Making digital compost: place-responsive pedagogy at a distance

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Abstract

Students studying at a distance are situated at a location remote from the campus, connecting to the institution via learning networks such as virtual learning environments, and communicating through a range of synchronous and asynchronous tools. While students may perceive a link between their physical learning environment and the institutional campus, their physical location may not be explicitly acknowledged or included in the learning activities of distance programmes beyond opportunities to participate in summer schools.

As place is defined as a location which has meaning for an individual, I propose that further research is required to explore the role that these meaningful locations can play in the learning experience of students studying at a distance from the institution. I question whether it is possible to develop a form of emotional connection to place at a distance, through artefacts and stories shared digitally by someone who feels closely connected, or related, to a place. I consider what the benefits may be of developing a more place-aware approach to teaching and learning in this context.

This paper outlines the early stages of a PhD research project investigating the importance of place for distance learners studying online. I will briefly describe methods previously used in outdoor education which may provide a way of capturing a sense of place at a distance. These methods include storytelling and walking interviews, with both options making use of mobile technologies. The use of these methods may also foster a stronger connection between students, the locality where they are based while studying, and the institution. Through this process, it may help to reduce the sense of social distance which can affect students studying at distance.

Incorporating activities traditionally used in conservation and outdoor education may demonstrate how education for sustainable development principles and practices can be integrated into distance education. If successful, this may help to address the missing element of teaching "in" the environment, providing a route to facilitate experiential place-based learning for distance students. This may also encourage a sense of care for the environment, as part of an affective approach to learning.

Keywords

Place, distance education, mobilities, education for sustainable development, storytelling

Introduction

Bayne, Gallagher & Lamb (2014) define "distance students" as those undertaking a programme where there is no requirement to be present on-campus. Gallagher, Lamb & Bayne (2016) continued this work, investigating the study locations of distance students, extending beyond text and visual representations to include sound recordings to gain a deeper appreciation of the students' learning environments. Both papers highlight the challenges in understanding what it means to study at a distance and reflect on the fluid nature of the developing campus learning network.

Gallagher, Lamb & Bayne (2016) propose that distance student learning environments warrant further investigation. In this paper, I will report on the early stages of my PhD project exploring the importance of place for distance students. I will consider the benefits of a place-responsive pedagogical approach and how that approach could be applied to the distance campus through the "networked" campus. Traditionally, place-responsive teaching events have involved staff and students synchronously located in the same physical space. The project will investigate whether it is possible to create a version of this process at distance with the same

aims of fostering engagement for student and staff in a meaningful location which is "local" for the student and "distant" for the staff member.

Two methods will be outlined which may help with developing place-responsiveness in distance education. Both methods involve gathering data from the places, through both digital and analogue methods, to incorporate into stories. Inspired by her partner, Haraway (2016) proposed the term "compost" as an alternative to posthuman, as human and more-than-human alike become compost. I see the data gathered and shared through these networked stories as forming "digital compost", acknowledging that the networked relationships include human-to-human, human-to-more-than-human, human-to-things, and human-to-place.

Stories of Place

A place can be defined as a meaningful location; a point on a map, which has been "claimed" by being named, bounded and recorded. Places often carry political, cultural and historic meaning, with sites of historic significance or marks of colonial power captured in changing borders and place-names. More than that, the notion of place can have personal, emotional and spiritual meaning. In a broader sense, each "place" is a multiplicity of stories which are constantly changing, incorporating culture, history and location, human and non-human. There is an ongoing relationship and development of the story that exists between a person and a place, however that "place" is defined. This is a story which, as Massey (2005) states, will be different for each person.

I aim to investigate methods that may enable distance students, staff and the institution to develop a sense of the diverse places of their global learning community. That raises the question of whether it is possible to develop a form of emotional connection to place at a distance, through artefacts and stories shared digitally by someone who is closely connected, or related, to a place. Archer (2010) issues an invitation to think more openly about "relationality" rather than "relations", and recognise how enmeshed humans are "with nature, with artefacts, with others". She calls for a new "open ground" for reflexivity that echoes in a large part the increased awareness that Alexander (2002) invites with his concept of "wholeness", or awareness of the completeness of each "thing", both individually and in relation to others. Alexander's work relates to Wilson's (1984) concept of biophilia, namely "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes". Wilson talks of the way humans are drawn to "elegance" (p. 60) and "patterns" (p. 116) in an echo of Alexander.

Gersie, Nanson & Schieffelin (2014) make a comparison between "environmental" storytellers and game designers. Game designers, they state, wish to "draw the player... into the designer's imagined world" in contrast with "engag[ing] people directly with the intricacy of the physical world". Unlike Gersie, Nanson & Schieffelin, Jenkins (2004) sees game designers not as lacking, but as exceeding traditional storytellers, by becoming "narrative architects" of worlds, or "spatial storytellers" (p. 121). He outlines four narrative types or formats (p. 129): "evoked... can enhance our sense of immersion within a familiar world"; "enacted... structured around the character's movement through space"; "embedded... a memory palace whose contents must be deciphered"; and "emergent... rich with narrative potential enabling the story-constructing activity of players". These formats are analogous to the activities seen in outdoor education activities (e.g. Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

From my perspective, the divergence between off-line and on-line storytelling proposed by Gersie, Nanson & Schieffelin (2014) fails to take into account developments in research and technology, and the creative potential of connecting with a global network. I agree with Pinto (2016) that a holistic pedagogy can be created which allows for both the physical and the digital.

Networked Campus

Bayne, Gallagher & Lamb (2014) suggest that the definition of "distance education" is perceived as being a de-privileged state, in comparison to being located on-campus. However, they recognise that the concept of "distance education" is in flux, where on-campus students are increasingly making use of mobile technologies to study off-campus. University campuses are becoming "location-based social network[s]" (de Souza e Silva & Sutko, 2011). This networked campus may provide a source of what Stenglin (2016) describes as "bonding" (emotional connection) and "binding" (structure and security), connecting the institution and the student to help minimise the sense of social distance (Ravelli & McMurtrie, 2016) which may be generated by studying at distance.

Researching the process of studying at distance requires an explanation of "how it draws in complex networks of people, things, and places" (Gourlay & Oliver, 2016, p. 77). As stated by Boys (2016, p. 70), it is about "getting under the surface of the multiple spaces of different participants (both human and non-human)… to take better account of the complexities of our everyday entanglements across both conceptual spaces and actual – situated – spaces". This "entanglement" brings to mind Ingold's (2011) concept of meshwork. In this view, the institution is not constructed of linked nodes in a network, but exists as a complex meshwork of relations, actions and potential.

In discussing the definition of networked learning theory, Cronin (2014) highlights that "networked" refers to the connections between people and resources and is not necessarily online, though the addition of an online connection provides greater potential as it can lift, to an extent, the limitations of space and time. Gourlay & Oliver (2016, p. 79) propose that students have the potential to study "nowhere and everywhere" through the affordances of technology. Students' places become hybrid spaces (de Souza e Silva, 2006; de Souza e Silva, Duarte & Damasceno, 2017) where, as Thompson (2014) asserts, the physical and digital become entangled. An awareness of students' meaningful locations, their physical places, can be lost in the meshwork.

Becoming "Place-Responsive"

A "place-responsive" or "place-aware" approach to learning is in contrast to the "everywhere-anywhere-nowhere" feeling that is becoming increasingly common in the modern landscape (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 52). It is developing a meaningful sense of, and attachment to, "place" as opposed to "placelessness" or "rootlessness" (Relph, 1976). Wattchow & Brown link the rise of place-responsive studies in recent years to the growing concern about the threat of modern development to the sustainability of places.

Sustainability pedagogies (Cotton & Winter, 2010), taken from the environmental education discipline, include many of the practices seen in networked learning, including student-centred, participatory and enquiry-based approaches. Mulà et al. (2017) emphasise that sustainability concepts should not be seen as an "add on" to the current curriculum, but be integrated into a holistic approach which may require changes to current educational practices. The social nature of networked learning echoes the "community-as-learning-resource" approach of sustainable education, also termed Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). What is perhaps less obvious is "environment-as-learning-resource" within the learning network, though this is being addressed in part by work on mobile learning and multimodality (Gallagher & Ihanainen, 2016; Lamb & Gallagher, 2017).

The aim of ESD is to foster education "about, in and for the environment" (Cotton & Winter, 2010, p.41). Education "in" the environment is key because of the impact it may have on learning "about and for" the environment and the intention of the learner to take action in protecting that environment (Nicol, 2014). Archer's (2010, pp. 9-10) challenge is to allow that "our relationships with the world are multi-faceted". This relational approach is in line with developing an "ethic of care" (Martin, 2007), a caring relationship between the student, their research and their location, and between the institution and the student's community and place. Caring goes beyond the relationship between human and more-than-human to passion for the subject itself within an authentic learning and teaching experience (Kreber et al., 2007). Baker (2005) promotes taking a "landfull" approach, where active presence, observation and reflection on a chosen place can move the student beyond a surface knowledge to a deeper relationship with their land and an associated drive to care for their place and their community.

In distance education, it is possible to educate "about and for" the environment. Educating "in" the environment is more difficult and is usually achieved through summer schools or short place-based research projects. This can potentially exclude students, whether due to commitments that prevent travel, limited finances to cover the trip, or lack of interest in leaving their "home" location. Outdoor education, with its focus on experiential education in an outdoor setting, can provide place-responsive methods which may facilitate "education in the environment". The sense of care and relationship developed may then be shared within the learning network, allowing students, staff and institution the opportunity to better know and appreciate their global community.

Place-Responsive Methods

At this early stage of the project, I have selected methods which may allow for a deeper sense of place at distance to be explored. These methods include walking interviews and an adaptation of storytelling activities that have been developed for enhancing place-awareness or place-responsiveness in outdoor and conservation educational practices (Gersie, Nanson & Schieffelin 2014; Lynch & Mannion; 2016). These are similar to the

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methods employed by Gallagher & Ihanainen (2016) in their field activities, where participants created multimedia compositions. I also take inspiration from Nadir & Peppermint's (2016) and Lamb & Gallagher's (2017) research, where mobile technologies were effectively employed to create multimodal walking tours. All demonstrate it is possible to facilitate a holistic experience of being immersed in a location where all actors (human, more-than-human, thing) are included.

Storytelling

Wilson (1984, p. 80) says that the mixture of enjoyment and ease of sharing mean that "stories [and symbols] invade the developing mind more readily". Storytelling can hold a space to admit and explore emotion, to acknowledge "feeling" in research (Naess, 2002). This interaction of "learning, emotion, and action" (Oliver & Dennison, 2013, p. 23) or cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964) can be important for motivating the storyteller to connect with their audience, whether that be the local community, the research community or as part of a broader public engagement exercise (Emerson, 2017). Using storytelling to share research with others may allow the student researcher to recognise the emotional influence of their learning and research, and their relationship with their research participants, subjects and place (Bondi, 2005; Widdowfield, 2000).

Creating a research story as part of the project will involve gathering artefacts - physical and digital - from the study location to integrate into each student's story, similar to the flanerie activity described by Gallagher & Ihanainen (2016). The goal is to create a meshwork of research stories that students can share with each other and with their local communities. This process of gathering artefacts local to the student may help to emphasise the importance of their local place both to the student and the institution. This links to a project reported by Wattchow & Brown (2011) where students reported that local activities had greater meaning as they allowed them to see a familiar place in a new light. It also draws on the work of Nadir & Peppermint (2016) in returning a sense of unfamiliarity and "wilderness" to the student's familiar places.

Walking interviews

"Walking" interviews (Holton & Riley, 2014; Lynch & Mannion, 2016) provide an opportunity to capture place as the interview is carried out while walking through a location selected by the interviewee. This approach can lead to unexpected observations and reactions to the more-than-human allowing place to be captured through the audio interview and photography by interviewee and interviewer. This is Ingold's (2011) "wayfaring" – knowing through your feet. Translating this into a distance activity poses questions about real-time events, where both the interviewer and interviewee are connected by mobile technologies, and the impact of connectivity on the person in a place where they would perhaps prefer to be solo-journeying (Bryce, 2012). This is an ethical issue; each participant should be given the option to share in the way that they choose, whether real-time or asynchronously, allowing them to preserve their "private and personal place" (Relph, 1976, p.36).

Conclusions

The concept of "thinning" the walls appears in the literature on networked learning (Cronin, 2014) and place-responsive learning (Gruenewald & Smith, 2014). These walls may be perceived as dividing students and staff, indoors and outdoors, local and distance. Storytelling focuses on "thickening" connections (Willis, 2011), to work *with* stories may allow the storyteller and audience to "re-story" themselves and their environment.

When discussing emerging themes in place-based networked learning, Goodyear et al. (2016, p.250) consider the "richer ways of thinking about the *people* involved in networked learning". This richness includes developing an awareness of the human body as an open system, of the relationships between life, technology, information and of being "in close touch with the world" (p.251). Walking with purpose and mindfulness can create space to observe and gain a deeper sense of the place through which we move (Ingold, 2011; Nadir & Peppermint, 2016).

Adopting a place-responsive approach at distance raises interesting questions about the ability to sense "place" and engage with place at a distance in both time and space. The potential of the approach for encouraging the development of ESD skills and strategies is encouraging, if distance-from-place can be reduced through the use of networked technologies. The ability to gain a stronger sense of the physical places of others in the campus network may also help to reduce the sense of social distance. Cronin (2014) describes a "Third Space", an open online space which integrates both formal and informal learning. This project seeks to work in that open space, developing sustainable, digital literacies for life of learner and location.

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