

Chapter 72

Contradictions and Expansive Transformation in the Activity Systems of Higher Education International Students in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter features a description of three contradictions (i.e., disconnects) in the activity system of international higher education students in online learning. These disconnects are interpreted in relation to the constructs of teaching presence, real presence, and social and cultural presence and analyzed in terms of their origins in face-to-face, time- and place-dependent contexts of learning. Teaching presence is the external (to the student) regulation and management of learning, real presence is the sensory-rich character of learning, and social and cultural presence relate to specific types of interactions and communication that occur in conjunction with learning. Learning presence reflects a constructivist perspective that values socially-constructed forms of knowledge and self-regulation. The chapter follows with a description of how the disconnects can be bridged and the activity system expanded.

INTRODUCTION

In the general literature on online learning, some studies have identified the time flexibility or independence of online courses as one of the main reasons why students enroll in them (e.g., Braun, 2008; Mahoney, 2009; Northrup, 2002). Factors such as convenience, scheduling, and availability influence students' choice of online learning more than learning preference (Burton, 2009). Time independence

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may be important for all learners but it is a particularly compelling affordance for international students (see Park, 2006; Thompson & Ku, 2005; Zhao & McDougall, 2008).

Online courses provide flexible schedules (Liu, 2008) and the possibility to study at any time during the week, to balance study time, to catch up on work or work ahead (Thompson & Ku, 2005). For international students, online learning offers spatial as well as temporal flexibility (Chen, Bennett, & Maton, 2008), in other words, control of place and pace (Park, 2006). Place independence may often be an advantage of online learning for international students (Zhao & McDougall, 2008) because of transportation concerns (Tseng & Newton, 2002) and difficulties related to weather (Lebrun & Rebelo, 2006).

While time and place independence offers many affordances to online learners and fulfills many of their needs, it also creates new needs and problems. That is because the introduction of the tools of computers and the Internet to meet the need of time and place independence subsequently means that adaptations are needed to other components of the activity system. Those adaptations can result in a form of learning that breaks with historical forms. The break or disruption can be a good thing if the new form allows more culturally and socially advanced activity to take place. But the break can be a negative one if, with the introduction of the new tool, other components of the activity system do not adapt to take advantage of the affordances of the tools. As we noted in Chapter 4, uneven development can result in disconnects, i.e., contradictions within activity systems.

In the previous chapter, we presented the cross-analysis of the portraits of seven international non-native speaking (NNS) higher education students. All of these students had long histories of study in face-to-face contexts. Some had already completed a higher education degree in these contexts. The students, therefore, did not come into online learning from a vacuum or without a past. Like all individuals in activity systems, they carried with them their histories (Engeström, 2001). They were used to the norms, division of labour, community, and tools of that context of learning. That context would have been characterized by physical classrooms and scheduled classes during which the students assemble, sit in rows, and follow an instructor's lecture or discuss in groups. The instructor would have been actively directing students' learning.

The dominant form of learning to which students would have been accustomed involved reliance primarily on listening (e.g., to the instructor mostly and to peers), reading of notes on a blackboard or projected with presentation software onto a screen, and copying notes by writing or typing. When students were working in groups, before or after class, speaking would be the most common form of communication. Also characteristic of that learning would be those periods before and after lectures, and sometimes during lectures, when students could interact socially and culturally with others. That form of learning would also have been characterized by immediacy and lack of delay (i.e., ask a question, receive an answer).

We summarize these characteristics of students' history of learning using the terms: teaching presence, real presence, social presence, and cultural presence. Teaching presence is the external (to the student) regulation and management of learning, real presence is the sensory-rich character of learning, and social and cultural presence relate to specific types of interactions and communication that occur in conjunction with learning.

According to Lombard and Ditton (1997), presence refers to the socially-rich experiences that appear natural, immediate, direct, and real, "a mediated experience that seems very much like it is not mediated" (Introduction section, para. 1). The authors define presence as "the perceptual illusion of nonmediation" (Presence Explicated section, para. 1). In the use of media to interact with others, presence is related to the perception of the medium as "sociable, warm, sensitive, personal or intimate" (Concept Explication

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