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Conclusion: Directions for Research in Online Learning Cultures

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Conclusion: New Directions for Research in Online Learning Cultures

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In the introduction to this book we argued that we were not setting out to fill a gap in the existing research on culture in online learning, but instead we were trying to take the whole debate in a somewhat different direction. This direction involves problematizing the very notion of 'culture' in connection with learning in online environments. We observed, in our discussion of some of the research literature that forms the background to these chapters, that much of the very useful work that has been done in this area has focused on the problems of appropriate learning design (or 'instructional design', to use the culturally inflected term favoured by our North American colleagues) for people from diverse national, ethnic, religious and linguistic backgrounds. Without in any way wishing to detract from the importance of this work to the many institutions, designers, teachers and learners currently engaged in multicultural and transnational e-learning, we set out to explore some of the implications of perhaps *not* going along with Geert Hofstdede's view that 'in most cases you do not wish participants in e-learning to notice' how important culture is (Hofstede 2007: vii). Instead we wanted to draw attention to the rapidly changing face of 'culture' in online education, and, even more importantly, participants' (including the institutions', designers' and teachers', as well as learners') active and continuing role in constructing it.

Accordingly, the contributions we solicited for this book have not focused on issues of learning design, but have developed a number of themes around difference and diversity in online education, which highlight the ways in which cultural 'problems' are constructed. In bringing a wide range of theoretical and practical orientations (from philosophy of education to second language learning) to bear on the concept of 'learning culture', these

authors have focused our attention on: the nature of identities online; the continuing importance of embodiment; the negotiation of cultures and the limitations of essentialist approaches to cultural difference; the centrality of language(s) and textuality; the under-acknowledged importance of the affective dimension, including resistance and creativity; and the increasingly unpredictable behaviour of technologies. In this concluding chapter we will attempt to draw these themes together and propose two key areas in which we have a particular interest, and which we suggest will be productive directions for future research into 'learning cultures' online.

Themes in this book

A major topic in all of the chapters is the cultural identity or identities of participants, viewed from a variety of perspectives, including how they 'see' themselves and those they interact with online, and how they are positioned by the social roles available in the particular learning context in which they find themselves. The authors have focused variously on identities characterized as: 'third' or 'hybrid' (Ess, Gunawardena et al.); 'self-identity' (O'Dowd); 'cybernetic/virtual' (O'Dowd, Macfadyen), 'emerging' (Develotte), 'performed' (Hewling, Doherty); 'postnational' (Doherty); 'marketed' (Lemke et al.), etc. In this they direct our attention to a key aspect of culture in learning environments, which is not usually addressed in work that is primarily concerned with the problems of design for online learning, that is, the relation between the embodied 'self' and online social 'identity'. The question how participants' embodied selves are engaged in the processes of learning in online environments is addressed directly by Ess and Mafadyen, but it is also present implicitly in the accounts given by Gunawardena et al., O'Dowd, Develotte and Doherty, because of the role they attribute to physical and geographic located-ness in shaping participants' approach to online interaction. It is implicit too, in Hewling's references to the 'isolation' of distance learners, and in Lemke et al.'s observations on emotion and eroticism in popular culture media.

While the cultural characteristics that are thought to shape a learner's essential 'self' have been the subject of much analysis in the research literature, the identities that participants develop through engagement with the social and pedagogical practices of the virtual environment itself (the national, institutional, corporate, professional, disciplinary and peer-group practices that frame the whole undertaking of learning online) tend to be seen as 'social' rather than 'cultural' phenomena. Four of the authors here (Ess, Gunawardena et al., Macfadyen, Hewling) have included critiques of the essentialist characterizations of cultural difference developed by

Hofstede and others, viewing these frameworks as inadequate to account for all dimensions of culture in online interaction. They go on to deploy the concept of 'third', 'emerging', 'constructed' or 'negotiated' cultural systems, emphasizing the work that participants are required to do to satisfactorily develop and present an identity and achieve personal goals in online environments. They suggest that participants working together may be able to collectively transcend individual cultural 'hardwiring' and create new cultural spaces and hybridized identities. Doherty's, Hewling's, and Lemke et al.'s accounts, however, indicate that in order to do so, participants may also be required to transcend the values and systems of the powerful institutional, pedagogical and technical communities whose virtual infrastructures they inhabit.

Five of the chapters have an explicit focus on language, both language as a means of expression (Gunawardena et al., O'Dowd, Develotte, Doherty) and more generally with language as text or genre (Macfadyen, Doherty). The role of the English language in framing the online negotiation of cultures figures implicitly in many of these accounts, and Doherty addresses it as an issue in itself. There is a reflexive twist here for us as editors and for some of our contributors, as we are aware that we are writing and publishing this book for an English-speaking audience, precisely because of the current dominance of English in the literature of online education (and indeed in academic publishing generally, not only because of the economies of scale available to publishers selling to vast Anglophone markets, but also because English is the only medium deemed likely to deliver international impact to researchers, whatever their native-writing language). We develop this point in our discussion of 'institutional hegemony' below, and in the proposal to adopt second language learning and intercultural studies research methodologies as a model for future research in online learning cultures, a proposal that we make in the last section of this Conclusion.

Affect, including desire (Gunawardena et al., Lemke et al.), emotion in general (Gunawardena et al., Develotte, Macfadyen, Lemke et al.), play and creativity (Ess, Gunawardena et al., Macfadyen, Lemke et al.), and resistance (Macfadyen, Hewling, Doherty, Lemke et al.) is discussed at length by Lemke et al. Affect is indeed a theme which, like the topic of 'culture' itself, could usefully be applied to many accounts of participant behaviour in online learning environments in order to restore the centrality of the human experience to a research field that has become increasingly obsessed with measurable outcomes. We address some comments on research methodology to this theme in our discussion of psychosocial perspectives below.

The final theme we want to draw out is again implicit in most of the chapters, because they address cultural issues arising in online, that is,

electronic, learning environments, and Hewling addresses it directly. The issue of how the technologies themselves are perceived as 'players' in the social interaction through which online learning cultures are built, is one that is developing in importance as systems increasingly become identified with cultural 'spaces' in the universe of the Web 2.0 internet, for example, social networking sites such as MySpace (www.myspace.com), or the virtual reality site Second Life (www.secondlife.com) or whatever comes to supplant these, as fashions in internet communication change. Hewling goes as far as to extend a metaphorical 'intent' to technology, as the many systems and levels of service that lie behind the screen appear to conspire in order to surprise and sometimes frustrate their human users. In fact the conceit of the system as player becomes less and less metaphorical with each new development in autonomous 'software agents' and personalization systems, and with each new step towards immersive virtual reality environments.

In summary, we think these contributions, and the main themes we have identified, point to a reconceptualization of issues of culture in online learning that distinguishes between three areas of investigation. The first is what we can call, for the purpose of this discussion, 'cultural learning styles', or the preferences of individuals, which are attributable to their socialization into specific national, ethnic, religious or other communities. This is the area that has been the focus of most of the research into online learning, which has used frameworks of cultural difference such as Hofstede's. The second, which we can call 'cultures of learning' (again the label itself is not important) concerns the norms and values associated with learning in specific institutional contexts. This area overlaps with studies of learning in organizations, disciplinary learning and academic literacies. The third, for which we will appropriate the term 'learning cultures', is the area of emergent, informal, often innovative, collective approaches to learning in conditions that are wholly or partially characterized by remote communication. All three perspectives are relevant to our understanding of the social practices and communication processes that constitute online learning, but it is the last one, 'learning cultures' that we want to use this book to outline a research agenda for.

Drawing together the themes we have discussed above, we propose two key areas where we think the major research questions for online learning cultures lie:

1. Investigation of the processes by which institutions and corporations develop hegemonies over the pedagogies of global online education, and the impact of these hegemonies on the emergence of autonomous online learning cultures.

2. Investigation of the cultural dimensions of communication in online learning communities and the processes of negotiation of identities by their participants.

Institutional cultural hegemony over pedagogy

We have tended, in this book, to use the expression 'online learning/ education', to signify the development of educational practices in virtual environments, and while the more current term *e-learning* has occasionally been used synonymously, it is our view that it tends to reflect a particular discourse of learning that emphasizes a technical-rational view of education rather than a humanistic one. This discourse and practice of *e-learning* is becoming ever more closely associated with the management of learning for instrumental (usually economic) purposes. See, for example, Lea's discussion of the shift in universities from the teaching of disciplinary knowledge to the management' of learning, in Goodfellow & Lea (2007: 18–22) or Clegg et al.'s 2003 account of globalization and e-learning in higher education. This is an important aspect of what we are calling institutional hegemony over pedagogy. Henderson (2007: 131) underlines this when she asserts that the design of e-learning needs to achieve a 'praxis between [the learner's culturally specific ways of thinking and doing] and the demands of particular academic, industry and government global cultures'.

We have suggested that there is an implicit but significant connection between the ways that national cultures are conceptualized, as occupying positions along a continuum between 'modern' (individualistic, low context, risk-accepting, etc.) and 'traditional' (collectivistic, risk-averse, high context, etc.), and the social constructivist psychological and pedagogical paradigm that characterizes Western/Anglo approaches to online learning. The practices of online collaborative learning, for example, favour dispositions that are associated with so-called Western cultural types: independence, low power-distance, acceptance of risk and low context, etc., and the pedagogy of *e-learning* is strongly influenced by the equation of learner-centred and collaborative interaction with empowerment. McCarty (2007), in an account of the introduction of social-constructivist pedagogies and online learning to Japanese teacher education, argues that the 'globalized classroom' and 'transformative learning and empowerment' may be 'external and internal aspects of the same overall picture' (2007: 106). This is the goal that many Western/Anglo institutional and individual practitioners of transnational *e-learning* claim to aspire to in the attempt to promote these cultural dispositions in their multicultural student audiences. However, just as McCarty's more subtle message concerns the ways in which his course

matches the aspirations of his students (2007: 112), we draw attention to the subtle ways in which some of the interactants in the accounts given by the contributors to this book (e.g. those discussed by Gunawardena et al. and Doherty) sought to appropriate the technologies and communication genres for their own needs without at the same time seeking to transform themselves at any fundamental cultural level. It seems clear that we need a far more nuanced understanding of how individuals see themselves in relation to their own and others' 'essential' cultural identities, and how they view the kinds of transformation that participation in multicultural online learning communities demands or makes possible. This, as we suggested at the beginning of this discussion, might involve bringing the question of culture to the fore, in the way that critical pedagogies have always sought to bring learner self-awareness to the fore as part of the process of empowerment (see, for example, Kellner's 2001 discussion of the work of Henry Giroux).

There is also a tension associated with the attempt simultaneously to counter the growing hegemony of Westernized constructions of online learning, and at the same time promote the emergence of learning cultures out of the free interaction of diverse individuals in mutually sustaining online learning communities. This tension relates to the contradiction identified in Lemke et al.'s concluding remarks when they note the need to provide educational structures for marginalized learners, at the same time as they seek to liberate more privileged learners from those very same structures. How do we identify and promote local alternatives to a Western/Anglo model of online learning (collaborative discussion and problem-solving, in English, with summative assessment of written assignments and a whole panoply of credentialing practices) without running the risk of marginalizing participants from the mainstream of global economic and cultural capital? Such alternatives would need to be explicit about underlying political questions, and about asserting respect for difference and the promotion of equality as significant reasons for wanting to resist cultural hegemony. Equally, a critical perspective on culture should be an important educational goal in its own right. Where Western/Anglo educational pedagogical philosophy is applied to online learning in multicultural contexts, it should not go unquestioned. 'What kinds of knowledge are being promoted?' And conversely, 'what kinds of knowledge are being neglected or obscured?' A key aim for research into online learning cultures must therefore be to understand the specifically cultural nature of our own online pedagogies and their relation to the discourses of cultural difference that have dominated research and practice in this area up to now. Only with such a perspective can we hope to promote the development of non-Anglo-hegemonic models of online learning within which educational goals appropriate to, and

defined by, the participants do not have to be subsumed by those intended to equip them for economic competition on the global market. Such development entails investigating possibilities for counter-hegemonic models of educational success that may not be framed by global markets (see Akkari & Dasen 2004, in which, for instance, the authors provide a historical account of family based, practice-based learning in North Africa, set against what they term the 'cognitive imperialism' of the European colonizers).

Cultural dimensions of communication and the negotiation of identities

What, then, is the relation to the nature of an emergent online learning culture of the identity-work that its participants do? Gunawardena and her co-authors show that aspects of embodied identity such as age, gender, current location, race, etc., are constantly being negotiated online, as individuals seek to disclose or reveal information that will position them in the way they want to be seen through the eyes of their fellow participants. Such positionings are influenced by the different values, expectations and cultural learning styles that individuals hold as a result of having been previously socialized into specific communities, but they are also constructed collectively as part of an emerging social environment. For example, several of the contributors here have given accounts of identity-work going on in response to institutional cultures of learning, We see evidence of this in Macfadyen's 'ritual of resistance', in Doherty's 'troubling' of the assessment genres of the host university, in the contradictory teaching practices that O'Dowd describes, and in the dissatisfaction with schooling that Lemke et al.'s media-savvy young learners report. It is characteristic of online learning cultures that the negotiation of personal and social identities is integral to learning, just as a critical awareness of culture is integral to a nonhegemonic model of online learning, as we argued above. As such, the negotiation of identities does not simply mark a stage in the socialization of an online learning group, necessary for the eventual construction of knowledge, as some social-constructivist pedagogical models would suggest. The identities of participants become part of the knowledge constructed as well as the means of construction, as Macfadyen's and Develotte's online learners' comments on their identities illustrate.

When individuals interact in online communication with each other and with the sociotechnical features and structures of an institutional online environment, they may develop, over time, 'hybridized identities' (Hawisher & Selfe 2000: 277–89) with the capacity to challenge and modify conventional relations of social power in that environment. Another key

question for our research agenda, therefore, addresses the process by which the culture of learning that forms the institutional frame for the interaction undergoes a similar process of transformation of norms and values. Cultures of learning, as we have seen, are enmeshed in power issues. One aspect of power that has emerged throughout the book is the impact on educational cultures of the ways in which institutions construct and constrain the online activity of learners both directly and indirectly. For examples of direct impact, see O'Dowd and Doherty's studies of participants underserved by their institutional context, thus ill-prepared for the academic task set to them, or Lemke et al.'s discussion of the attempts made by schools to co-opt 'the digital' into national curricula. For learning cultures as 'third' cultures to emerge in institutional contexts, this power must be modified, or any emergent hybridity will be dominated by institutional shaping of the learning context, allowing little room for negotiation of new identities by the participants.

Online intercultural language learning theorists have catalogued mismatches of different kinds in the cultural learning styles of groups formally brought together into institutional online collaborations (e.g. Belz 2003, Schneider & von der Emde 2006). These difficulties, along with the excitement of the recent technological developments we discuss below, have led some researchers (Thorne 2008, Lemke et al., in this book) to turn towards noninstitutional online worlds in the hope that they can reawaken the desire for learning. We draw attention to Thorne's characterization of language learning, and suggest that it may well be true for wider educational domains: 'certain developmental trajectories occurring in informal learning environments may only be possible in self-selected activity marked by the establishment of relatively egalitarian, and situationally plastic, participation structures' (Thorne 2008: 323). This commitment to adjectives like 'egalitarian' and 'democratic' suggest a scrutiny of 'democracy' would be an important aim for a critical approach to pedagogy in research on learning cultures, and we see at least two immediate needs. The first is for an examination of 'democracy' in international/transnational online learning contacts between groups with unequal access to economic and symbolic power. The second is for research into claims about 'democracy' made on behalf of noninstitutional online learning, particularly in its relationship with institutional schooling.

In online contexts, social practices and relations are constructed in a purely symbolic 'place', made up of the collective verbal-iconic-kinesic elaborations that happen in textual and multimodal environments. The role of language use and understanding in the construction of identities via processes such as Macfadyen's 'ritual text acts', or in contexts such as Develotte's 'graphico-scriptural' environment, has been considered in this

book. But what of the linguistic nature of Hewling's unpredictably visible, then invisible, traces of interaction? What also of the role of language in multimodal environments currently developing in and around so-called 'Web 2.0' technologies, which offer an even more complex array of means of meaning-making? Techniques of design and the production of digital resources (for example: the use of phone cams, video editing, website and web log creation, syndication of digital resources, book marking) have made user-generated content simple and widely accessible. These tools, combined with social networking practices, appear to generate possibilities for the creation of new cultural resources, or the adaptation of existing ones, in the activities of online communities. Researchers need to pay attention to how learners negotiate these symbolic and material components of learning cultures. In particular, we need to build on the developing base of work on intercultural language studies that aims to characterize linguistic inter-action in online communities where there is language hegemony of some kind.

Second language learning and intercultural studies research – a basis for research on online learning cultures

This book has drawn attention to the ideological nature of the multicultural *e-learning* agenda and to the power imbalances that underpin it. The grow-ing diversity of the learner pool gives researchers a particular responsibility for making sure that their attention remains focused on this. Here we argue that enquiries based on frameworks such as those offered by our contribu-tors, investigated through the lenses developed by language learning and intercultural communication researchers, are likely to yield a much richer understanding of the real and diverse conditions in which learners learn with and from each other online.

Negotiation of cultural identity in linguistic interaction is, as the authors in this book have shown, central to online learning. Block (2007) has flagged up a body of work in language learning from the late 1990s and the early 2000s, which has reconstructed the notion of (language) learner identity away from the idea of an unchanging given, towards the notion of identity as 'a site of struggle' [involving] 'negotiation of difference, ambivalence, struc-ture and agency, communities of practice, symbolic capital' (2007: 867). This approach, as Block has suggested for language learning, and we argue is pertinent for other domains, implies a research focus on learning contexts and on power issues, and attention to the psychoanalytic perspective.

Language learning and intercultural communication research initially made a distinction between three types of learning context: the naturalistic

(learning a language when living long-term or permanently in that language's own environment), the formal (classroom-based instructed learning) and 'study abroad' (learning a second language on short-term or medium-term visits to that language's environment as part of home-based formal learning). In online settings this neat picture became blurred, however: not only may learners interact in environments that combine different contexts, but the categories of context lose their meaning: 'abroad' can be found online, and the normalization of technology supports perceptions that communicating with a computer is as 'naturalistic' a sociolinguistic practice as talking on the phone or in person. Moreover, contrasts such as learning in institutional versus noninstitutional contexts are less important, because, as Thorne shows (2008: 322) the conditions that are necessary for effective (language) learning can be met in noninstitutional learning online. Realizations of this kind have stimulated the entire second language community into taking stock and refreshing its thinking on the cognitive and the social in language acquisition, and we are arguing here for a comparable exercise on the part of multicultural online learning researchers. Just as, for language learning research, the thrust of enquiry moved away from *evidence* of language learning towards the sociocultural *conditions* for language learning (a logically prior objective, perhaps), so today the conditions in which multicultural online learning takes place should be scrutinized also.

In sociocultural language learning theory, power has always been at the centre of research into migrants' language development and heritage language research, where it has been associated with the dominant or subservient positions of language speakers according to their nation's economic strength. We have considered some of the workings of ideological power in the discussion of institutional hegemonies above, but power has also emerged as an issue in intercultural exchange research, where it has been constructed in psychological terms, as a facilitator or an inhibitor of comfort in online groups, a condition seen as vital to successful language learning by a large body of anxiety research. Much to the fore in this latter has been the anonymity (and identity play) that text-only exchanges can afford. Block's challenge to language learning researchers, which we embrace for other domains, is 'to balance an overwhelmingly social view of identity with a more introspective psychoanalytically inspired one' (2007: 873). We approach this idea with all the caution that the term 'psychoanalysis' requires, yet there are at least two unmistakably psychosocial themes in the findings of our contributors: embodiment and pleasure. Ess and Macfadyen's chapters open up questions about the role of the bodies of the learners in the construction of the online learning culture. Perhaps because it has been assumed that text-based interactivity yields little information

180   *Conclusion: New Directions for Research in Online Learning Cultures*

about bodies other than facial representation via smileys, research into the embodied conditions of intercultural communication has barely started. A notable exception has been Jones (2004). His work on polyfocalization by learners attending to multiple interaction windows on screen while interacting with people in their immediate physical environment holds great interest for researchers into online learning cultures, as it counters prevalent assumptions that learners are sitting at their keyboard, 'out there', in ideal conditions for receiving a language-based educational experience.

Extending the question of embodiment from text-based to multimodal-platform-mediated learning, there is even more scope for re-examining learning cultures' relationship with the body and the senses, but even less research is available (though see Lamy forthcoming). Lemke et al.'s chapter does, however, home in on one psychosocial dimension of engagement with multimodal worlds: pleasure. The relevance of pleasure to learning may be perceived by reference to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) concept of 'flow'. A flow experience happens when participants are totally absorbed in an activity and forget everything around them. Csikszentmihalyi identifies a challenging activity that requires skills, clear goals and feedback, and a sense of control as preconditions that make such absorption possible. Thorne (2008) and Meskill (2007) have seen some learners' passion for working with online artefacts as potential terrain for the enhancement of (language) leaning. Further research on the role of pleasure, passion and other aspects of affect on the development of online learning cultures in other domains is one of the recommendations to come out of this book.

Open Educational Resources – a proposed site for research on online learning cultures

In the Introduction to this book we proposed that the drive from governmental widening participation policies, transnational *e-learning* and informal socialization practices on the internet, would result in increasingly unpredictable configurations of participants in online learning communities. While there is clearly much work to be done on cultural learning styles and cultures of learning in the more established contexts of formal education in colleges and universities, corporate training and governmental and international agency staff development, we would like to suggest one site for research on learning cultures in which this unpredictability might surface sooner rather than later. That is: the use and re-use of Open Educational Resources (OER).

Open Educational Resources are learning and teaching materials (usually complete courses or modules and units from courses) that have been

produced as part of a university's curriculum for its own students and are being offered free to the public at large, via the internet. Major OER initiatives that offer materials globally currently include 'Open Courseware' from: Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT); the United Nations University, Osaka University; the Open Courseware Consortium; the European Union's Open E-Learning Content Observatory services and the UK Open University (UKOU) Openlearn project. The philosophy behind the OER movement is a mix of philanthropy and self-interest. As Santos et al. (2007) observe, idealistic discourses such as 'building a better world', overlap with social policy discourses such as 'widening participation', and business interests such as the marketization of institutions and brands, and the recruitment of students.

MIT claims a great deal of success in the numbers of users of their materials, with more than 40 million visitors to the site to date, divided between educators, students and 'self-learners', according to the statistics on the Open Courseware website. Self-learners are people who are using the resources outside formal institutional contexts, to expand their knowledge generally, or keep current in their field or plan future study. Open learners such as these, and the possibility that they might wish to learn collaboratively, are of particular interest to the UKOU Openlearn project. This group has created an environment that provides tools for communication and collaboration, as well as original learning materials, for those who wish to collectively adapt materials for re-use either in their original English form, or in translation. This is regarded as a platform for the development of online learning communities that exist independently of institutional cultures of learning.

The use, and/or appropriation and re-use, of open educational resources, pedagogies and technologies, which are currently largely the product of Western/Anglo education systems, by learners from globally diverse backgrounds and cultural and linguistic heritages, is a site of great potential for research into online learning cultures. There is much to be discovered about whether learning communities do develop around these resources, and whether they can then develop norms and systems of meaning that sustain long enough to propagate themselves as learning cultures.

Investigation of the cultural meanings that are attached to open educational resources, in contexts of use which are removed from the sites of production of those resources, is a promising direction for research in online learning cultures. This is because, although most major OER initiatives are owned and disseminated by Western universities, and the resources themselves embed the cultures of learning of those institutions, open-ness of access and a lack of constraints on the way they can be used means they may be taken up by people whose individual cultural learning styles

differ considerably from those by and for whom the resources were originally developed. Such contexts might involve 'different and contradictory rules or barriers to the uptake and motivations for using [the] resources' (Mwanza-Simwami et al. 2008: 7) from those envisaged by the providers, a situation that is likely to throw up a different set of problems to those associated with 'appropriate cultural design' (see our discussion in the introduction to this book). Cultural meanings attached to OER could encompass a wide range. Resources might be viewed as a kind of 'gold standard' because of their source, and promoted uncritically, but they might equally meet resistance precisely because of the kinds of arguments against cultural hegemony that we have been rehearsing in this book. Materials might be used unadapted by institutions as cost-free alternatives to locally produced resources, but they might also be taken up by designers and teachers as models for the development of their own locally appropriate open resources. Some individuals might simply use them to further their own personal development, but others might view them as a way to generate communities of shared interest. In all the latter cases the conditions would be present for the emergence of learning cultures, which might transcend both the institutional cultures of learning in which the resources originated and the cultural learning styles predominant in the sites where they were taken up.

In all cases where research into online learning cultures does develop, it is important that researchers should include some who have an ethnographic involvement in the communities being studied. It is a key implication of the position that we have taken on institutional hegemony (and also on the centrality of language) that the research perspective should incorporate 'insider' views. This means that projects intending to research online learning cultures should not be conducted entirely from an *etic* perspective, that is to say, entirely by researchers who share a particular cultural perspective and who are looking in from the outside. Projects should, in our view, be conducted by teams, which are themselves culturally diverse, for whom the construction of their own learning culture would be an acknowledged outcome of the research. Such teams should include individuals who share either languages, national and/or ethnic cultural backgrounds, religion, class, gender or occupational and professional identities, with at least some of the learner participants, so that the *emic* perspective, the 'insider' view, can be adequately represented. This is likely to present a considerable challenge to many Western university departments wishing to conduct research on their own foreign or international students. However, research such as that reported in Baumeister et al.'s (2000) account of an European international online seminar project, Gunawardena et al. (in this book), or Lin and Lee's (2007) account of the deployment of open courseware in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, demonstrate that the international

partnerships necessary in order to conduct multicultural research of this kind are far from impossible to set up. Moreover, insofar as research focusing on online learning cultures is concerned, the very systems of digital communication that have made the emergence of such cultures possible should be more than adequate to facilitate multicultural research by multicultural researchers.