

A Critical Discourse Analysis: Reconceptualising Online Distance Learning through a Foucauldian lens

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Abstract

There is a lot of rhetoric related to current internet based distance education as accessible, flexible, just-in-time, cost-effective, innovative and interactive. In particular, discussion about the value of interaction for successful online learning experiences, which is grounded in social constructivist learning theories, has been ongoing for recent decades. The burgeoning popularity of online learning such as a MOOCs phenomenon and the rapid proliferation of its new name “e-learning” have pushed aside the older connotation of distance learning as an inferior form of learning compared to face-to-face instruction. With the advent of web technologies and the growing public interest in the Internet, a simultaneous claim from internet-based research that such environments are inherently interactive has reinforced the rhetoric about the “interactive nature of online learning”. As a result, literature suggests researchers have single-mindedly focussed on developing more effective interactive online learning with neither empirical examination of the claims nor careful investigation of distance educational contexts where their designs would be implemented in. In this context, the changing roles of online teachers have drawn great research attention and so have been conceptualized and theorised. This Foucauldian critical discourse analysis project looks closely into the rhetorical discourse and their influences on instructors’ perspectives and behaviours at open universities to address the gap in our current understanding about distance education. Two foci of this study are i) instructors’ language use: how instructors at open universities talk about their perspectives and experiences of online learning and ii) instructors’ subjects: how each instructor is described and characterized by other members at the universities and why. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 instructors in two open universities, one in North America and the other in Asia-Pacific region. Our findings show the powerful impact of the rhetorical discourse on instructors’ perspectives and their subjects, which has increased the potential danger of the institutional abuse of power against or the marginalization of a particular group of instructors. The ultimate aim of this study is not to refute social constructivist assumptions but to provide a different framework to broaden our understanding of the nature of online learning beyond the current set of assumptions.

Online Learning, Distance Education, Open University, Social Constructivism, Critical Discourse Analysis, Foucauldian Approach

Background

There is a lot of rhetoric related to current internet based distance education, which generally speaks of online learning as accessible, flexible, just-in-time, cost-effective, innovative and interactive. In particular, discussion about the value of interaction for successful online learning experiences has been ongoing for recent decades (Barker, 1994; Hannafin, 1989; Moore, 1989). Swan (2010) suggests that unlike distance education of the previous era, current online learning is grounded in social constructivist learning theories, is student-centred, and focuses on collaboration. She also argues that distance education in this new era has been influenced by both emerging technologies and the “rediscovery and enthusiastic embrace of social constructivism” (p. 109) in the field of distance education. Although neither the social learning theories nor the educational value accorded to interaction is new in most face-to-face educational contexts (Dewey, 1916; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978), the inherited distance between teachers and students in distance education had naturally suppressed the conversation about the need for interaction until recently. While collaboration and interaction have been key conceptual constructs in some groups engaged in understanding learning and technology, predominantly in the work of the Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) community (see Stahl, Koschmann & Suthers,

2006), a lot of this research has been looking at the mediating effects of technology used largely within face-to-face or blended educational contexts (Collins, 1996).

The rhetorical location we are focusing on in this paper lies rather in the idea of “anyone, anytime, anywhere” learning (Sims, 2008) made popular through the recent increase in online course (or e-learning) offerings throughout the educational and business sectors. With the advent of web technologies, which provides new possibilities for interactive distance learning, the academic field of educational technology particularly has made much effort to increase the level of interactivity in online courses (Angeli, Valanides, & Bonk, 2003; Beldarrain, 2008; Herrington & Oliver, 2000; Woo & Reeves, 2007). As a result, the rapid proliferation of the new term “e-learning” has pushed aside the older connotations of distance learning, and opened up an enthusiastic tone of discussion about its educational possibilities. While the previous print-based distance education tended to be regarded as an inferior form of learning compared to face-to-face instruction, mainly due to a lack of human interaction, online courses are currently being viewed as an innovative educational opportunity to overcome accessibility limitations and interactivity in the face-to-face courses (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006).

One notable example in higher education reflecting the popularity of online learning and its instructional focus is the massive open online course (MOOC) movement, initiated by Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT)’s OpenCourseWare project. Since 2002, MIT has published its course contents online including lecture videos and notes for free and in 2012, in partnership with Harvard University, it launched a new MOOC platform edX. The new platform allows all distance learners to participate in online discussions and communities in addition to having access to free course materials (Lewin, 2011; Yuan & Powell, 2013). This MOOC project well-demonstrates the important instructional shift in distance education from knowledge transmission towards knowledge co-construction through facilitating different forms of learner interaction. The enthusiasm for interactive online learning initiated by these leading institutions has captured the public attention and expanded into all levels of educational institutions and it has further led to a profusion of social constructivist research in the field of distance education. With the growing public interest in the Internet, a simultaneous claim from internet-based research that such environments are inherently interactive has reinforced the rhetoric about the nature of online learning.

Some would argue, however, it is too soon to understand the implications of such educational efforts and that there are a great number of questions we should be asking to better understand current online learning practices (Milman, 2012). Selwyn (2010) suggests that as a field educational technology research might productively move towards investigating “state-of-the-actual” as opposed to “state-of-the-art” questions. He identifies questions like: “What is the use of technology in educational settings actually like? Why is technology use in educational settings the way it is? What are the consequences of what happens with technologies in educational settings?” as being examples of the general direction of research in this area that might broaden our understanding (p. 70). Such research questions are particularly important to investigate now as the burgeoning popularity of online learning at every level of education increases daily, while our research knowledge of these new developments is limited. Considering the growing concerns over the lack of quality interaction in many online courses (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009; Woo & Reeves, 2007) including MOOCs (Baggaley, 2013; Simonson, 2012; Yuan & Powell, 2013), it may be timely to re-examine the rhetorical discourse on which this rapid uptake of online learning has been based.

The Interactive Nature of Online Learning in Literature

Harasim’s article ‘shift happens: online education as a new paradigm in learning,’ published in 2000 provided the field of distance education with a well-described explanation about the nature of online learning, which has been cited since throughout the online learning literature. Through her thoughtful review of educational computing and online education, she affirmed that the learning paradigm in online learning had shifted from one that was individualistic and knowledge transmission-based toward one that was networked and involved collaborative knowledge construction. She also suggested that the roles of instructors, learners, courses and universities in higher education were also transformed in this new paradigm. The relationship between instructors and learners, in particular, became more interactive and students assumed more responsibilities for their own collaborative learning processes as well as outcomes. Wallace (2003) started her review paper ‘online learning in higher education: a review of research on interaction among teachers and students’ by citing Harasim’s earlier work (2000) and suggested that students’ active participation in online interaction with peers and instructors had been emphasized in most online learning research. Similar to Harasim, Wallace also

observed the radical transformation of the instructors' role toward being an instructional designer who provides well-designed tasks and a facilitator who encourages learners' participation in collaborative knowledge construction.

Since these review papers were published, much discussion in the field has been focused on design issues to support learner interaction based on the earlier claims about the interactive nature of online learning with neither empirical examination of the claims nor careful investigation of distance educational contexts where their designs would be implemented in (Moore, 2013). Therefore, using the unquestioned theoretical base of social constructivism that views learning as social interaction and participation (Anderson, 2003; Moore, 1989; Jonassen, 1999, Swan, 2005), online learning studies repeatedly attempt to better design online learning environments as a key means of improving the quality of learner interaction (Woo & Reeves, 2007). In this context, the changing roles of online teachers have drawn great research attention as "online learning, by nature, changes the way teaching responsibilities are performed" (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011, p. 426). In the literature, there have been multiple teacher roles conceptualized to characterize what teachers should do in an online teaching context, including an instructional designer who develops learning resources and activities in close collaboration with other experts, a pedagogical facilitator who manages courses and guide students' participation, a social member who interacts with students not only at the cognitive level but also at the affective level and a technical expert who deals with technical issues that students face (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Berge & Collins, 2000; Guasch, Alvarez, & Espasa, 2010; Salmon, 2004).

Although each researcher prioritizes different roles and competencies of online teachers according to the context where their research and teaching is situated, there is a shared agreement *and* emphasis on the fundamental change to the teacher-student relationship (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). Teachers' power and control over students' learning as a sole instructor voice, which is often equated with "teaching responsibilities", move now to the role of student support and another set of rhetorical claims signifying online learning as being "active" and "student-centred" are generated (Salmon, 2004; Smith, 2005). Having considered these multiple roles of the online teacher together with the shifted responsibilities for learning, the long-standing questions about "good teaching" and what makes an "effective teacher" tend to be challenging to address. Haughey (2010) addresses three emerging tensions related to transitional teaching contexts at distance institutions, which add more complexity into the questions, and first, teachers not as "sole course creators" but as "part of a course team" experience multiple difficulties including fear of losing their academic autonomy and control. Another tension can arise when the rhetorical discourses, what also appear in guidebooks to online teaching, clash with the realities of distance teaching; for example, on the one hand, teachers are asked to design interactive learning activities yet simultaneously they must consider "the fiscal realities of courses design" (p. 61) that may not allow them to teach a small scale course or for students, who may not want interactive learning but rather wish to have individualized learning instead.

In sum, the rhetorical discourse about the potentials or "state-of-the-art" of online learning has become the truth-like discourse about its nature or "state-of-the-practice" through repeated self-referential research in the field of distance education without really examining the internal complexities and external contradictions to the realities of distance educational institutions. Thus, we, in this paper, want to re-examine the rhetorical discourse about online learning and its influences on teachers' online teaching practices and teacher subjects. Typically, the term, "identities" is more commonly used in literature, but here, we utilize the Foucauldian term "subjects" instead. Using Foucauldian critical discourse analysis (Link, 1982 as cited in Jäger & Maier, 2009) we hope to present new interpretations about what is happening in actual distance education contexts.

Using Foucault to Reconceptualise Online Learning

The concept of discourse in this study follows Foucault. Michel Foucault's definition of discourse is "an institutionalized way of talking that regulates and reinforces action and thereby exerts power" (Link 1983, p.60 as cited in Jäger & Maier, 2009). This is a very different notion from the more commonly used notion of discourse as utterances, dialogues, or communications. To Foucault (1995), discourse produces a set of legitimated norms that exerts power over people's lives through regulating and institutionalizing their ways of talking, thinking and acting (Mills, 2003). Foucauldian research aims to challenge the most common, but often-unexamined assumptions or beliefs that people hold at a certain historical moment or within a particular institution by analysing and showing the "discursive practice" which denotes the complex process of how discourse regulates people's thoughts and behaviours. To Foucault, human subjects are constructed through the

process of discursive practice, so subjects such as “an innovative or traditional teacher” and “an active or passive student” are not natural but products of social, cultural, and educational discourses (Comber, 1997). In this process of subjectification, a person should necessarily become the object of research to produce knowledge about the qualities and characteristics of persons and this knowledge inevitably categorizes individuals into two groups that are often attached to the two opposing values considered good and evil. The knowledge further produces a set of norms regarded as “good behaviours” and also a set of regulations useful for correcting “bad behaviours” (Foucault, 1995). In this sense, neither problematized nor normalized human subjects capture the whole objective and ultimate truth so it is important to Foucault to be conscious of the process of “discursive practice” and the shaping and often unconscious influences of discourse on our lives.

Foucault’s approach to discourse can be used in this paper as a way to understand why and in what ways educational discourse about interactive online learning has regulated and controlled online teachers’ talking, thinking and doing. Focusing on online teachers as constructed subjects by discursive practices, we also observed that online teachers have been the object of many studies on effective online teaching and through which set of roles and norms for them about “what to do” and “how to do” have emerged and circulated across distance education institutions. Thus, Foucauldian understanding offers a new way to look into distance education institutions where educational discourses about “interactive” and “innovative” online learning are taken up, resisted, and reworked with other discourses and the set of roles and norms for online teachers in literature are realized and coming into play (Luke, 1995). Foucault (1995) also suggests “surveillance” as an essential element of discursive practice and this concept may enrich our discussion about online teachers’ discursive practices. Foucault explains that every institution including school has implicit but effective mechanism of surveillance using as an example the design of a *panopticon*, a circular building with an observation tower in the centre and divided cells for occupants in an outer wall. That is, this structural characteristic makes it convenient to observe and control each occupant’s behaviours according to the fixed regulations of the prison. When it comes to online learning contexts, the “open” nature of the Internet provides new possibilities of surveillance; in other words, it enables researchers, administrators and staff to easily monitor and observe on online teachers’ teaching activities, which has by contrast tended to be almost impossible in face-to-face educational contexts. For the sake of research or teaching evaluation, each teacher’s data stored in an online course system can be accessed and analysed, and accordingly, good teaching behaviours can be compensated and bad ones can be corrected.

Our critical discourse analysis project, therefore, focuses on two open universities that have recently transformed into online institutions. These sites of struggle with different discourses may be a good place to investigate these issues as a means to avoid limiting our perspective to the prevailing rhetoric about online learning and instead to deepen our understanding of what is going on inside the actual online learning institutions in terms of instructors’ discursive practices.

Research Methods and Data Sources

Two foci of this critical discourse analysis project are i) instructors’ language use: how instructors at open universities talk about their perspectives and experiences of online teaching and ii) instructors’ subjects: how each instructor is described and characterized by other members at the universities and why. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 17 instructors in two open universities, one in North America and the other in Asia-Pacific region. All participants were recruited by a snowball sampling method, that is, all interviewees were suggested by other members of the institutions as a good, important, or interesting (in various reasons) person to talk with. The interview questionnaire consists of 15 open-ended questions about their perceptions about online teaching, their experiences of teaching online courses, and their own evaluation of their teaching practices: question examples are “what are the criteria for effective online learning?”, “how does a good instructor, teach and talk in online courses?” and “do you think students have meaningful learning experiences in your online courses?”

Together with the interview data, which was treated as oral text, another corpus of written texts was collected from two open universities including official documents, policies, instructor guidebooks, and information packs. All texts was analysed using the Foucauldian Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. CDA is an effective way to study “social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multidisciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2) through analysing specific events of language use (Sawyer, 2002). Because a complex relation between a discourse structure and a power structure often cannot be directly

analysed, CDA focuses on language users' experiences of verbal and non-verbal behaviours in active relations with social contexts. Among different approaches to CDA, Foucauldian CDA approach to a text, as an event of language use, provides a more useful tool to investigate discursive practices in which particular subjects are constructed (Jäger & Maier, 2009), in other words, understanding how a set of legitimated norms exerts power over people's practices through institutionalizing their talking, thinking, and acting (Sawyer, 2002). As Anaís (2013) similarly points out, the Foucauldian CDA researchers are concerned with questions such as "what action or practice is represented as a norm or as a problem in a certain text?", "what evidence is used or what is left out?", and "what alternative explanations are disregarded?"

This approach offers us a useful structure to reconsider educational discourses about online learning. Online learning has become synonymous with the notion of "interactivity," which is assumed now to be an unquestionably "more effective" form of distance education. We want to understand how instructors' discursive practices are being taken up, resisted against, and how these new discourses in the distance education field are being reworked and reinforced (Luke, 1995). With a diversity of approaches, other CDA projects in education have applied and reported their analytic procedures in a vast range of ways (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005). In this study, we particularly focused on an analytic procedure used in Comber (1997)'s case study of an Italian teacher in a school in South Australia with a social justice agenda. Through the repeated close reading of the data sets with and against each other, we focused on recurring terms referring to characteristics of instructors such as "innovative", "traditional", "tech-savvy", and "resisting" and explored the contradictory nature of their talks and behaviours. To validate the results of our CDA, two researchers in this paper have been engaged in triangulating the findings through recursive reflection and continued discussion of particular examples and insightful findings from multiple sources of data (Cohen & Manion, 2000).

Findings

Both universities were established in 1970s as print-based distance institutions where the same two words "interactive" and "innovative" emerged to refer to the qualities of online learning. There were remarkably similarities in the discourse about online learning although two universities are located in very different cultural regions, one in East Asia and the other in North America, with very different institutional histories, educational foci, and cultural values. For example, all participants both in the East Asian institution (where the hierarchy between professors and students is strictly based on the Confucianism culture) and in the North American institution (in which the professor-student relation is very casual) stressed the importance of interaction between learners and teachers, although the exact nature or quality of that interaction was not deeply specified. A noticeable distinction between the two universities is in their histories of instructional media use although both universities have been transformed into online universities around the same time. Until mid-2000, the one in North America had mainly remained as a print-based institution, whereas the one in Asia had changed their main instructional delivery method over time from print to radio and to television. Despite these institutional differences, most participants (15 instructors) stated online learning was more interactive, largely due to the convenience of Internet communication, and that it is more innovative and effective than previous forms of distance education.

These statements are very much in a same line with the discourse of the interactive nature of online learning in the literature. However, during the 90 minutes interviews, we also observed a number of contradictions and inconsistencies in the way instructors talked about these issues. When asked to evaluate their own online teaching experiences, most instructors (except for 4 instructors who were mainly in charge of graduate level courses, designed using social constructivist approaches with a relatively small number of enrolled students) said that their online courses are not interactive enough. Peter, an agriculture professor in the Asian institution, said:

Compared to television courses I used to teach, I am very happy with my online courses, which enables two-way communication... I am using a discussion board in all my online courses and encouraging students to interact with each other and share various ideas and thoughts there, but most of time, students are not as active as I want... in one course, there was no single question from students through the entire course period. I was tired of waiting [laughing]. Only if interactions count for their grade, they participate... but it is impossible for me with limited supports from only one tutor to facilitate discussions in the course having more than 200 students. It will be so messy.

Another professor, Susan, teaching computer sciences at the university in North America, similarly explained her difficulties in making her online courses interactive as:

My courses are all self-paced. Learning is individualized, meaning that each student is working on different modules based on their own schedule. I believe this self-paced structure of our program is one of the strengths we have here... it allows individual students the great level of flexibility in the timing of assignments and exams within the course contract period. Of course, there are both pros and cons... it is difficult to have collaborative activities in this type of course... some finished mid-term exams and others just started their first week. Who just finished the first module cannot participate in discussion about the module 3 subject without learning the second module... If we have a class discussion board, students will share the exam questions, assignment topics and answers. It is hard to control.

These interview excerpts suggest that prevailing educational discourses about online learning seem to have a more powerful impact on instructors' talking and thinking than their actual teaching experiences. Although most of them thought their online courses were not interactive, when it came to the general question about online learning, all 17 instructors used terms like interactive, innovative, good, and effective. We also observed multiple conflicting discourses competing with each other in a single interview text. For example, discourses about what effective online learning should or could look like are competing with other discourses about institutional limitations such as "what I can or cannot do in this institution"; and discourses about the value of interactive learning and individual learning, often regarded as flexible, are frequently contradictory to one another.

Foucault (1990) in his analytic work on discourses on sexuality presented four figures that emerged from the discursive practices constituting normal or problematic subjects related to sexual behaviours. According to Foucault, these four subjects are cultural, social, and historical products constructed through the influence of institutional norms about good behaviours and bad behaviours. Given the constraints of space, we will briefly describe two contrasting cases of our instructor subjects produced through the discursive practices of online learning at an open university in the North American context: i) the "innovative" and "open-minded" instructor and ii) the "traditional" or "uncooperative" instructor. As described below, the first case is regarded as good but the second is problematized. The most important finding here is that instructor subjects are not constructed based on the actual quality of their teaching practices but rather they are based on their general attitudes toward online learning, university policies and collaborative course design.

One instructor, Jane, who teaches communication studies, was referred to by several instructors and instructional designers working at the same institution as an, "innovative and open-minded" professor. She joined the university 13 years ago when correspondence education was still a major course delivery method and since then, she has participated in various departmental projects to increase the quality of teaching. She has also played important roles in transforming traditional courses in her program into online courses. Because she majored in communication studies, she was familiar with web technologies from the very early stages of its development, and she was always more active in online learning projects and positive about these changes. Her extrovert personality, good communication manner, and genuine interest in instructional design put her in a better position to collaborate with other members in her course development team. Although her courses are not more interactive or innovative than others, her enthusiastic attitudes towards institutional changes and her behaviours as a teacher and particularly as a colleague resulted in her being labelled as an "innovative" instructor.

The second case was called the "traditional and uncooperative" instructor. Other derogatory terms such as lazy, old, out-dated, resisting and inefficient were used to describe those with similar behaviours and views. George, a history professor, joined the university about 20 years ago and put a great deal of efforts to develop effective correspondence courses. He is very confident in the quality of textbooks he published earlier so truly believes that students can experience intellectual growth only by reading carefully and writing individual essays about given topics in his courses. For these reasons, he has resisted the university policy about online publication that transforms print-based textbooks into online materials as a means to save resources and increase accessibility to those materials. At the same time, he is not very comfortable with reading these heavy texts on the computer screen and the ways of segmenting contents into small pieces to accommodate screen displays disrupts his reading flow, which he thinks it would also do to students. He feels frustrated when working with instructional

designers who force him to accept the new course development policy. Although he does not any problem with using the latest technologies and his online course does not look very different from others, he is judged as a traditional and uncooperative instructor.

Educational Importance of this Project

In this Foucauldian critical discourse analysis project, we are beginning to look closely into prevailing rhetorical discourses related to online learning and their influences on instructors' discursive practices at open universities to address the gap in our current understanding about distance education. Our findings suggest online learning has become synonymous with the idea of interactivity, so research has become single-mindedly focussed on developing more effective interactive distance education practices. This focus is based on applying social constructivist approaches to learning rather than examining our fundamental understanding about its actual characteristics. We also observe the powerful impact of those rhetorical discourses on instructors' perspectives about online learning and their subjects at open universities, which has increased the potential danger of the institutional abuse of power against or the marginalization of a particular group. The ultimate aim of this study is not to refute social constructivist assumptions but to open a space for multiple discourses about online learning. This study could provide educational researchers in the field of distance education with a new framework and perspective to broaden their understanding of the nature of online learning beyond the current set of assumptions.

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