Chapter 90

Learner "Mixed Embodiment" in Face-to-Face, Blended, and Fully Online Learning:
An Exploratory and Applied Conceptual Work

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ABSTRACT

Is it accurate to suggest that face-to-face (F2F) learning involves learner "embodiment" (learners' physical presence) and fully online learning involves learner "disembodiment" (a lack of learner corporeality in the learning experience)? An exploration of the research suggests that the concepts of embodiment and disembodiment are not clearly defined and, further, that learners engage with "mixed embodiment" in all the contexts of F2F, blended, and fully online learning. There are not bright lines of embodiment and disembodiment in the separation between real and virtual spaces in learning. This work offers a basic definition of "mixed embodiment" and some early thoughts on the way the physical learner is engaged in online learning with a variety of factors: assignment types, social interactivity, group assignments, instructor interactivity, assignment sharing, self-representation creation, technological applications, and other factors. This work has implications on instructional and learning design for greater incorporation of learner embodiment in online learning.

INTRODUCTION

"Embodiment" refers to a state of being able to be perceived in physical form, as something material and tangible and instantiated. Often, embodiment occurs in a particular context or situation. Some writing suggests that something experienced in the body is more authentic than something experienced more

remotely. Embodied experience involves "the human brain, the body, and its larger environment" for human experience (Wilson & Golonka, 2013, as cited in Hewett & Thonus, 2019, p. 1). "Disembodiment" refers to a state of lacking form or presence, lacking material existence, and lacking a body or corporeality. This refers to an ethereal state of being. This also is thought to occur in a particular spaces and contexts, interpreted broadly. And "mixed embodiment" refers to being partially present in physical form (including through mediated means, such as digital imagery, digital video, voice communications, and such for virtual expression, self-representation, messaging, and other endeavors). In a learning context, a newer definition of "mixed embodiment" is the amount of personhood and individually that is required for the particular learning context based on learning design. This concept suggests that people manifest in various spaces through various expressions of individuality: digital self-representation, learner agency, assignment types, assessment types, group collaborations, social interactivity, learner creativity and expressiveness, and other factors. Learners speak through their ideas, their friendships, and their works.

Sometimes, terms may be better understood with the addition of indirect definitions and inferential concepts. Colloquially, being "embodied" is seen as more healthy and integrated and desirable than being "disembodied." A light exploration of social imagery around "embodiment" shows various visual representations of people who are at peace and integrated; there are images of people doing yoga, a silhouetted seated person meditating, a person holding hands up in the air in a sign of victory, a diagram of an avatar exercising, and others. Social imagery around "disembodiment" shows depictions of people missing parts of their bodies, body parts (heads and arms) in the middle of a room, an x-ray of a broken hand, a ceramic art piece of a partial body on a cart, a faceless body, a heart by itself against a black background, a cartoon of "disembodied eyes," and a man being strangled by a disembodied brain, among others. Some disembodied body parts are inanimate, and in some horror scenarios, they are animate (with a life of their own). The suggestion of "disembodiment," visually, is of ineffectuality, fracturedness, disconnection, and lack of cohesion. The first set of "embodied" social imagery trends positive in sentiment, and the "disembodied" set trends negative. [Psychological "disembodiment" is also known as the "Cotard delusion experience" and results in "derealization and depersonalisation" (Young & Leafhead, 1996, as cited in Gerrans, 2003, p. 510).] These ideas of "embodiment" and "disembodiment" are a little challenging when applied to learning. In terms of sound senses, a "disembodied" voice is not connected to an understood source. It may emanate mysteriously, out-of-body.

In a simple depiction, face-to-face (F2F) learning is considered "embodied," and fully online learning is considered "disembodied," the first "real" and the latter "virtual." In the first, people are in "meat space," and their physical selves (facial expressions, dress, body movements, physicality, and other aspects) are present and interact with the teacher, the learning environment, co-learners, and others. In the latter, people are in "virtual" space, and they use avatars, their work, their voices, and other aspects to interact and collaborate, albeit with fewer opportunities to self-represent and to self-express. This binary approach of "embodied" or "disembodied" apparently over-simplifies this phenomena of engagement of the embodied or disembodied selves. A research team suggests that labeling online education as "disembodied, wholly technical, and devoid of human interaction" really points to a "misuse of technology by the academy" and fails to represent the sense of authenticity in the learning (Robley, Farnsworth, Flynn, & Horne, Sept. – Oct. 2004, p. 341).

In some academic domains, practitioners have an understanding that "virtual interactions are necessarily embodied" (Dolmage, 2012; Arola & Wysocki, 2012; Hayles, 2005; Collins, 1999, as cited in Cohn, 2016, p. 80). The actions taken virtually originate with a physical body and person. Digital representations then create a sense of the person (through visuals, through user-designed and human-embodied

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