Chapter 1

Foundational Theory: A New Conceptualization of Relevant Ideas

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ABSTRACT

Some of the fundamental concepts we use to frame our theories of online education have undergone a meaning shift since the advent of the computer age. As such, online educators need to update their understanding of such concepts in the light of the changes their meanings have undergone. This chapter examines the changes in three such concepts: ‘personalisation’, ‘presence’, and ‘communication’ by examining the shifts in three of the more fundamental concepts upon which they depend: ‘mind’, ‘self’ and ‘others’. It outlines a framework based on a ‘discontinuous’ theory of the latter notions; one in which the presumed continuity between these concepts and online reality is challenged. Thus the chapter works toward a new conceptualisation of the terms of our enquiry that responds directly to the way in which shifts in their presumed or default meanings may have led us astray over the past few decades.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

What does the phrase: ‘the humanisation of online teaching environments’ actually mean? The concepts used in the title and remit of this work are familiar enough; terms like ‘presence’, ‘communication’, ‘interactivity’, ‘personalisation’, and ‘humanisation’ will be commonplace for anyone researching online and distance education and learning environments.

In this chapter, online teaching and learning (and ‘online education’) refer to all teaching and learning behaviours mediated by a computer. To a limited extent, some of the points raised apply to self-paced online courses without a (present) instructor delivering the course. In this case, the ‘teacher’ interacting with the students’ refers to the online material itself.

Typically, in the online education literature, terms like ‘presence’ and ‘communication’ are used to frame data or construct theories regarding effective learning online. Researchers in the field typically assume that these terms are clearly defined in their attempts to refine or import them into the context of online education. However, there is reason to doubt that such concepts are still, in fact, as clear as they...
once were before ubiquitous computer use, hyper-connectivity and digital immersion came to dominate everyday life – a phenomenon appropriately described as ‘onlife’ (see key terms and definitions). This chapter suggests ways to update our understanding of these sorts of ‘core concepts’: concepts on which our theories of online learning often depend.

There is currently little theoretical analysis of such fundamental concepts in the mainstream literature on online education, beyond restating some (often quite venerable) theories explicating their role in framing and understanding empirical research. We might find a nod to social constructivism (Conrad 2014), theories of social presence and transactional distance (Moore 2013); and perhaps occasional references to sociological perspectives such as Turkle’s 2011. This chapter does not mean to criticise such efforts, but hopes instead to revitalise the sort of endeavour they represent. It looks at wider research across a number of fields in order to update our understanding of the key ideas to which online educators typically appeal. The hope is that we can then begin to update the theoretical frameworks and tools by which we understand, interpret, and situate our empirical data and our research. Misunderstanding the terms involved potentially means misunderstanding what’s at stake in online education.

This chapter targets three concepts in the scope of this book: ‘personalisation’, ‘presence’, and ‘communication’, and explores some of the ways in which their meanings have changed, both in themselves but more as a result of changes in the meanings of key concepts on which they depend, crucially the concepts of ‘mind’, ‘self’, and ‘others’. Our understanding of ‘the mind’, ‘the self’ and ‘the others’ we address when teaching online needs to accommodate the changes these notions have undergone since the computer age. If it does not, then at best we risk delivering less effective teaching for online students, but at worst, actively undermining their progress. Broadly, if there has been a shift in the meanings of the fundamental concepts on which the ideas of presence, personalisation and communication depend, then that shift must be properly recognised in order to develop the sort of responsible, careful and thoughtful understanding of online education needed now.

Presence, Personalisation, and Communication in the Literature

Current theories of online learning utilize some or all of the concepts ‘presence’, ‘communication’ and ‘personalisation’ in a variety of different ways, primarily to maximise their perceived positive value in an online setting (e.g. Dunlap, J. C., & Lowenthal, P. R. 2011) or in an effort to increase the effectiveness of learning online (e.g. Ni 2013). Typical research questions include: ‘what makes an online community?’ (e.g. Song, M. & Yuan, R. 2015), ‘what constitutes presence online?’ (e.g. Tu 2002), or ‘how can teachers ensure effective communication in online courses?’ (e.g. Serdyukov, J.P. and Serdyukova, N. 2009). But these questions generally assume that we already know what the key terms themselves mean.

For example, a common strategy in the literature exploring ‘presence’ in online education might proceed as follows: the (supposed settled) meaning of the term is recalled or appealed to in a few lines, then that concept (taken as understood) is considered in the context of an online setting (e.g. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes 2010). Lehman and Conceição (2010) offer some analysis of ‘presence’, but their interest is primarily in the utility of the concept itself (which, again, is presumed to be already understood) for an overall theory of effective teaching and learning online. They offer an explanation of a sense of presence as a sense of ‘being there’ and ‘being together’ (pp. viii and 131) before going on to investigate modes and determinates of online presence (chapters 2 and 5), and arguments establishing what constitutes its success, e.g. that ‘successful presence’ involves technology becoming transparent (p.16).