Reflecting on *then* and *now*:
pedagogical being in lockdown via Zoom

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a creative narrative enquiry into the aspects of online learning which proved crucial to my work as an online curriculum and materials creator in creative arts in the 2000s, that have proven invaluable during the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020. Reflections on my practical experience of, and research into, e-learning and online communities of practice lead me to recognise how five key features of online education served as a solid grounding for responsive and pedagogically engaging teaching and learning in the age of coronavirus. Community of practice theory and pedagogy form the basis for this investigation of five constant features of e-pedagogy which are just as pertinent now as they were then—in the relatively early years of web-based learning. My historic narrative of *now* and *then* indicates that the affordances of online communities of practice with the greatest value to educational practice include the development of trust, the creation of critical friendships, and the need for outcomes that are impactful at the levels of both the collective and the individual. This reflective process enabled me to access aspects of my pedagogy as an educator that had long been in hibernation and to apply them directly to the act of becoming an instant e-educator in a time of crisis.

HERE WE GO AGAIN

This article describes how my immersive, experiential learning in designing learning and curricula for online learning at a Master-level in the 2000s prepared me well for the emergency application of learning via technology during the 2020 lockdown period. The article demonstrates that my most transformative learning of the 2000s, namely that online learners required socialisation and a sense of belonging, emphasised the centrality of community of practice pedagogy[1] to what I call my 'pedagogical being'—that deep aspect of one's self as an educator so transformed by lived experience that it becomes core to one's educational philosophy.

THEN AND NOW

On Friday, May 15, 2020, at 5pm, I finished my one hundredth lockdown teaching and learning session by Zoom. Just as Hoover had stood for vacuum cleaner in the '60s, so has Zoom become the key trope standing for all applications of its type, outclassing Skype, Groups, Anymeeting and other all-comers. I used Zoom for multiple pedagogical purposes: lecture- and tutorial-style interactions; two- and three-person learner-focussed mentor-led postgraduate critical conversations; and interest-group sessions informed by community of practice theory, which started with Lave and Wenger[2] in 1991.

In another life, fifteen years ago, I had been involved as an early-uptake curriculum and materials creator for 100 percent-online Master-level programmes in writing and creative arts and as a card-carrying ASCILITE (Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education) conference-goer with multiple refereed outputs.[3] After creating resources for the mostly asynchronous delivery and teaching successfully with them for four years, I found myself so lonely for face-to-face, socially-mediated learning that I had to refocus my pedagogical being. Our pedagogical being is who we are, who we become and who we have the capacity to become when we engage in the flow of teaching and learning. Friday, May 15, took me back, and I asked myself, "What aspects of online education crucial in the late 2000s remain important in the early 2020s?" This article reflects on this journey deep into, turning away from, and returning to online spaces of learning to discover what, for me and likely for others, sits at the heart of online educational learning.

Creative academic stories of this nature draw on narrative enquiry and autoethnography to generate authentic narratives of the lived experience of those close to a phenomenon over time, leading to understandings about how the individual and the cultural are interconnected.[4] The subject of enquiry is the social reality of the narrator; myself as educator, 'being pedagogically' within a culture of electronically-mediated learning. In the tradition of 'narrative knowing',[5] this is a story that reflects a knowable reality.[6] As autoethnography drawing on the self as data, this article aims to transcend "mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation;"[7] in this case, in relation to the cultures we create when we teach and learn online.

During the 2020 international lockdown, my major Zoom interactions fell into three categories: (i) maximising the affordances of the webinar-ware to deliver content- and strategy-based language learning to large groups in Vietnam; (ii) harnessing the communicative capacity of the medium to create mentoring sessions where learners could be heard and critical conversations occur; and (iii) facilitating online communities of practice for the purposes of the sharing and building of professional practice, leveraging the potential of the information-sharing and breakout group affordances. Each of these three pedagogical contexts demanded my full reflective capacity, whether recollective

reflection, thinking-on-feet real-time reflection, or meticulous planning for learning. They also required harnessing the reserves of experience, taking me back to the late 2000s when the fresh modes of delivery and interactive materials my team created were nationally acclaimed.

The building of my comfort with and expertise in online materials creation and techniques of teaching and learning happened in Australia at an ambitious 'cyberversity,' and, as 'the Kiwi' on the team, I never wanted, to draw on the Māori saying, to be the kumara that declared its sweetness ("Kāore te kumara e kōrero mō tōna ake reka"). Instead, I wrote ten journal articles, only two of which I reference here, though they are now, in effect, my data. Next, I will briefly outline some of our learnings from this project and consider their applicability to the cultures of learning I have described above that occurred out of necessity not desire in the wake of the pandemic.

FIVE KEY LESSONS OF *THEN*

The most prominent learning was that successful online learning in this context ('the first takeaway') involved creating and managing online communities of practice. Within these communities, tutors assumed the roles of 'e-moderators'[8] and curated 'e-tivities'.[9] In this terminology, from the UK's Open University, e-moderators serve a range of functions from facilitating discussion board sessions and chat groups to evaluating the shared discourse of individuals contributing to the e-community. The management 'netiquette' via a negotiated protocol was also central to the successful operation of the e-culture. The 'e-tivities' used were provocations, stimulus materials, and questions serving as prompts for critical writing on key concepts and topics related to the curriculum. After all community members had written a round of responses, a further level of prompts was added so as to deepen the criticality of the discussion and question any underlying assumptions.

The second 'takeaway' concerned the value of trust in e-education. Each 'subject' (as they call 'papers' in Australia) comprised 12 discussion board topics, and this course structure enabled community members to generate much 'shared repertoire' (to use Wenger's[10] term for the collective discourse generated by the community) and therefore constitutive of its culture. Over the 12 weeks, even the initially outlying and diffident learners were engaging with depth, and this is due to the trust fostered among learners.[11]

A third moment of knowing came from the realisation that critical friendship afforded a valuable and naturalistic pedagogical opportunity for writers. Learners either chose their buddies—perhaps known from previous units or from their own writings—or were sympathetically paired by the e-moderator. Critical friends functioned as mirrors and lamps in the process of critiquing creative texts for assessment. The acts of seeing their

own strengths and weaknesses in others' works and generating critical commentaries from a readerly perspective led not only to the building of trust between buddies but also to an increased sense of autonomy for the learners; that is, they were able to generate critique without the supervision of the e-moderator. Trust between buddies cemented trust within the broader community which developed via the passage of time. This trust, then, is a function of another of Wenger's features of a community of practice, 'joint enterprise',[12] working together on a similar task with similar motivations. These motivations were in part about assessment, but more about the earning of a professional identity.

The idea of professional identity brings me to the fourth and fifth critical moments or takeaways. The fourth item of critical learning is that everyone wants to belong; and belonging is fundamental to successful online education.[13] The concept of belonging lies at the heart of 'sense of community', a much-researched and -measured idea in the literature of online education. In 1986, when online education was young, McMillan and Chavis described "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that learners' needs will be met through their commitment to be together."[14] This sense of community evolves through collaborative and authentic practices that build partnerships and community allegiances between and among participants. This is the work of e-moderators, online lecturers and mentors. It aligns with the Wengerian concept of 'mutual engagement'.[15] Through mutual engagement, we create allegiances to current communities, and imagine belonging to aspirational communities in our professional futures. We might call these imagined communities, where we imagine alliances with people we have not yet met, and this act of imagined belonging improves engagement and fosters motivation.

This leads to the fifth critical moment or takeaway message, but far from last, key learning: that online learning in community needs to have something for the individual as well as for the community.[16] Lave and Wenger[17] argued there are connections between imagined community and desired identity. It was true of writers in the Master-level programme that this community of practice pedagogy enhanced individuals' understanding of their desire for a future life as a professional writer.[18] Not only did they contribute collectively to evolving community text and repertoire in the discussion boards, they also generated works of their own for critique, first by their critical friend and then by the e-moderator/assessor, and usually by the moderating eyes of other lecturers.

Workshopping is a core pedagogy in creative arts, and it involves the critical appraisal of work by multiple community members with different levels of what Lave and Wenger called 'legitimate peripheral participation' or LPP.[19] LPP allows less confident members and those with initial fears of imposter syndrome to observe the work of the group peripherally at first, becoming more active participants in the acts of scrutiny as trust and belonging build. Salmon[20] maintained this process of socialisation is one of the

cornerstones of e-learning but it does not account entirely for the fact that learners' engagement in education is tied also to both assessment and identity. Learning, online or not, is concerned with 'proving that you can be' (via assessment) and with 'becoming': the element of personal identity development, fulfilment and being closer to one's imagined communities of desire.

NOW: LESSONS APPLIED

COVID-19, and the forced return to online spaces, led me to call these learnings to mind, and to apply them to the three main pedagogical contexts described above. I carried with me a quote from Hung and Der-Thanq which encapsulated the five key learnings: "People, forming a community, come together because they are able to identify with something—a need, a common shared goal and identity."[21] Thus, grounded in my own experience, I armed myself to tackle online learning again.

In teaching examination English to communities in Vietnam, understanding such examinations are often 'make or break' moments for these learners, I leveraged the reputation I already had as a lecturer after many years of teaching there. For me this teaching was voluntary work: making life in lockdown meaningful for overseas communities with whom I had fostered alliances. However, in creating five hours of online learning a week, I had to fast-track my reflective capacity. The impetus began with recognising the common needs and shared goals of the learners (who ranged in age from teenagers to retirees). These goals involved enhancing competence in the productive skills of writing and speaking via carefully moderated e-tivities, knowing that speaking and writing are the aspects of language learning most concerned with identity. Each utterance or generated text is an act of generating an artefact of identity. I gave learners opportunities to engage mutually in a range of joint enterprises (such as text co-creation and peer assessment) and to share their repertoire (their homework writing and speaking recordings) on Google Drive for the scrutiny of others and ultimately me, their lecturer. The principle of maximising participation and output ensured everyone had their say, even in classes exceeding a hundred. The feedback required by the individual for learning complemented the collectivity of learning from each other's works-in-progress.

In my online work with postgraduate learners and with co-mentors, I invested in building trust and, hence, community. In the age of coronavirus, it was important to recognise the emotions and stories impacting us all; in fact, in many cases it was impossible to proceed with the work of education without first acknowledging the affective dimension. Conversations about coronavirus contributed to building trust, and lay the groundwork for constructive critical conversations about project work. We consolidated a sense of being in this together. Indeed the dimensions of mutual engagement and joint enterprise allowed us to examine the journey, and not just the

outputs, within our small-scale community of practice. Our shared repertoire are the drafts and other artefacts that are products of our community, and these are respected in the spirit of critical friendship and understood as texts representing the exploration and development of professional identities.

I facilitated communities of practice among mentors on my programmes and editors of two journals of which I am a core community member. The purposes here were both to keep track of how people were travelling with their work as mentors and also to share our stories and experiences as repertoire. Our joint enterprise is that we are all involved in facilitating the deep-learning journeys of other professionals, some with more applied experience than others. The sharing of stories of practice can build confidence and create a repertoire of ways of being that defines the group. Our ways of doing and practising mentoring are shared as a register of joint enterprise, and the effect of this is ideally to highlight our mutual engagement. In this context, I take this as meaning that we can all learn from each other.

Within sessions, which occur approximately every two to three weeks, it is important to keep up momentum by ensuring a learning trajectory for those who invest in the community regularly, but also provide interest for those whose schedules allow them to join the community infrequently. Each session needs to recognise the capital of individuals while keeping an eye on the learning needs of the community. As these sessions are populated with seasoned educationalists, it is important to have a transparent year-long curriculum and to ensure a changing range of dynamics both from session to session and within sessions. The affordances of the shared screen, the whiteboard and the breakout groups allow for a balance of led e-tivities and the sharing of repertoire among critical friends.

TOWARDS CONCLUSION

As I reflect on the days of lockdown, I come to value my early grounding in e-pedagogy, a key constituent of my pedagogical being, all the more. Although I despair frequently at the vicissitudes of technology, I believe my grounding in the principles of community of practice theory and e-moderation enhanced my value as a member of the online communities to which I contributed in these weeks of enclosure. Taking time to build trust is crucial; it constitutes investment both in learning and in learners' identities. It builds the communities in which we work. The pedagogy of critical friendship comes to the fore in times of crisis and forms a model for the relationship between the assessor and the learner in all contexts of teaching and learning. Further, informal critical friendships, such as those between trusting and close learners, can consolidate motivation in complex times. Though the community becomes the medium of much of this learning, we should never forget that it is the individual trajectory of each member, of each learner, that is the primary project of our enterprise.

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3   See M. Andrew, "Postgraduate writing e-communities: De-marginalising remote participants," in *The Margins and Mainstreams Papers: The Refereed Proceedings of The 14th Conference of The Australian Association of Writing Programs*, eds D. L. Brien and M. Freiman, (2009), 1-12, https://www.aawp.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Andrew_0.pdf ; M. Andrew, "Community and individuality: Teaching and learning insights from a postgraduate online writing program," *SAGE Open*, 4, (2014) 1-13, https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014544292.

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5   J. Bruner, "Narrative and paradigmatic modes of thought," in *In search of pedagogy. The selected works of Jerome Bruner Vol. 2.* (New York: Routledge, 1985) 116–128.

6   D. E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis," in *Life history and narrative*, eds. J. A. Hatch and R. Wisniewski (Washington, DC: Routledge Falmer, 1985) 5-23.

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8   G. Salmon, *E-moderating* (London, UK: Routledge Falmer, 2004).

9   G. Salmon, *E-tivities* (London, UK: Kogan Page, 2003).

10   E. Wenger, *Communities of practice* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

11   Andrew, "Postgraduate writing e-communities."

12   Wenger, *Communities of practice*, 77.

13   See Andrew, "Postgraduate writing e-communities"; Andrew, "Community and individuality"; D. Hung, and C. Der-Thanq, "Situated cognition, Vygotskian thought and learning from the communities of practice perspective: Implications for design of web-based e-learning," *Educational Media International*, 38, no. 1 (2001): 3-12; Salmon, *E-moderating*.

14   D. W. McMillan, and D. M. Chavis, "Sense of community: A definition and theory," *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, no. 1 (1986): 6-23.

15   Wenger, *Communities of practice*, 73.

16   Andrew, "Community and individuality."

17   Lave, and Wenger, *Situated learning*.

18   Andrew, "Postgraduate writing e-communities."

19   Lave, and Wenger, *Situated learning*, 27.

20   Salmon, *E-moderating*.

21   Hung, and Der-Thanq, "Situated cognition," 3.