interaction in the conferences is an unproblematic part of the online learning experience. As Collis and Meeuwsen (1999) suggest, digital technologies might offer enormous learning opportunities and web-based environments may bring a wealth of new learning resources but a potential filter to these benefits is the capacity of students to learn in this environment:

> 'Given a new technical environment and immediate access to virtually unlimited amounts of both filtered and unfiltered information and human contacts, learning to learn now faces an additional layer of challenges – how can we help students to learn how to learn, efficiently and effectively in a www based environment.' (Collis and Meeuwsen 1999: 45)

11.2 While the conferences were a space for sharing knowledge, exchanging information, socialising and providing support they were also the source of much conflict, frustration, tension and difficulty. Even at its most limited in the form of lurker participation, asynchronous conference interaction required and demanded a considerable investment of time in the maintenance of an online presence. Yet in reflecting on the complexities and contradictions that characterised my ethnographic experience of being an online student the conferencing element of the course, while structured around and oriented towards academic goals, played a fairly minor role in my engagement with the course materials and its substantive themes. The conferencing that supported and formed an integral part of the course and its assessment was a secondary activity and one which contributed little to my practices of academic study. Rather, the conferring acted as a space of *interaction* work; the maintenance of an online conference presence and participation in debates and interaction with other students. In contrast, academic study remained grounded in traditional offline activities; reading, note taking and the production of assessed work.

11.3 The separation of interaction and study as 2 distinct spheres marks a departure from literature that suggests that online interaction is a fundamental and pedagogically effective constituent part of distance online learning (Kearsley et al 1995, Wegerif 1998). In line with Crook and Light (2002) I argue that learning needs to be understood as a social and temporal accomplishment and is an activity and a cultural practice embedded in specific contexts; 'doing' the activity of learning requires an environment that structures and configures learning as an activity. As such, learning cannot easily be accomplished outside of these contexts. The conferences were a valuable part of my participation in and engagement with the course but, overwhelmingly, as spaces of interaction and reflexive discussion *about* online interaction and the experiences of virtuality as a student, rather than as spaces of scholarly dialogue.

11.4 In theorising the activity of study as a cultural practice Crook and Light (2002) draw on the notion of enculturation; the organisation of existing 'repertoires' of communication and interaction into particular (educational) goals, and suggest that the challenge facing the virtualisation of higher education is the challenge of re-mediating the underlying, embedded and cultural contexts of learning:

> “Study is a culturally distinctive form of human activity: a cultural practice. Where cultural practices are firmly entrenched, interventions can be problematic. We argue that this may be the case for attempts to engineer new forms of virtual learning…influencing the enculturation of others may often concern the careful management of an interplay - namely, that between novel and entrenched modes of acting” (Crook and Light 2002: 154)

11.5 My own existing repertoires of learning, embedded in offline understandings and experiences of traditional, formal scholarship were not easily re-mediated or transferred to the conference environment and, *in* its detail and specificity, the auto-ethnographic exploration of being an online student highlights the need to understand the experience of learning to learn online and the ways in which students are enabled or constrained by technological implementations and innovations in HE.

11.6 This cultural context of learning is at the heart of the contradictory and polarised evaluations of conferencing as a part of distance learning. As Mason and Weller (2000) argue, some students find the conferences invaluable while other students find online interaction intimidating or unhelpful. The categories of ethnographic participation identified here may be a starting point for enabling course designers and tutors to rethink the blend of learning activities and tasks with the social functions of conferences. Lurking, as an invisible yet vital element of participation in online conferences needs to be considered by course organisers as a valid and meaningful mode of participation, equally the ease with which some modes of interaction splinter study and conferences as 2 distinct spheres of activity needs to be evaluated. Rather than replicating existing offline models of learning, group work and interaction, new blends of social and pedagogical interaction might be more usefully employed. A key element in this would be the management of student expectations of the conferencing environment. One of the regular conference debates was concerned with our often-confused understanding of the purpose and role of online interaction and how it was situated in the wider context of our participation in the course. Positioning each category of interaction in the conferences as a meaningful part of learning and acknowledging its value is a critical first stage in rethinking these practicalities of course structure and design.

11.7 The focus of this article has been on a qualitative exploration of how online conferencing is used by students. In an attempt to focus on the learner perspective largely overlooked in research (Sharpe and Benfield 2005), I have explored, through auto ethnographic categories of participation, the student experience of using CMC. These categorisations go some way towards developing an understanding of the experience of being an online student. Different students are likely to use the conferencing resources available to them in a variety of ways and indeed students vary dramatically between and within institutions across academic schools and departments. However, this is not to imply that the observations of this research have no value. Highlighting the complexities and nuances of student use of conferences helps provide a framework with which to think, sociologically, about the potentials and problems of online discussion as part of online education.

Notes

[1] This is a very crude characterisation of a ‘gift economy’ which may involve more complex and less obvious forms of reciprocation including more spiritual, diffuse and sequential forms of exchange.

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