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Using the Internet for Informal Learning about Joining the Brain Drain: A Qualitative Central/East European and Pacific Perspective

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Abstract: The Internet greatly expedites the process of “shooting through” from one’s home country. An online survey of Slovaks, New Zealanders and others suggests the Internet expedites leaving home – largely because of its informality and the way it erodes official control.

The centrepiece of lifelong education and Illich’s notion of deschooling was learning in informal settings. In the 1970’s, informal learning provided impetus for Tough’s work on learning projects, Knowles’s on andragogy and campaigns in developing countries. In those days, learning in informal settings meant talking to friends, watching television, reading a book, watching street theatre or suchlike. The Internet has greatly facilitated informal learning and created a mechanism within which to negotiate life changes even more dramatic than those that preoccupied Mezirow. Today, people use the Internet to leave home. In some cases, temporarily. In others, for good.

This was a study of people using the Internet (web, email, file transfer) to join the brain drain. Almost every country ruminates about the loss of bright, motivated and Internet-savvy citizens. Instead of helping their homeland compete in the global economy, they shoot through. People have always settled in foreign countries. But the Internet has dramatically changed the way people learn about and act on information about “target countries.” Many feel using the Internet is fundamentally different to writing a letter. For example, one of our Ukrainian respondents wrote “A letter, ten letters or more *could never have done for me* what email and Internet did in that half a year I was pushing.” Hence, the **purpose** of this study was to map elements associated with using the Internet to learn how to join the brain drain.

Theoretical Framework

Most research concerning the Internet and learning has focussed on political economy, the “digital divide” and formal coursework. Although the Internet has reshaped ways work is done and lives lived, there has been little theorizing explaining its use outside formal courses. Hence, this study was largely inductive. We conjectured that Internet learning for brain drain purposes involves a *beginning, middle* and *end*. It was further assumed using the Internet to join the brain drain was a process fundamentally different to writing a letter in the “old days.”

The theoretical framework for this study was anchored in subjectivist ontology and involved a model comprised of three stages (*beginning, middle, end*) and two elements of Internet use. The focus was not on the objective “facts” (browsers etc) of Internet use. It was on how brain drain participants subjectively experienced the Internet.

Research Design

The study purpose was attained in three phases. Each built on the one before. During the

- (i) *Preliminary Orientation*, both authors interviewed university teachers, Internet café owners and customers, people in queues outside foreign embassies in Central Europe and others residing in “foreign” countries. Next,
- (ii) a *Short Questionnaire* was emailed to known “brain drainers” – mostly in Slovakia and Canada. This asked respondents to “tell me how you are using the Internet to expedite your departure?” “Are you using web searches, file transfer, email?” “Where do you do this work?” “Have there been any significant break-throughs and is there one person in your target country – with whom you’re talking on the Internet?” “Do you think you’d get the same result without using the Internet?” “Tell me your story.”
- (iii) During a more elaborate third phase, the conceptual framework was used to place an *Online Survey* on the web. At first, known “brain drainers” living nearby were directed to the survey. After becoming confident the *Online Survey* form did what we wanted, listserves (such as CASAE or the Commission of Professors) and email to individuals were used to direct known brain drainers to the URL containing the survey. Respondents wrote answers into drop-down windows that expanded to accommodate longer responses. Once the respondent pushed the “submit” button, responses were emailed to the authors (one in Canada, the other in Slovakia). The software was programmed so neither author was supplied with the respondent’s email address. This ensured respondent anonymity but meant authors couldn’t ask supplementary questions. The *Online Survey* first asked respondents the name of their home and the “target” or “desired” country. It then said “tell us how you used (or are using) the Internet to leave your home country. Tell us your story ...” Next, the survey asked respondents to think about when they “started” using the Internet to plan their escape, the “middle” and then the “latter” part of the process. It then asked if the respondent had met (F2F) a “significant person” from the place-of-interest. The final part of the survey contained questions about educational qualifications, gender, whether commentators would consider them part of the brain drain and whether the respondent will remain involved with solving economic or social problems at home. It then asked “where are you sitting while completing this survey?” “Who owns the computer?” and for “last thoughts concerning “the dynamics of using the Internet for brain drain purposes.” If respondents so desired, they could then request the results by emailing UBC.

Findings

There were four sets of findings – concerning (i) Meaning of the brain drain (ii) Cultural aspects of online surveying and (iii) Stages in brain drain learning and (iv) Elements of Internet use.

Meaning of the Brain Drain

The notion of brain drain emerged in the 1960’s and was used to describe the migration of British and other intellectuals to the USA. Discussions typically occurred within a human capital discourse. By developing education, governments create human capital. When skilled citizens shoot-through, government loses their investment. There are two ways of counteracting

the brain drain – through *rentention* or the *diaspora* option (Boshier, 2002b; Pisutova & Boshier, 2002). In Central/East Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India and other places there is concern about the brain drain.

In New Zealand there is also aggravation about the Australian tendency to claim eminent Kiwis - such as actors Russell Crowe, Sam Neill and John Clarke or filmmaker Jane Campion - as Aussies. In a globalising so-called “knowledge economy,” vulnerable countries cannot afford to “donate” their best talent. A contrary discourse – such as the one expounded by the rightwing New Zealand *Business Roundtable* claims the brain drain is an inevitable and welcome consequence of globalisation. Hence, when leading members of the *Team New Zealand* America’s Cup sailing syndicate were lured to European and U.S. syndicates – taking NZ secrets with them – the *Business Roundtable* shrugged. Others called it treason (Boshier, 2002a; Pisutova & Boshier, 2001).

Online Surveying

Thirty-three responses were received to the *Short Questionnaire* and 30 useable ones to the *Online Survey* for a total of 63 responses. Most people responding from their home country were in Slovakia or New Zealand. Of those responding from their target country, most were in the USA or Canada. Others were in Australia, Germany and Austria. Almost all respondents had left (or were planning) to leave their home country for study or employment. Many had a friend, associate or professional colleague in the target country. Typical situations involved Slovaks heading for (or already in) the USA, Germany, Canada, and Australia. There were responses from USA citizens heading to Canada. Canadian responses were from people heading (or already in) the USA, Czech Republic, Australia, New Zealand or Mexico. There were respondents heading to Canada from Japan, Russia, USA, Germany, New Zealand and China. The survey also attracted responses from people leaving Germany, China, New Zealand and Canada for the USA.

During the *Preliminary Orientation* the authors became convinced the Internet had expedited the brain drain. However, they also encountered literature which suggested the ability to virtually experience foreign residency would dampen the need to shoot through. Hence, if a citizen in rural Slovakia can “visit” New York or take an online course from the British Open University, why go through the trauma, trouble and expense of emigration? With this in mind, the authors opted for a qualitative methodology and provided windows in the *Online Survey* that, in the event of lengthy responses, could accommodate page after page of text. Unfortunately, the anticipated data deluge didn’t happen. Instead, there were striking differences in responses to the *Short Questionnaire* and *Online Survey*. Whereas respondents in Canada, New Zealand and other western countries usually wrote at least a paragraph in response to each question, many Slovaks provided only one-word or one-sentence responses. Whereas Westerners appeared comfortable talking about themselves, Slovaks seemed hesitant. Even though the Czechoslovakian Communist regime was toppled in 1989 there is still concern about official surveillance, jealously directed towards those getting ready to leave and the expense of Internet connectivity. The extreme parsimony of Slovak responses (from within Slovakia) was not matched by responses received from East Europeans in their target country. For example, one of the more elaborate, interesting, nuanced and amusing was a several-paged response from an Internet-savvy Ukrainian who, with considerable diligence, talked her way into a Canadian university.

Stages in Learning for the Brain Drain

We early conjectured that, when using the Internet for brain drain purposes, there would be beginning, middle and end stages. In the *Online Survey* the authors suggested the beginning might involve *surfing*, the middle *focussed searching* and the end *very focussed searching*. These distinctions were not sustained. Most respondents were unable to recall ways in which the end was different than the beginning and it appears that *very focussed searching* occurred throughout. Emigration stories had a beginning, middle and end but there was considerable overlap in the way the Internet was used throughout all stages of the adventure. “It was focussed searching from beginning to end,” said a 29-year-old Russian woman. What the authors assumed might be a sequential or developing process was sometimes chaotic or characterised by sudden disappointment or unexpected breakthroughs. A good example was the aforementioned Ukrainian woman who parlayed her way into the University of British Columbia in Canada.

“I started looking on-line. I was ready to apply to any university that offered the largest scholarship to foreign students. My search term was ‘American Universities and Scholarships and foreign students.’ One day I came across a web site where UBC and its \$16,000 University Graduate Fellowship were on the top of the list. I wrote to Admissions at UBC, told them about my desire to study at an American university and asked about application procedures. They sent me an email with instructions and noted at the end ‘By the way, you wrote about your wish to study at an American university. UBC is in Canada. Good luck with your studies.’”

“A graduate secretary wrote to me daily – updating me on my application. She even said her ancestors were from the Ukraine and she would like to chat to me when I made it to UBC. I felt this was a sign that I should make it to Canada. I felt there was a person who could help me out, who was waiting for me. We probably sent each other a thousand emails from January to July.”

“Then I saw a posting from Bob Bruce in UBC Education Computing Services. He was looking for a Graduate Assistant to work in the labs. As soon as I saw this, I sent my resume. He responded immediately ‘Your resume is infected with a virus. You should not send out an infected file.’ I apologised and our correspondence started ... He said he was looking for people familiar with UBC procedures. I told him I was confident I could learn it and said ‘your job is my only chance to come to UBC’. He arranged a conference call and offered me a job two days later. I had no chance of coming to North America had it not been for this call. A letter, ten letters or more, could never have done for me what email and the Internet had done in that half year that I was pushing my way to UBC – guessing, probing, inquiring, questioning, assuring, responding, reiterating and finding connections. I found UBC by chance. I came because of people who trusted without ever seeing or hearing me. The Internet provided a space to find them and email created a media to communicate.”

Elements of Internet Use

Several respondents appeared puzzled by the *Survey* questions because using the Internet is so *normal*. It appeared that many younger respondents had no knowledge or appreciation of what shooting through was like in pre-Internet days. Hence, although they referred to the *speed and convenience* and ability to *bypass lower officials* and *triangulate* by contacting trusted friends or associates in the target country, this was so *normal* it defied analysis. Why even ask about it? It’s as ordinary as having breakfast. As a 40-year-old male Slovak heading for Canada explained “I was trying to find a job via the Internet. But as I have been using the Internet for three years, it was absolutely normal, nothing really special.” As well as being *normal*, other

respondents claimed the Internet as the *only way to go*. As a 24 year old Slovak woman explained “When I was thinking about going to study abroad, I was forced to use the Internet because it is quite impossible to use any other source with my specialization, which is not ordinary in any other country. .. My country is not in the EU so ... I was forced to start searching with the Internet.”

Two Dimensions

The authors closely read data as it was received. Salient points were highlighted with coloured pens and post-it notes. Almost all respondents commented on *convenience, ease of use*, ability to secure *fast responses* or, as one respondent said *rapid turnaround*. When all data were in, the authors read and re-read it looking for a defensible and parsimonious way of organising the analysis. Because of their age, many respondents were unable to contrast – even loosely – Internet use with say, a letter (by snail mail). Yet, it appeared nearly all respondents referred to different attributes of two inter-correlated variables that lay in an oblique relation to each other. One set of responses referred to the **formality** (from formal to informal) of the Internet and the other to the way it moves the **locus on control** from authorities to Internet users. Think of these as two axes laying at a 45-degree angle to each other. Pasted on top of and around each axis were words, phrases and concepts extracted from the data. Hence, *quickness, fast turnaround* and the *conversational* nature of email were pasted on the *informal* end of the **formality** dimension. Terms like *direct contact, getting dirt on employers, accent concealment* were pasted on **locus of control** (at the “user” end of the continuum).

Formality (formal to informal). Almost all respondents to the *Questionnaire* or *Online Survey* applauded the informality of the Internet. Respondents said their learning was facilitated by, for example, the *speed of email exchanges, opportunity for feedback, reciprocity, questioning and clarification, the low (or no) cost*, the ability to do *broad-ranging* web searches for opportunities in target countries, *up-to-date* web sites, *free, immediate, direct contact*. *It surely felt different than reading a newspaper or posting a letter*, said 30-year-old woman from China. *I wanted to go and have quick productive conversations with them to get the information I wanted. The advantages of email over telephone or snail mail are immense* said a New Zealander now in the USA. *Email is more informal and more conversational. Sometimes people will say things they wouldn't put in a letter*. The informality of the Internet expedites *lurking or covert gathering of information*. In addition, it contains *multiple resources*. The *fortuitous forwarding and receipt* of announcements and files was an asset. The ease of Internet use felt like *soothing reassurance*. The stress of joining the brain drain was lessened by the ease of *maintaining relationships*.

Locus of control (authorities to Internet user). Many respondents felt the Internet expedited the brain drain by its ability to move the locus of control from authorities to the Internet user. Web pictures, email and file transfer created a feeling of *closeness* with the target country or people there. Email blitzes from already-departed friends created a sense of being *left behind*. It was *easy to contact and cultivate a target person*. Information received from one person could be *easily checked* with another (*triangulation*). Instead of waiting for a door to open, the Internet created opportunities for *proactivity* (such as seeking out relevant email addresses). It mostly delivered *up-to-date* information. Several respondents reported an ability to leapfrog over *local officialdom*. Through *tenacious repetition* (with email) it was possible to *nail home* details and arrangements. The Internet contained a private and *intimate space* that consolidated relationships between the aspiring traveller and places and people in the target country.

Implications

Although this study concerned the brain drain, it has broader implications. The 63 respondents all very much liked the informality of the Internet and the way it shifted the locus of control. Does this have implications for more general forms of adult education? For example, web course designers or instructors using the Internet as a supplement to face-to-face instruction would be well advised to think about how their courseware and teaching/learning processes ensure *informality, fortuitous forwarding, soothing reassurance, maintenance of relationships, proactivity* and feelings of *closeness* or *intimacy*. In particular, informal elements have the potential to inform both face-to-face and distributed forms of adult education.

Many governments (such as Ireland, Israel or Singapore) concerned about the brain drain have resolved to reengage with expatriates (or diaspora) living overseas. Perhaps the same Internet elements that characterize departure might be deployed for the purposes of reengagement with the homeland?

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