Isolation in online learning environments: Podcast Transcript

Introduction

From the outset, the internet has had a complicated relationship with isolation. In 1998, Kraut *et al* highlighted what they termed the 'Internet paradox': that this technology, with the capacity to connect people all over the world, seemed to have a negative impact on users' 'social involvement and psychological well-being' (cited in Kraut *et al* 2002). However, three years later, the authors provided an update: the negative effects on the original group had 'dissipated', while a second group appeared to experience positive outcomes for people with well developed social skills, but negative outcomes for people who were less socially adept (Kraut *et al* 2002; Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 2013, p 321).

This neat distinction between the two groups was further clouded by the argument that some socially isolated individuals seem to find, in the 'protective environment' of the internet, an opportunity to develop their social skills (Hamburger and Ben-Artzi 2000, cited in Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 2013, p 322). While others, in this same group, seem to trap themselves in a 'negative loop' of internet use, where prolonged time online created 'further distance from the offline world' (Kim, LaRose and Peng 2009, cited in Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider 2013, p 321).

It seems apparent, then, that the internet has the capacity both to connect and isolate its users. This presents a challenge for online course designers who subscribe to the view that students learn best when working in groups: are we certain that the online learning environments we use to connect students, be it *Second Life, Minecraft, Moodle* or others, do not end up isolating them further?

The evidence for social learning

First of all, what evidence is there that students learn best in groups?

Brown and Adler argue emphatically that:

> 'The most profound impact of the Internet, an impact that has yet to be fully realized, is its ability to support and expand the various aspects of social learning.' (2008)

It's a striking claim, backed up by evidence from Light that one of the strongest determinants of student success is their ability to participate in a small study group, stronger even than the style of the instructor (2001, cited in Brown and Adler 2008).

Urry, somewhat pessimistically, takes a different tack: arguing that if the university is to be seen as a place of 'intense meetingness', then 'no amount of virtual connectivity can really replace it' (Urry 2007, p 244).

In other words, students have more successful outcomes when they learn in groups. Though Brown and Adler see the internet as a positive force for achieving this goal, and Urry views it as an insufficient replacement for face-to-face interaction, both fundamentally agree that connections between students are important for learning.

What then, of the other side of the argument? What impact does isolation have on student achievement?

Negative impact of isolation

Definitions of 'isolation' in the literature are varied. Erichsen and Bollinger (2011 p 311) split it into two categories: academic isolation, resulting in 'marginalization and anxiety' and social isolation, described as 'pervasive feelings of loneliness, dissatisfaction, marginalization, and heightened levels of interpersonal distress'.

The only word to be used in both definitions is 'marginalization'. If we are to take it that marginalization is something done *to* an individual, rather than something they *seek*, then it follows that isolation is not sought, but is forced upon students by people, environment, technology or circumstance.

Another recurring theme in definitions of isolation is 'a lack of meaningful social contacts' (Hortulanas *et al* 2006, p 37). It is not that isolated individuals do not know anyone or are incapable of making connections, but that those connections do not meet their 'social needs'. The extent of each individual's need will vary: some may be satisfied with just a few close relationships, while others may require constant meaningful contact with a larger group.

What of the impact of isolation on the student? Rubin writes that solitude can result in 'intrapersonal feelings of loneliness, sadness, anxiety, helplessness, and hopelessness' (Rubin 2013, p *xvi*). How much worse, then, is 'isolation', which is not sought but is a forced separation?

There is also some evidence that 'dissatisfaction and isolation' as a result of online study has an impact on attrition rates for courses (Schaeffer & Konetes 2010), a view subscribed to by a large number of academics (Allen & Seaman 2013, p 6). While it should be noted that students who study online often have very different backgrounds to those who enroll in a face-to-face programme (Melkun 2012), it seems reasonable to argue that the issues identified by Rubin would have some impact on the student's academic success, as well as their mental wellbeing.

It is important to stress that isolation among online students is not posited as an alternative to an imagined 'social cohesion' of students who physically attend university. Just as an online student may find their social needs met by a small circle of supportive friends and family (Hortulanas *et al* 2006, p 37), an 'offline' student may continue to feel isolated even when surrounded by peers.

Nor is isolation to be taken as a binary position, where the student is either isolated or they are not. Just as Edwards (2015) argues that openness is not the opposite of closed-ness, aspects of online education can both isolate and connect at the same time.

Isolating effect of online learning environments

In the rest of this podcast, I will look at how online learning environments can increase students' sense of isolation while creating a barrier to the 'meaningful contact' that connects students and establishes an effective student community.

1. **Distance from the university**

Perhaps the most obvious isolating effect of online learning environments is their position as an alternative to physical attendance of a university. As Bayne (2014) points out, the term 'distance education' serves to position online attendance as an alternative to the 'norm',

immediately marginalising those students who study online from the on-campus student body. Indeed, marketing materials for institutions like Bayne's own University of Edinburgh put a heavy emphasis on the city itself and on the buildings that make up the campus.

Yet, the geographic location of the host institution may be more important to the online student than would likely be imagined. In her paper, Bayne raises the intriguing possibility that online students may choose to enroll in a programme because, for them, it represents 'a conceptual homeward return' (2014). This could be because the student has lived near the institution in the past, or because they have historic links to it through relatives and ancestors. Faced with the opportunity to study anywhere, some students seem to seek an institution which for them feels in some way like 'home'.

If we are to interpret 'home' as a safe, familiar space, we can readily see that this conceptual homecoming is in some way an attempt by the student to avoid the isolation of 'attending somewhere new'. This idea of finding comfort in the familiar will be returned to a little later in this podcast.

2. Instability of environments

Another concern raised by Bayne is the instability of the online environment when compared to the offline. Where students attending a physical campus enjoy the 'spatial securities' (Mol and Law 199, p 642, cited in Bayne 2014) of set classes, at a set time, in a set place, with set people, online environments offer no such stability.

The online student must learn 'within the uncertain boundaries of a highly technologised educational space' (Bayne 2014). Or, to use a term from a different paper by Bayne, in an online classroom that is 'destabilized' (Bayne 2010, p 8). Not only is the online classroom not confined to one environment, but the environments visited change so frequently that they become 'disquieting, disorienting, strange, anxiety-inducing, uncanny' (Bayne 2010, p 6).

There are advantages to learning in this uncanny environment. Unfamiliar environments can prompt students 'to be uncertain, to question, to experience, in strangely new ways' (Royle 2003, p 14, cited in Bayne 2010). However, they can also isolate students by calling into question the ''thereness' of learners and teachers' (Bayne 2010).

That is to say, the online student is never entirely online: they also have a physical, offline presence. They can be wrenched away from the online world by the sound of a doorbell or of the need to eat. However, even in online spaces, the student's presence is transitory and often split. Tapscott notes, for example, that when observing a child navigate the world wide web, they quickly move between sites, learning in an 'interactive and nonsequential' fashion (Tapscott 1998, p 142, cited in Cousin 2005, p 120).

In this way, the student's online presence is 'ghost-like', to borrow a term from Bayne (2010). They move from one environment to another, occasionally leaving evidence of their presence in the form of comments or posts. To look at this from the other side, they will also find evidence of previous visits by students and tutors without ever necessarily encountering them in 'real-time'.

The notion that online students can study 'anywhere, anytime' is generally seen as a positive (Melkun 2012). However, if the student is never entirely 'in one place' and their peers are never entirely sharing that space, how does the student make a 'meaningful' connection with others?

For Bayne, this 'digital pedagogy' presents an opportunity to reimagine 'contact' between students and teachers (2010, p 8). The question is: does this digital contact satisfy the social needs of the students who exist in this environment?

3. Resistance to creating 'familiar' spaces

Some effort has been made in the past to re-create the spatial securities of the physical classroom within an online environment. Brown and Adler (2008), for example, describe the University of Southern Queensland's 'Terra Incognita' project, whereby students attended an online classroom constructed in *Second Life*. This virtual representation of the physical classroom reduces the isolation of many online learning environments by providing a central location for lecture-style teaching and interaction within "breakout" groups.

A similar project, at Harvard Law School, provided three levels of instruction for the class 'CyberOne: Law in the Court of Public Opinion' (Brown and Adler 2008). The second level - most relevant to this discussion - took place in *Second Life*, where lectures and discussions could take place, and where students could "visit" faculty during their online office hours.

Both the University of Southern Queensland and Harvard Law School's use of *Second Life* represent an attempt to overcome the spatial and temporal isolation that can occur online. Students taking part in synchronous online lectures or discussions must attend at the same time and, in the case of *Second Life*, have a virtual presence in the form of an avatar. They can communicate in real-time, follow one another and, to an extent, interact with each other.

The existence of these projects seems to confirm Urry's assertion that the purpose of a university is not just the production, storage and transmission of information, but that 'meetingness' is key (2007). The advantage of a virtual representation, like *Second Life*, is that it creates the possibility of an accidental meeting, as might happen in the coffee shop, bars or hallways of the physical campus.

There has been some resistance to this virtual manifestation of the physical campus. Cousin (2005, p 122) criticises the names and graphics used by Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) like *Blackboard*, *FirstClass* and *WebCT* as looking backwards to the 'safe and known academic world'. The problem, as Cousin sees it, is that the 'uncharted territory' of online education is not being explored fully because the design of online learning environments is focused too much on the 'familiar'.

Cousin's argument is an initially convincing one. Why would we want to hold on to the past, when there is a limitless future to be explored? One reason for doing so, in defence of online learning environments that closely resemble the construction of the physical campus, is the sense of familiarity that was discussed in relation to homecoming. Might it be possible that traditional classroom structures help students feel like they are not studying alone, but are part of a class?

4. Impact of online identity on development of 'meaningful' contact

While immersive online environments like *Second Life* and *Minecraft* do allow for some degree of 'meetingness', it is important to recognise that they can also, in their own way, create a sense of isolation for students.

As Cousin ([2005 p 118](#)) argues, the medium through which we communicate is not a 'mere instrument': it shapes the way we behave, how we construct identity and how we form relationships with others. For example, communicating with Morse code encourages the user to be succinct. A Morse user would be unlikely to include personal details, jokes or interesting asides because the time it takes to communicate these would be prohibitive.

A user of *Second Life* or *Moodle*, however, can communicate many personal details to others through text chat or in the way that they construct (or re-construct) their identity (Boon and Sinclair 2009, cited in [Bayne 2010](#)). This immediately poses the questions: 'what will I reveal?' and 'what will I hide?'.

Perhaps more importantly for creating meaningful contact and overcoming the sense of social isolation: 'what are other people hiding?'.

Amichai-Hamburger & Schneider ([2013, p 323](#)) describe two 'different orientations' that have developed in online environments. Those who are socially adept offline tend to use those same skills online, constructing avatars or identities that are essentially duplicates of their offline identity and present a very real opportunity of them being 'identified' in the offline world. Introverts meanwhile, with 'their tendency to withdraw from social interaction', find in the process of online identity construction an opportunity to re-create themselves without fear of rejection. They can change their gender, race or age, and can do so more than once if desired. In one study (Dunn and Guadagno 2012, cited in Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider [2013, p 323](#)), participants were asked to create an avatar before entering a virtual game. The avatars created by introverts tended to be more attractive than those created by extraverts.

This creation of online identities creates the conditions for a curious paradox: people online tend to disclose more about themselves than they would do in offline interactions, but often do so while keeping their 'real' identity a secret (Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider [2013, p 318](#)).

Thus the process of avatar creation in *Second Life* or *Minecraft*, or of profile creation in *Facebook*, *Moodle* or *Twitter*, creates questions of authenticity that can make the establishment of meaningful relationships more difficult. As Fukuyama (1995) points out: people can only establish a trusting relationship when honesty becomes 'palpable' (cited in [Dolan 2011](#)).

Additionally, Pultnam (2001, p 175) argues that trust is in large part established through the exchange of nonverbal cues like smiling and listening attentively. He goes on to argue that computer-based groups tend to develop understanding faster than offline groups, but that they are slower to build the 'trust and reciprocity necessary to implement that understanding'.

Thus we find, ironically, that one of the offline issues with isolation can replicate itself in highly social online environments like *Second Life* or *Moodle*: that 'loneliness may be experienced even when an individual is surrounded by others' (Peplau and Perlman 1982, cited by Amichai-Hamburger and Schneider [2013, p 317](#)). This may be particularly true where the relationships that are established online reinforce the gap between 'the interaction we are having' and the kind of trusting, meaningful relationship that is so important for satisfying social needs and overcoming isolation.

Conclusion

It is clear then that the internet's complicated relationship with isolation is far from resolved. Where the online course designer creates online learning environments that attempt to overcome the physical separation between students and tutors, those environments can themselves act to isolate the student through their instability, their occasional rejection of traditional forms like the classroom, and the difficulty of establishing trust online.

It is important to remember, then, that creating an online space where students can work together to construct understanding does not, in and of itself, create the 'meetingness' that has long been such a major advantage of physical university attendance. As online education continues to develop, further exploration is required into practices that can be developed to help isolated students form the social groups that improve mental health and contribute to better academic outcomes.

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