

PTAS proposal

New geographies of learning: distance education and being 'at' Edinburgh

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Abstract

The sense of location and connection to an institution is differently, not less, important to students who are studying at a distance from their home university. The question of students' identification with their institution is a key strategic issue for recruitment and retention, and also for the quality of the student experience once studies are underway. Taking into account the anticipated growth of distance education at Edinburgh and internationally, this project will ask the question: what does it mean to be a student at Edinburgh who is not *in* Edinburgh, and what insight does this give us into learning design for high quality distance programmes?

The fully online, distance MSc in E-learning in the School of Education has around 150 students studying across 35 countries. Using this programme as its primary focus for research, the project employs an innovative mix of narrative and visual methods to explore how distance learners understand the relation between 'here' and 'there', and how they construct and describe their relationship with their institution. On the back of this research, the project will develop new pedagogical and pastoral approaches to supporting community formation for distance learning programmes, which will be of value and relevance to those working on distance programmes at this University, in the UK and beyond.

Background and rationale

A sense of place, an understanding of 'its character'... can only be constructed by linking that place to places beyond. A progressive sense of place would recognize that. (Massey 1991: 29)

Online distance learning in higher education is growing throughout the UK and internationally, with many institutions providing programmes in this mode (White et al 2010). Funding bodies such as HEFCE are encouraging further growth in the provision of online distance learning (Brindley 2011), while in this University the Distance Education Initiative is investing in online distance education in order significantly to grow numbers of taught postgraduate students over the coming years (DEI 2011).

Online learning provokes questions about the nature of place and institution for distance learners, with the question of students' identification with their institutions a key strategic issue for recruitment and retention, and also for the quality of the student experience once studies are underway. Distance learning is sometimes described as place-less or border-less (Latchem 2005). This is inaccurate in two respects. First, location and place are closely linked with matters of identity (Al-Mahmood 2008; Edwards and Usher 2000). Second, the institution through which the learning is orchestrated – the University – has significance and meaning for students even if they never visit its material campus. Complex issues of location and identity are foregrounded by working at a distance.

The project starts from this sense that location is differently, not less, important when students are distanced from their home institution. In digital environments, to be distant no longer needs to imply isolation, but the nature of community and place needs to be fundamentally re-thought for a digital context. To develop vibrant communities, geographically dispersed groups of students must find their place together, rethinking distance, home and institution in light of where they are individually, and where they meet together.

This project explores notions of place and institution for an online distance programme – the MSc in E-learning in the School of Education. The programme has around 150 students across 35 countries and is run entirely at a distance. Yet, again and again, questions surface among students about where in the world they are as individuals and as a group. Last year, the programme team launched a community web site for students (the Hub <http://www.elearning.ed.ac.uk/>) where students can communicate and network outside the formal settings of their courses. Through the Hub, a thread of activity has emerged where students have expressed interest in cultural difference, institutional identity, and geographical location (for example, see the student-created World Map at <http://tinyurl.com/45xk8lk>).

This project will build on these questions and preoccupations to research how distance learners understand the relation between 'here' and 'there', and what it means to be a student at Edinburgh, who is not *in* Edinburgh. On the back of this research, it will develop new pedagogical and pastoral approaches to supporting community formation for distance learning programmes. It will be of value and

relevance to those working on distance programmes at this University, in the UK and beyond.

Project aims and objectives

The project will conduct empirical work which will provide theoretical insight into the ways in which students construct and understand their institution of higher education, when they are studying at a distance from it. The pragmatic implications of this in terms of programme design will also be considered.

The project will:

- conduct a piece of research over one year in which narrative and visual data is generated by students on the themes of place, home, and institution
- use this research as the basis for a high quality publication in a peer-reviewed journal on the topic of institutional identification by distance learners
- use the thinking generated by the project as a way of developing new pedagogical and course design approaches for the MSc in E-learning and other distance programmes, which take account of space, location and a re-thought geography of learning.

The over-arching research question addressed will be: what does it mean to be a student at Edinburgh who is not *in* Edinburgh, and what insight does this give us into learning design for high quality distance programmes?

Methodology

The project will generate qualitative data through a methodology which mixes narrative methods with visual approaches.

Narrative methods

Narrative methods have been to date little used in research relating to education and technology, though a strong rationale for them exists and is increasingly recognised in the recent literature (for example Clanindin 2006; Friesen 2008). Narrative methods, like other interpretivist approaches, focus on the instabilities, pluralistic meanings and ambiguities which characterise discourse (Labov 1982; Riessman 2004; Clark 2010). They are about 'how protagonists interpret things' (Bruner 1990: 51) – the participant's interpretation of what has happened to them, and the researcher's interpretation of the resulting narrative. As Riessman (2004) has said, 'Narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it' (708).

This piece of research will use narrative methods to elicit stories from students which provide insight into their experience of place, space and institution. It will do this by employing the ethnographic trope of 'arrival stories' (Pratt 1986; Hine 2000). Such stories – focussing on the moment in which the ethnographer arrives at the 'field site' – will have a generative and rich application for distance learners, as they are asked to describe their 'arrival' at University, where that 'arrival' is entirely via mediated and electronic learning environments. While it is important to recognise that the moment

a distance student feels a sense of 'arrival' may not necessarily coincide with the actual start of studies, the arrival story captures an intense moment as the familiar 'place of home' is brought intimately alongside the unfamiliar 'place of study' – a moment likely to be rich for generating data on the ways in which place, institution and distance might be articulated. That MSc in E-learning students are both distance learners and scholars and practitioners with a professional interest in distance learning makes them ideally placed to generate engaging, reflexive narratives of what it means to be a distance learner within the context of this project.

Visual methods

As the practices of higher education shift online, the work of learners, teachers and scholars increasingly takes place within the domain of the image. The 'digital turn' we are experiencing, both in higher education and in the wider culture, accompanies an 'iconic turn' in which the logic of the image as it emerges on our screens has a growing influence over our modes of meaning-making (Kress 2005; Jewitt 2005; Crook 2002).

This study will use an approach informed by Rose's (2007) critical visual methodology to accompany the narrative methods described above. This is an approach which takes images seriously, considering their social conditions and effects, and taking reflexive account of how, as users of images, we are prone to adopt certain ideologically-informed perspectives on their meaning – what Berger (1972) famously referred to as 'ways of seeing'.

Prosser and Loxley (2008) distinguish between two types of visual research data – researcher-created data and respondent-generated data. This project will focus primarily on the latter kind, asking distance learning students on the MSc in E-learning to create images to sit alongside their narrative accounts. Giving student participants the opportunity to construct research data in visual form aligns well with the ethos of the MSc in E-learning programme, which asks students to work across multiple media and modes of representation (Kress 2005), nurturing in them advanced skills in transliteracy (Thomas 2007). In this project, the visual artefacts generated will be treated seriously as research data, analysed according to Rose's critical approach as outlined below.

Sample

In partnership with the Research Associate, the project team will request data from the entire MSc in E-learning cohort, currently around 150 students. Narrative and visual accounts will be sought from all interested students, with an opportunistic emphasis on eliciting data across all years of study, and a reasonable global spread, in an attempt to generate a range of perspectives on the research question.

We know from previous exercises and research projects with these students that they are keen equally to contribute to research and to share their own stories of their studies. For the former, the current PTAS project 'Student writing: innovative online strategies for assessment and feedback' stands as an excellent example. For the latter, see the impressive work conducted by one student, James Lamb, for the Distance Education Initiative 'Experiences of online distance learning on the MSc in E-learning': <http://odlexperiences.weebly.com/>.

We also know that our students are highly motivated to explore alternative, transliterate modes of representing knowledge, and that for this reason they will be keen to engage in the experimental visual aspect of this study (for an example of students' willingness to think via the visual, see the work generated during the 'E-learning and digital cultures' course at <http://tinyurl.com/3lh5lpz>).

With support being provided to students by the Research Associate and project team, we would anticipate responses in the region of 20-40 textual and visual accounts from current students. Students will be able to provide their textual accounts either in written form, or through telephone interview with the Research Associate. Visual representations may be produced in whichever form is preferred by the student; we would anticipate most producing digital composite images, photographs and videos. This number of accounts for analysis is appropriate to the narrative method (Riessman 1990; Riessman 1993) and will provide ample material for analysis.

Methods of analysis

Visual data will be analysed according to Rose's critical visual methodology, which takes account of three different 'modalities' in the interpretation of the image: the technological, the compositional, and the social (Rose 2007: 13). Here, the researcher has a framework by which the method of production of the image (the 'technological mode') can be interpreted alongside its semiotic and structural form (the 'compositional mode'). In engaging with the 'social mode' of the image, the full range of 'economic, social and political relations, institutions and practices that surround it' (Rose 2007: 13) can be taken into account in its interpretation. Here, images will be 'read' for the ways in which they construct, articulate and problematise the distinction between 'home' and 'University' for distance learners. For an example of this kind of analysis, see Bayne (2008).

The narrative data will be considered according to Riessman's four approaches to analysis (2004): thematic analysis, structural analysis, interactional analysis and performative analysis. The primary focus, however, will be on the thematic (enabling the conceptual grouping of stories and themes relating to 'distance', 'place' and 'University') and the performative (which emphasises storytelling as performance, looking at how narrators 'do' their identities and what that means for the ways in which those identities interact with a broader conception of institutional identity) (Riessman 2004: 708).

Timetable

September 2011	recruit Research Associate from among MSc in E-learning students (we have several likely candidates for this)
October 2011	RA and project team begin working with students to elicit data – initial ‘trawl’ of students to identify those willing to participate
November – December 2011	RA works with first group of students in conducting narrative interviews, where needed, and in collating and transcribing the written and visual data
January – February 2012	any ‘gaps’ in data are filled by the RA identifying and working with individual students (for example if, after the first trawl, we do not have a great deal of data from year 3 students, or from students outside the UK, targeted attempts will be made to generate these over this period)
March – April 2012	RA will archive, organise, code and tag data using NVivo
May-August	research team and RA will analyse data and write research publication
September and ongoing	dissemination seminar for University colleagues online seminar for Edinburgh distance students paper submitted for conference and publication

Dissemination

The project’s findings will be disseminated in the following ways:

- a paper on new educational geographies and their implications for programme design will be presented at an appropriate conference (SRHE or Networked Learning) and developed into a paper for publication in a peer-reviewed journal (*Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, Teaching in Higher Education* or similar)
- two seminars will be held at the end of the project: one for University of Edinburgh staff (face to face) and one for students on the MSc in E-learning (online)

The work will also be less formally disseminated within the University via the project team’s day to day work with colleagues and course teams from across the Colleges.

Further development

This project is designed to partner and enhance a bid going in to the Higher Education Academy teaching development grant scheme (individual awards), led by Jen Ross. On completion of the two projects, if funded, a bid will be taken forward to the next round of Higher Education Academy funding for a larger, cross-institutional

collaborative award, in order to extend the work across the University's new distance education programmes.

Educational innovations growing from this project will be in the form of new pedagogies and community-building environments which take account of the geo-spatial understandings generated by the project. For example, the MSc in E-learning programme World Map might be extended and developed with the further mapping and visualisation of student interactions via a feed from Twitter, while geo-tagging applications might be created which allow students to indicate geographical locations for the purposes of global 'meet-ups'. At the same time, pedagogies for embedding such activities within courses will be developed in time to be implemented during semester one of the 2012/13 academic year.

Background on the applicants

Dr Siân Bayne is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Programme co-Director of the Edinburgh MSc in E-learning and Associate Dean (digital scholarship) in the College of Humanities and Social Science. Her research is concerned with the ways in which technological change prompts us to re-think what education is and can be. She has held grants from the V&A, the AHRC and the Higher Education Academy for projects researching the place of social media in lifelong learning, and currently holds an award from the Royal Society of Edinburgh for research on social media in museum education. She was awarded the 2008 Chancellor's Award for Teaching for her work on the MSc programme.

Dr Hamish Macleod is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, and Programme co-Director of the MSc in E-learning. His research and teaching interests are in the psychology of computer use, particularly the applications of information technology in teaching and learning. In the past he has worked within the TLA Centre in support of the University's IT Literacy Programme, and he has recently worked on a number of Principal's E-learning Fund research and development projects. He taught for many years in the University's Department of Psychology and still retains close links with colleagues there.

Clara O'Shea is an Associate Lecturer in the School of Education and coordinates two of the MSc in E-Learning courses. Her research interests meet at the nexus of curriculum design, work-based learning, e-learning and assessment and feedback practices. She has worked in a variety of disciplines developing curriculum in online and blended environments, and researching related facets of learning including peer mentoring programme, vocational educational and the transition from further to higher education. She has also made innovative and sustained contributions to practice, including the development of a peer mentoring programme for the Australian National University (for which she was awarded the ANU Council Medal for General Staff Excellence - http://info.anu.edu.au/studyat/International_Office/sign) and the 'Coming to the University of Edinburgh project' (with John Bamber - <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/student-recruitment/widening-participation/projects/partnership-projects/cue>) an online programme facilitating student transition to higher education that has been taken up across the University.

Jen Ross is an Associate Lecturer in the School of Education who works on the MSc in E-learning programme as lecturer and technical co-ordinator. She led the recent PTAS project Student writing: innovative online strategies for assessment and feedback, is a project team member on the RSE-funded Digital Futures of Cultural Heritage Education project, and was previously Research Associate on the National Museums Online Learning Project. Her research interests include e-learning in higher education, online identity, reflective practice, e-portfolios and blogs, and learning with and from online objects.

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