A Collocated Space in Fine Art Teaching

UTLGBP-15-M - Investigating academic and professional practice in higher education

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Introduction

This study takes an inductive approach to investigate the social actions that occur between a lecturer, guest speaker and two collocated groups of students (online and physically present) in a Masters level seminar using free, web-based technologies. To gather and reflect on empirical evidence of the social actions that occur in this context, this study uses; naturalistic observations, semi-structured interviews and methods of analysis associated with Grounded Theory.

This report starts by setting out the context of the study. It continues with a discussion of some of the principles underlying the methodological approach and methods of inquiry taken in the study. The process used to analyse the gathered empirical evidence is then explained with an overview of the coding process. In the discussion section an overview of two of the three categories that arose from the analysis of the empirical data (**managing the system and a collocated space)** is presented and considered in relationship to pertinent academic literature.

Study Context

Jonathan Kearney is the course director of the Fine Art Digital Masters course at Camberwell College of Arts. He has run the course since 2004. The course is full time and runs over two years' and consists of two distinct groups of students; an online cohort and a cohort that is physically present in the college. At the end of the first semester in each academic year Jonathan runs the 'low Residency' programme for both first year online students and second year physically present students in London. This two-week long residency brings together both groups of students in an intensive week of projects, talks and seminars. The online cohort is made up of students from around the world including countries with complex political situations such as Iraq, Yemen, Eqypt and the USA.

The seminar session that is the focus of this study was conducted in the course's main studio around a large desk with seating for each student. A guest artist spoke about their work to the students. The artist's work then formed the basis for the seminar discussion. The course director and main lecturer was present during the discussion along with the guest artist, an online cohort of eight students and a physically present cohort of nine students.

A large, flat screen monitor was placed at the end of the table showing slides of the guest speaker's work. The lecturer Jonathan sat next to the guest speaker with a laptop and headphones. The laptop streamed the presenter's slides and a live audio feed from the room on YouTube Live. The laptop also showed the students' online Skype chat which the lecturer was also part of. Both the offline and online students were able to access the Skype chat. Students across both cohorts used a range of laptops and mobile devices to access the session. The session lasted two hours. The live stream and chat

window were both recorded, archived and ready an hour later for students to review on a private YouTube channel.

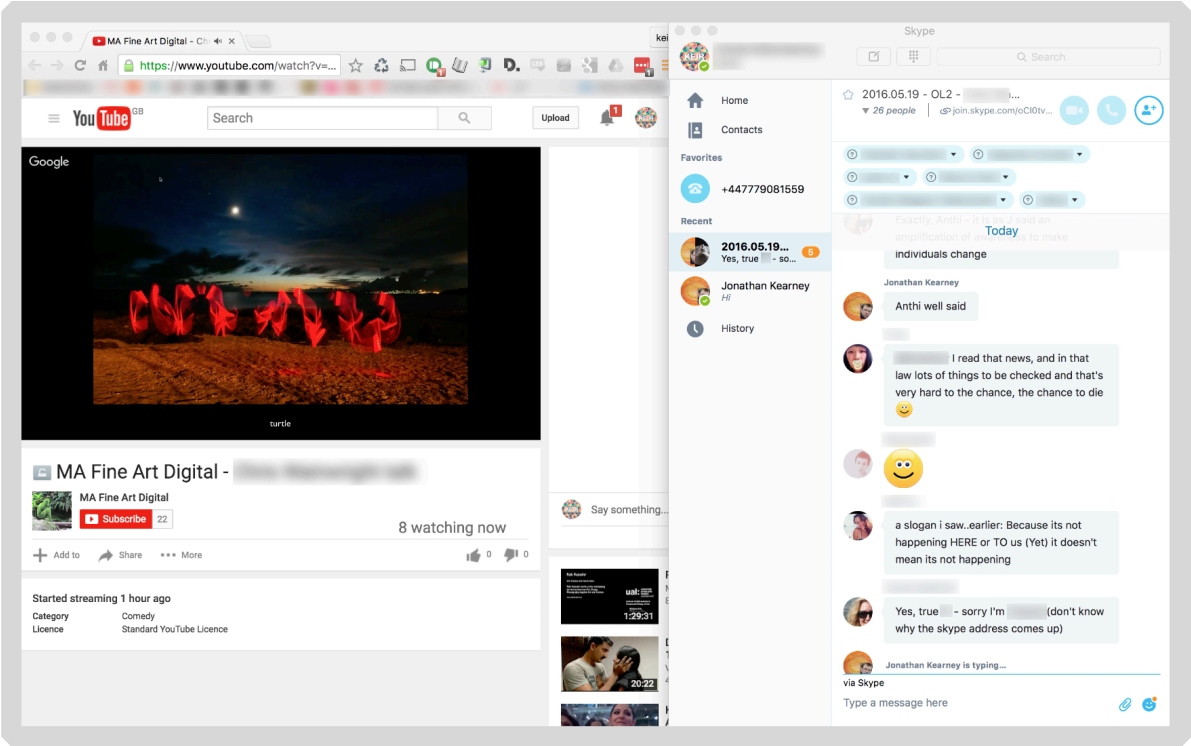

Figure 1 - Live view of Skype chat and YouTube Live

Approach

Methodology

This study is empirical and phenomenological. It starts out from phenomena and builds upwards from them. To study phenomena is not to find out 'what they really are' but to abstract purposefully and selectively from aspects of the empirical evidence and observations to allow interpretation, analysis, and explanation. In this case the phenomena are social interactions.

The aim here is not to put forward a hypothesis, and then see whether it can be falsified or not against evidence of significant cases or a number of cases. It is to interpret an abstracted, 'pure-type' or 'ideal-type' representation of a single complex 'case' (Weber & Shils, 1949, p. 90).

The methodology that is adopted here for studying those social interactions, following Max Weber, is an 'interpretive understanding of social action and interaction'. (Weber, Roth, & Wittich, 1979, p. 4 vol. 1)

Social actions have meanings; social institutions have structures; they both have consequences. The researcher must be concerned with asking: what are the consequences, intended and unintended, ***of*** and ***for*** forms of social action and interaction and social institutions?

Methods of inquiry

The methods of inquiry used in this study (observation, interviews, and analysis) arise from the methodology (interpretive understanding of social action and interaction). They are chosen for and are appropriate to this study; they are not put forward as a general method for pedagogical inquiry.

Observation: This study is inductive. It starts by observing and reflecting on social actions as they occur within the institutional setting of a Masters level, collocated seminar session. The seminar session occurs both online and in a physical space within the university. This specific situation allows me as a researcher to use the online tools available during the session to observe some of the social actions that occur between staff, students and presenter both online and in the physical space.

During the observation I took time stamped naturalistic observational notes on my laptop. I took a recording of both the Skype chat window and YouTube live broadcast within the same window using the QuickTime software. I also had a recording of the session facilitator's computer screen (Jonathan Kearney) during the seminar session. See fig. 1

Interviews: I conducted an interview with the course leader before and after the seminar observation. The interviews were both conducted in a semi-structured manner. The questions and focus of the first interview was guided by my experiences of working as an associate lecturer on the course over 6 years. This informed my knowledge of the techniques used on the course for collocating offline and online students and helped me to develop a specific focus for this small scale study.

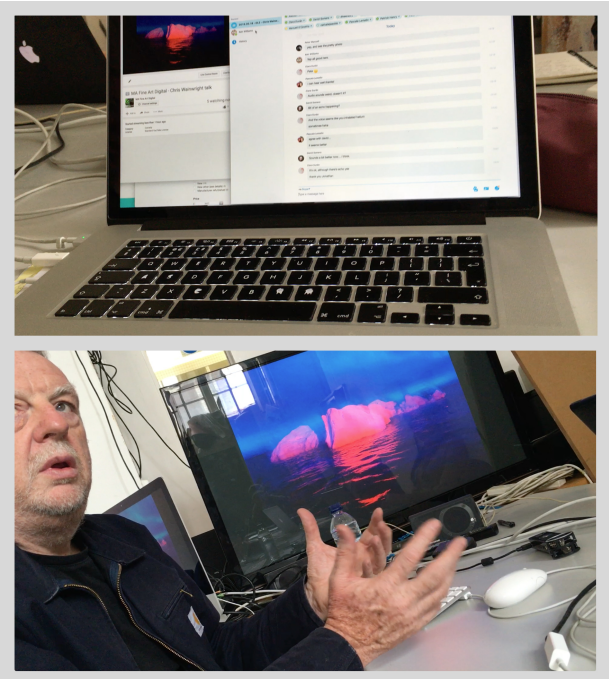

Figure 2 - Jonathan Kearney's computer and guest speaker

The second interview with Jonathan was informed by my observations and initial coding of the seminar session. This enabled me to check my emerging themes with the course director and provided new insights into seminar session.

Analysis: This study follows some of the basic methods of inquiry of grounded theory to analyse the empirical data gathered through interviews and observations and to develop basic categories which are discussed in the discussion section of this report.

Grounded theory directs us to consider our data through inductive and iterative processes of collection and analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It focuses on the

importance of ‘grounding’ analysis and emergent theories in empirical evidence. It is not a set of prescriptive procedures but rather a set of principles and practices to be employed in making sense of social phenomena (Charmaz, 2006). The history, development and processes of grounded theory are covered in a number of texts (Bryman, 1994; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1992; Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Within this research study I use two stages of coding to begin developing categories which provide insights in to the social actions of participants within the specific context under study. This small scale study does not seek to build a theoretical framework that would be applicable in multiple contexts rather it will consider select categories that result from the study’s methods of inquiry and should be considered within the limited data collected. In a more developed study these categories would be further explored and tested in relation to one another by gathering empirical evidence and ‘saturating’ each category with an aim of developing themes which in turn form the basis of a ‘grounded theory. Please See Appendix for: coding sheets, lists and initial coding map.

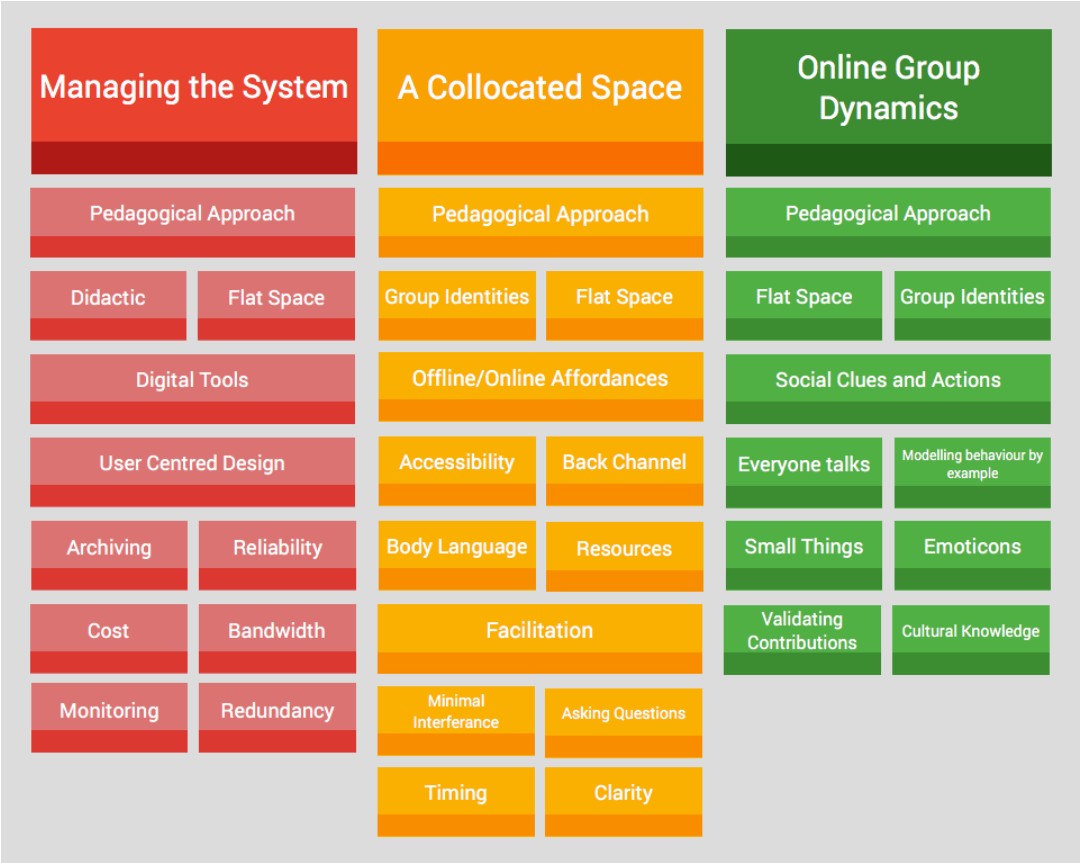

Figure 3 - Final Coding Map

Ethical Approach

To conform to university ethical standards for research I conducted an ethical review of my study before commencing any field work. The main ethical considerations for this particular study were: the secure and anonymised storage of all research materials, ensuring all participants where fully aware of what I was researching, how I was

conducting the research and how it affected participants learning and ensuring that any students who didn't want to participate did not miss out on any teaching sessions. The lecturer and students were all asked if they could be mentioned by name in this study and all agreed. I have however only used the course director's name, Jonathan Kearney, as it proved unnecessary to include the names of students.

Discussion

In this discussion section I will give an overview of the categories of '**managing the system'**, and '**a collocated space'** that arose from my inductive coding process. This is a small scale study. Through the analysis I conducted and the observations I made I have found a rich body of evidence to work from. In order to develop a deeper understanding of the context under study I would need to conduct more evidence gathering, analysis and write a much more detailed discussion which is not possible within the limitations of this project. I will therefore provide an overview of two of the three categories that have arisen to provide a tentative introduction to this rich and complex area of study with an aim to provide an initial mapping of the social actions that occurred.

Managing the system

The course director Jonathan has rejected his University's suite of tools for streaming and archiving sessions, creating online forums and blogs and has instead created his own suite of digital tools to supports his students. His key concern, as identified during our interview, for selecting the technologies that make up his system for teaching is that they "support his and his students learning". His bespoke system is designed to enable his online cohort of students to take part in group discussions, individual tutorials, guest lecturers and seminar sessions as a distinct online group and in collocated sessions with students physically present in the classroom as in the seminar session discussed in this study.

He describes the existing university's system as enforcing "underlying pedagogic assumptions" that are at odds with his own. The university system requires the lecturer to speak from a lectern in a particular lecture room with no facility to record student responses or conversations. This assumes a didactic, speaking from the front setup for the classroom with little variation in the classroom setup. The existing university system is also unsuitable for Jonathan's teaching due to issues of reliability and redundancy. All of the video streaming, audio streaming, archiving and text based chat system are all contained within one program (Blackboard). If Blackboard fails on either the client or server side, then all of the features are lost for the student. He is reliant on the university network and its support systems to help when things go wrong which has proven, in his experience, to be unreliable and unable to help within the small timeframe he has to "just get it working" during a teaching session.

Jonathan says he subscribes to two main pedagogic approaches which underlie his teaching approach and by extension the tools he uses to teach, these are the Connectivist and Harkness approaches to learning.

Connectivist theory, as advanced by George Siemens, contends that learning and knowledge rests in diversity of opinions; that learning may reside in non-human appliances and that software and hardware are the result of human choices. It emphasises the importance of learning and understanding the principles and values underlying technologies over the teaching and learning of specific technologies. (AlDahdouh, Osório, & Caires, 2015; Siemens, 2014). This approach to learning and technology informs both Jonathan's approach to how his students learn to use technology in their arts practice but also his own approach to the technologies he uses for his teaching.

The Harkness method is an approach to teaching that emphasises the importance of student enquiry and dialogue shifting the role of the teacher from lecturer to facilitator. The teacher is required to facilitate conversation and problem solving by students and to:

> Be more open-minded and less controlling over outcomes, to take the risk of listening more and saying less. (Williams, 2014)

The most recognisable aspect of the Harkness model is the use of a large oval table around which students are encouraged to discuss ideas in an open-minded space with minimal intervention from the lecturer. The method derives from the Oxford tutorial system and Socratic methods of pedagogy. (Williams, 2014) Jonathan describes this in terms of his teaching as creating a "flat space", where students and lecturer can discuss ideas openly, shifting the focus from teaching from the front to creating a shared dialogic space. This is reflected in both the physical setup for discussion in the main studio (a large oval table), and in the way he manages and facilitates his online chat sessions.

Jonathan takes a user-centred design approach (Abras & Maloney-Krichmar, 2004) to the design of his teaching system. That is, he starts from the needs of his users which in this case are his students and himself as a lecturer, then develops a set of requirements for the system which are met by a particular arrangement of tools. This is in opposition to a system-led design approach, which can be seen in the design of the university's systems, that starts with a set of system requirements and asks the users to adapt their working practices to fit.

Jonathan's online cohort are located around the world in multiple time zones. They come from a range of countries with varying economic and political contexts. They all have access to the internet. The internet speed, reliability, level of censorship and types of devices they use to access the web also varies from country to country and student to student. What is consistent across all of the students is the need to access teaching sessions and to be able to review anything they have missed. These user needs lead to

a set of key requirements for the digital tools Jonathan and his students use. These are set out below:

Platform agnostic; software will run on any platform and most importantly will run on the majority of mobile devices. This allows students to use a broad range of mobile and computer based solutions to access the course.

Open; wherever possible he uses technologies built under the open-source philosophy where code is developed and left open for others to add to, amend and develop further.

Free; this keeps costs to a minimum and again makes the tools accessible to all of his students even within the variation in economic backgrounds of his students

Reliable; whilst using tools provided by large corporations such as Google and Microsoft runs against his open source principle it ensures that the technologies underlying the tools are rigorously tested and maintained on an international scale.

Redundancy; the system needs to be able to run even if parts become inaccessible for students due to issues such a bandwidth and censorship on either the server or client side of the system.

Jonathan and his students use a range of digital tools but in this study I will focus on the tools he uses for his collocated seminar session. There are two main digital tools that Jonathan uses for his collocated seminar sessions: Skype and YouTube Live.

Skype – He describes Skype (Skype 2016) as the most important tool in his teaching. In the collocated session he uses Skype's text based chat system for group discussion for both on line and offline students in the seminar. The most important feature of Skype for Jonathan is that allows each invited member in a group chat to see the complete chat log no matter when they join the discussion. This allows students who join late or miss the session to review the chat log at anytime.

YouTube Live – this allow Jonathan to stream audio and video in HD via his laptop from the session live, for free, to every student. He can switch between video streams of the presentation slides and a live feed of the room as needed. He can then automatically archive the stream on courses private YouTube channel. (YouTube 2016)

I have provided a brief overview of the 'managing the system' category that arose from my analysis, and turn to consider how Jonathan uses these tools to create 'a collocated space' during the seminar session.

A collocated space

The course is split into two distinct groups; an online and offline cohort. Until the low residency programme which takes place at the end of the first semester, students from the two groups deliberately have little interaction. Jonathan uses the initial semester to develop strong group identities for each of the groups before bringing them together in the residency and subsequently offline/online collocated teaching sessions. The

construction of those group identities is a rich area for investigation but beyond the scope of this study. An overview of some of the pertinent topics in this area can be seen in the ‘online group dynamics’ category in the coding map see fig 3

The seminar that was observed for this study serves as a useful case study to consider how the tools discussed in ‘managing the system’ are used by Jonathan and his students to create a collocated teaching space. The use of the Skype chat system in combination with the YouTube live streaming of the event provided a number of useful opportunities for students in and out of the classroom. The first is what I have termed a “back channel”. That is during the talk, students were encouraged by the guest speaker and Jonathan to ask questions. Whilst this and the table arrangement allowed for a more dialogical, ‘flat space’, than a typical teach from the front session, the conventions of listening to a guest speaker didn’t encourage students to talk.

The online chat system provided a means for both sets of students to maintain a discussion during the talk. The types of comments that were made online didn’t need the same ‘weight’ as a comment directed at the guest speaker. This worked well and follows an important rule that Jonathan has for his online chats, “everyone can talk at once and everyone should”. This wouldn’t be feasible in the physical space but the online tool makes this possible for both the online students and offline students who participate in the online chat. I observed a good example of how this supports quieter students to contribute to the session. A Chinese student who Jonathan had said was reticent to contribute to discussions in class was a very active member of the online chat during the session. The questions and comments she made in the online chat where subsequently asked by Jonathan in the seminar session.

An important affordance of the online tools for students only came to light in my second interview with Jonathan, accessibility. One of the students taking part in the online chat has severe physical difficulties which require him to work from bed in his home. A second student was recovering from an operation in a hospital bed. Both students were able to participate fully without having to disclose any details of their conditions. This demonstrates an important role for the use of these digital tools in supporting a range of physical needs.

There were technical issues with the live stream during the session which at times affected all of the online students and other times only individuals. Jonathan would participate in the online chat session and monitor the session by wearing headphones and watching the live stream whilst simultaneously facilitating the seminar in the studio. By monitoring the stream and taking part in the online discussion Jonathan was able to quickly identify any technical issues, respond to and validate student’s comments and ask questions posed in the online chat. Where one student was unable to see or hear the stream for 20min or so Jonathan was able to explain what the speaker was discussing through the text chat and able to reassure the student that “it will all be

available 5min after the session has finished on our private YouTube channel". This then brings us to Jonathan's facilitation of the session.

One of the most important insights that has arisen from this study is that what makes the collocated sessions possible and more importantly a useful teaching tool is not the innate qualities of the technologies used but rather the skill of the lecturer as a facilitator who chooses and uses those tools. This social determinist position to the use of technology in teaching is seen in the work of Larry Cuban in his historical account of the introduction of broadcast technologies in teaching. (Cuban, 1986) Cuban discusses the importance within teaching practice of what he calls the 'situationally constrained choices' that teachers must make in their day to day interactions with students.

> [Teachers] can alter classroom behaviours selectively to the degree that technologies can help them solve problems they define as important and avoid eroding their classroom authority. (Cuban, 1986) p.70-71

It is these constrained choices that dictate when and where a teacher is likely to adopt particular technologies into their classroom practice. Teachers approach the use of technology in their classroom incrementally. That is, teachers make use of technology when it supports what they are doing more effectively and efficiently. This is evident in the way Jonathan has chosen and makes use of digital tools in his teaching.

A good example of Jonathan's facilitation during the session is the way in which is brings in questions and comments from the online chat into the physical session. What was evident from my observations and subsequent interview was that Jonathan will take a question from the online chat and ask the guest speaker or group with minimal changes to the question. That is, he will interrupt the guest speaker at an opportune time and ask the question, using the online students name, even if this means bringing the discussion back to an earlier point. This is important as it demonstrates to both the online and offline cohort that the online conversation and subsequent questions are as valid and important as those of the physically present students. When questions and comments were asked it was interesting to see the guest speaker directly address to the online student using their name. This validation of student's ideas is also manifested in small comments and the use of emoticons by Jonathan and the online cohort in the online chat to show encouragement and validation where the use of verbal clues and body language would be used in a physically placed space.

Conclusion

In this study I have taken an inductive research approach to investigate the social actions that occur between a lecturer, guest speaker and two collocated groups of students (online and physically present) in a Masters level seminar using free, web-based technologies. I used a range of qualitative research methods of inquiry which resulted in the development of three initial concepts two of which were used to discuss the social

actions that occurred in the seminar session. The observations and interviews I conducted resulted in a wealth of empirical evidence which I hope to use in a further, more involved study next academic year in collaboration with Jonathan Kearney, the course leader of Fine Art Digital MA at Camberwell College of Arts.

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Appendix

The following appendix files can be viewed as PDF files by following the relevant URL link.

Coding Spreadsheets

Observation Coding Spreadsheet: https://goo.gl/XyHhXg

Interview Coding Spreadsheet: https://goo.gl/09RyDz

Coding Maps

Initial Coding Map: https://goo.gl/piMJZO

Final Coding Map: https://goo.gl/4RtcMw

Coding Lists

Initial Coding List: https://goo.gl/nF790a

2nd Stage Coding List: https://goo.gl/pdJ7Qq