

Lurking on the threshold: being learners in silent spaces

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Introduction

This paper presents our perspectives of being learners on the first two modules of a relatively new and innovative MSc in E-Learning. We explore our underlying reasons for undertaking this course, particularly as we are both fairly experienced academics, but perhaps more interestingly the paper also examines when and how we experienced 'stuckness', and the particular catalysts that resulted in this disjunction. In providing reflections on the same course from two different perspectives, we highlight both shared experiences and very different responses triggered by the same catalysts. The paper delineates the forms of stuckness we have experienced and identifies the catalysts for these forms. The final section of the paper suggests that some of the stuckness we have experienced is related to a new form of lurking and argues that our experience may have implications for other learners in online spaces.

There are four names on this paper: two of them belong to our 'Second Life' avatars. On occasion, these characters appear to be sources of observations that we might not have made ourselves.

Lurking on the threshold: our stories

We begin by presenting our positions as both academics and learners and explore the notion of 'silence in online spaces' and suggest that being an e-learning student can sometimes feel like being in a silent space.

Christine/Christine Sanders: I had two motivations for undertaking the MSc in e-learning: one an awareness that I was slipping behind in understanding of the 'e' environment and the other, the main one, to experience actually being an e-learning student. I had already researched the experience of being an undergraduate student in a new discipline by becoming such a student again. (I had become a mechanical engineering student, though my background is philosophy and education.) Now I wanted to explore a new mode of study, as well as a new discipline, and from a postgraduate perspective

As Christine Sanders, I have been enabled to enter a whole new environment (Second Life) and have even learned to fly and teleport myself. I have been surprised at how wary I have been about Second Life, given my enthusiasm for taking on an alternative perspective both in my early study and this current one.

Maggi: Over the last five years I have enjoyed the shifts to e-learning and I like to fiddle and play with technology - even though most of the time I don't actually know what I am doing. However, as someone who has researched learning for many years I was constantly frustrated by what I saw as the 'clunkiness' of learning in online spaces. I hated the ordering strategies of VLEs and the discussions I had had with many experts was that the problem was not with the VLE but how I was choosing to use it. Having heard Sian Bayne speak about learning in cyberspace and attended ICE2 I realised that the problems might not just be with me. I felt I had given WeebCT 'a go' but thought that if I wanted to learn differently then perhaps many others did too. I heard about this MSc and decided the best way to prevent any further courses I developed from being completely vanilla that being a learner for my 'self' was the way forward. However, I didn't expect the shift into liminal spaces to occur quite so quickly nor did I expect the course to be quite so addictive.

As Second Wind I have found that I been more playful and challenging than usual, particularly in group seminars on the beach. My biggest shock was how much my appearance affected how I was 'seen' and because of this I have changed from looking quite like my-self to looking like a goth-with-attitude, (which probably reflects the subtext of my RL).

Maggi's identification of 'liminal spaces' is key to our interpretation of what has happened to us as students and occasionally to our avatars. This notion, originally derived from cultural anthropology, relates to transition and ambiguity and is considered further below in our account of how we approached our task.

Methodology and positioning of ourselves as researchers

Our stories show that the idea of using our own data as research material occurred to both of us from an early stage. We both saw a value in providing a thick description (Ryle, 1968; Geertz, 1973) of our experiences as students. One way of categorising this is to say that we were adopting a form of narrative inquiry. Our new stories, we believed, could be a means of understanding experience as lived and told, through our blogs, assignments, discussions and the literature we read.

Narrative inquiry can be seen in a variety of ways and tends to transcend a number of different approaches and traditions such as biography, autobiography, life story and more recently life course research. In terms of locating it in the broad spectrum of qualitative research, it tends to be positioned within a constructivist stance with reflexivity, interpretivism and representation being primary features of the approach. It is possible to see these features by comparing how reflexivity is seen in narrative inquiry against other approaches. For example, Lincoln separated what she termed conventional qualitative methods from constructivist methods that emphasise holism. She highlighted the ontological stance of constructivist research as being that 'realities are constructed entities' (Lincoln, 1992: 379), and

emphasised the subjective nature of its epistemology. Our own stories, then, might be expected to relate to our own representations of our student experience.

Differences about the issue of representation seem to be one of the strong points of disagreement between qualitative researchers who hold different perspectives. This is not surprising, because to debate the issue of representation would usually draw into question the very processes with which the voices of participants are believed to be captured and presented. We consider that such opinions are, in turn, strongly influenced by views that are held about the nature of truth and truths. Denzin's view of the representational crisis is characterised by the assumption that 'much, if not all, qualitative and ethnographic writing is a narrative production...' (Denzin, 1997:4). The assumption that follows is that 'there is a world out there (the real) that can be captured by a 'knowing' author through the careful transcription (and analysis) of field materials (interviews, notes, etc..)' (Denzin 1997: 4). Denzin, positioned within critical post-structuralism, challenged these assumptions by stating that:

Language and speech do not mirror experience: They create experience and in the process of creation constantly transform and defer that which is being described. The meanings of a subject's statements are, therefore, always in motion.

(Denzin 1997: 5)

It is in such transformations that a sense of liminality may be experienced. And when what is being described happens on the Internet 'which draws users into peculiar kinds of ephemeral 'places' that we do not have words to adequately describe' (Waskul, 2005: 54), then inevitably we find ourselves in liminal spaces.

Thus in practice narrative inquiry is used to study educational experience by researchers who argue that humans are storytelling organisms who lead storied lives. Those who use this research method argue that stories are the closest we can come to shared experience. For example, Clandinin and Connelly (1994: 415) argued: 'Experience. . . is the stories people live. People live stories and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones.' However, we argue that narrative inquiry must go beyond the notion of just telling stories. By using our narratives at the beginning of this article we hope to begin the process of illuminating the difference between 'stories' as data and narrative inquiry. Our interest in narrative inquiry emerged from our experiences of using stories in our teaching and in the notion of the blog and discussion forum as being a space for sharing experiences, journeying and telling stories. Yet the reading of each others' blogs, for example, enabled us to see not only similarities and differences but also how one of us privileged some ideas, concepts and experiences that the other had barely noticed. Furthermore, the notion of what counted as a story and biography in this self reflexive study was something we necessarily saw as problematic, but how it was problematised was an issue that seemed to

slip in and out of focus as we used it as a research method, as we illustrate in the examples below.

Silence and Stuckness

The overarching sense of silence and stuckness pervaded the course for both of us. What we mean by silence is not only lurking on the discussion boards, but not knowing what we thought, how to position ourselves, what to say. While our stuckness was largely characterised by conflict, ambiguity and incoherence, sometimes it seemed as if we were just pedagogically immobile; at other times we were cross and frustrated, knowing there must be better ways of attempting tasks but not really knowing where to start. Paradoxically, online spaces can also seem to be very noisy places, with many people 'talking' at once and using a language that may be alien in part. For example, Phipps (2005) has discussed the notion of 'sounds' in academia and argues that the changes in sounds is having a somewhat unhelpful impact on the quality of academic life experiences. Phipps' work, although located in a deconstruction of sounds, in many ways refers to the impact of noise on learning spaces.

However, it is important to note at the outset that how we saw these concepts and the way we experienced them were both similar and different for both of us. Maggi had not expected so much liminality so soon. Christine had expected it – and was indeed looking out for it – but it came from unanticipated sources. Whilst this might seem negative, for us it was actually an exciting learning space and our sense of being in control of our learning destiny seemed to be out of focus most of the time. The themes that we feel best capture this are explored below. We have chosen what we see as significant entries from each others' blogs to illustrate our points.

Positioning of self

The notion of what presence and embodiment mean in digital spaces was something that was constantly problematic for us. The way we seemed to cope in this silent space in the earlier stages of the course was to (super)impose what we 'knew' using an identity we felt we 'had'. We both intuitively felt that this new learning space was distinctively different but it might be that we were imposing difference on it because it was new and unfamiliar, which would seem to be a contestable position, just as is the notion that we are somehow disembodied in cyberspace. Thus, there is an assumption that because we were not 'seeing' non-verbal cues such as eye contact and body language, this is making online learning and communication difficult. However, it might be the case that new and diverse forms of communication are emerging that are creating new textual and identity formulations, not previously located or understood, as Christine reflected:

But I don't want to make the separation between the worlds as strongly as yesterday's blog suggests. I always get annoyed when people contrast university with the 'real' world: though I suppose that does fit with students

saying it feels like another planet. (I do think that these are two different issues though.) Some of the current discussions and next week's reading are making some very interesting points about what's visible and available and the relationships between online and embodied identities. Yesterday I wrote in my journal, 'I'm not convinced that the embodied identity can be ditched so easily.' and left myself an instruction to think about this.

Sometimes not having a physical presence can be convenient. Maggi found that she welcomed the opportunity to decide where she should 'be'. She had decided not to participate in the discussion thread but go off and explore Second Life in advance:

I...wonder if it matters that I haven't joined my group. Part of me feels it does matter but I have enjoyed 'not' being there which has given me a chance to reflect and play with some other things. For example, I have an avatar in Second Life and I managed to change my clothes and hair today. I feel as if I am really enjoying the experimental side of all this and feel very clueless but sort of more confident in my clueless-ness.

At this stage, then, working with Second Wind seemed more comfortable for Maggi than the group discussions in WebCT. The idea of *having* a digital identity emerged predominantly from the notion of a mind-body split and the overarching sense when operating in cyberspace that there is a feeling of disembodiment and of not being present, a sense of being present and yet not being there but this was a notion to which neither of us subscribed. Yet our embodiment still appeared to be troubling because it prompted us to consider the nature of our identities in cyberspace and whether they were the same or different from our other identities (Christine):

Embodied people can't lurk - they have presence. However, it occurred to me afterwards that there may well be disembodied lurkers in SL, as we show our RL colleagues what is going on on screen. I've done this a couple of times. I didn't do it during our tutorial, but I might have - and now I'm questioning the ethics of this.

Imposed boundaries

Although we had both been engaged in digital spaces for some years we still felt we were new to them and thus felt we did not have a sense of how to be in, or a sense of ways of operating in these spaces. The result was that our face-to-face stances impose pre-existing structures to online settings. However, in undertaking a module on digital game-based learning we both felt launched into liminal spaces as we felt that the games were positioning 'us' rather than be able to position ourselves in relation to the game, as Christine reflected:

I have noticed two things that give me cause for concern:

1) I am positioned as having no choice but to engage in violence. I am unable to continue with the game if I do not. Carrying this message into real life is disturbing for a pacifist.

2) When my soldiers get killed, it is more 'costly' if they have good weapons as I have to replace them. Thus the more lightly armed soldiers' life has less value.

When I first noticed the second point, I said to myself: 'But it's just a game; I wouldn't take that stance in real life.' But the game seems to have exposed a side of me that has taken that stance and I don't like it.

Maggi's journal shows similar deep concerns about violence in computer games and this was a strong theme from many of our fellow students too. Perhaps it is because as a society or even as an academic community we have become so focussed on signs, and because signs seem to change so fast we 'read' people and signs at such speed that organising principles that once seemed stable are constantly shifting. Thus the ability to 'take a position' is not just shaped by our personal and pedagogical stances but also by the late modern focus in signs and as well as the signs of the game. Thus our position, even our ability to 'take up' a position is surely not only located by the game, by our reaction to the game and well as the impact of our life world on/with the game. Many digital learning games do position us as well as positioning ourselves 'in relation' to the game. It seems to us then that positioning is probably more important than the game itself but it is only through understanding the subtext of our position through the game that we come to understand our responses and reaction to our selves.

Thinking about games in new ways proved uncomfortable for us both and suggested some liminal spaces – but with the possibility of release through discussions with each other and with the tutor, as recorded by Maggi:

After some very interesting email conversation with Hamish I have been challenged to think through a number of issues to do with games, but what is also interesting is firstly that I feel I am now on the cusp of my disjunction and things are on the move, and secondly that everywhere I look I now see games...

Power and pedagogy

There seems to be relatively little understanding of how digital spaces are constituted, how they might be mapped, how they might be used differently, and the impact that such spaces are having on the nature of higher education. For example, the provision of information for students, the structuring of learning, the development of websites and learning materials, and the changing in patterns of communication are some of the noticeable but probably smaller impacts that digital spaces are having on the higher education experience for staff and students. Yet Christine wondered about the extent of the commitment of many university staff:

My main point is that unless people have themselves experienced the presentation of self through blogs, portfolios and WebCT, they are not really in a position to make judgements about how other people do it. And then I have a question: is it the presentation of the self that we are judging or the actions and artefacts that tell us that this person is someone who can participate in a particular activity? And can these be separated?

One of Maggi's blogs on the same topic (e-portfolios) takes the arguments a bit further. After reflecting that the issues involved are not that different from other types of portfolio, she concludes:

Surely too the extent to which one allows the database to order and privilege for ones self is a matter of choice, creativity and structure, and choice of tool. There are also arguments by McAlpine that the e-portfolio becomes a virtual identity – yet it is not clear how this is different (or the same) as the identities that we present in discussion board and blogs.

Ordering proved to be a source of discomfort for both of us.

Ordering

A subtext of control is evident in many VLEs, not only through semiotics, symbols and terminology, but also in the way learning is ordered in ways that suggest how teaching and learning *should* be. Whilst for many people these images of scaffolding, structure and safety suggest stability and control, for us there were times when the ordering brought into question our perspectives as both teachers and students; for example Christine reflected in her blog:

The course is making me question some of my assumptions about my own practices, particularly in relation to written materials. There are some issues of control and boundaries here that are surprising me. Two specific triggers should perhaps be recorded: 1) the increased opportunities for collaboration afforded by technology 2) the role of technology in liberating or constraining what a student might do

All this is making me think that there might be another side to Gee's 'rules' - perhaps an analysis that's more from the student perspective: 'what video games have to teach us about how we can get on at university'.

Further, the ordering strategies in WebCT systems encouraged us as students not only to manage knowledge but also to manage our discussions and possibly sometimes to think and learn in linear ways. This kind of ordering and containment seem to reflect a more modern than late-modern stance to learning in a digital age. Thus, the way in which technology is employed in many universities is resulting in the sense of an institutional panopticon, where visibility and calculability are not seen as problematic. As Land has argued:

The Web, for example, remains unruly, risky and troublesome, an implacable aspect of the supercomplexity and intractability of the post-modern condition. An intriguing irony is that though current commercial virtual learning environments (themselves global corporations) might be seen as spaces that dis-place older collegial spaces, symbolised by the quadrangle, they nonetheless still attempt to wall in their own 'onscreen real estate', to fend off, perhaps, the post-modern wildness of the Web. In this respect they function as an *ordering strategy* (Land and Bayne, 2006). Like many modernist practices and spaces, they are singularly rectangular.

(Land 2006: 108)

Perhaps WebCT and other manifestations of the Web preserve some of the stereotypical or established teacher and learner roles. As both learners and teachers, we did, of course, have some observations to make on these roles.

Teacher and learner identity

The way in which we portrayed and projected ourselves in digital spaces seemed very much to reflect our pedagogical stances, the way we see ourselves as learners, and teachers. Thus, the complexity of being a learner (and teacher) in a variety of digital spaces constantly challenged us to question what it meant to 'be' a learner in these kinds of spaces, not only in terms of portrayal and presentation, but also in relation to pedagogy and action. For example, whilst there has been much discussion about presence and forms of presence in the literature on digital learning there has been relatively little exploration of the impact of diverse forms of digital presence on pedagogy (see for example, Feenburg, 1989; Bayne, 2005a, 2005b; Land, 2006).

Maggi summarised some of these issues succinctly in her blog after an early meeting we had to discuss this paper:

Yet, as Christine suggested, maybe our constant contestation was problematic to others and I also wondered whether my strong pedagogical stance might be intimidating at times to others.

The use of the blog to expand on pedagogical issues was invaluable to Maggi. Later she said:

I think due to so much going on I have struggled with the reading but really got fed up with the Dreyfus article. I think this is because of the way I see learning as approach and deeply connected to our multiple and changing identities and much of this and the other articles for the last 2 weeks seemed over simplistic...I avoided going on the discussion list about it all because I felt I might get too inflammatory... so here is really what I think...

Although Maggi the student was fed up with the reading, Maggi the university teacher was prompted by the issues to keep writing for another page or so beyond this.

These examples illustrate how pedagogy *in* digital spaces is continually changing and both this and the pedagogy *of* digital spaces are mutually shaping and changing each other. We both found exchanges with tutors on the two modules considered here particularly helpful, to move us on as students and also to take forward the implications to our own teaching. The interplay of student and teacher personas was both discussed and practised during the course. It might be argued then that the pedagogical discourse emerged at the boundaries of these.

One of tutors reflected:

Teaching on this course involves engaging at the same time in multiple written conversations across multiple media - in a morning's work I can be commenting on 15 weblogs (each of which are 'voiced' very differently), responding to a handful of discussion threads, talking synchronously in groups in Second Life, and also responding to individual emails both in WebCT and in my usual email client. Personally I love working in this way but it strikes me that the opportunities for the linguistic performance of 'teacherliness' are so complex here, that we've barely even begun really to explore what this complexity might mean for the ways in which power operates in the classroom, or for the ways in which academic developers might need to work with teachers in helping them work with digital teaching spaces. I confess I'm still a little haunted by the chat session I had earlier in the semester, where - it emerged afterwards - the students couldn't see my postings, and I didn't even realise. What does that say about the operations of power in the online class, when the teacher can be quite literally invisible, yet can be continuing to teach without ever realising?

However, there are further difficulties with the language of online learning. The notion of 'moderating' clearly locates the control with the lecturers. The notion of 'lurking' implies that silence and watching are inherently bad, whilst at the same time raising questions about what counts as presence in digital spaces – and who decides.

Catalysts to Silence and Stuckness

We found becoming stuck in learning was both deeply problematic and useful and transformative. This is echoed in the similarities in our experience and also in the differences in our responses. However there were trends we shared and in particular we both felt that the stuckness did not necessarily *a/ways* result in the displacement of identity (in the sense of a shift causing such a sense of disjunction that it resulted in costs personally and pedagogically, and hence has a life cost) but rather a shift in identity or role perception so that issues and concerns were seen and heard in new and different ways.

Technical difficulties and understandings

For both of us, despite being used to using a VLE, we found that the volume of links, information, reading and in particular the speed of communication and learning made us feel awash with complexity. This was partly as a result of the sheer enthusiasm of the cohort who posted daily (and more) to the discussion board, but it was also because others had so much really useful knowledge (and links) to share. Whilst we enjoyed the stimulation, there were times when we fell silent because of feeling overwhelmed and almost voiceless in the discussion spaces.

Pedagogical concerns

Our pedagogical concerns stemmed from not only our interest in how knowledge was created and through the course but also around what might constitute the underlying pedagogy of the course. It seemed to be a course that was largely behaviourally constructed but was actually constructively positioned. For example we had learning objectives and a very traditional course guide with readings and the prerequisite guidance about plagiarism, but when 'on' and 'in' the course it was much less constrained or striated (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1988) than we anticipated. Assessments were flexible, interesting and negotiable, blogs could be designed the way we wished and no one seemed to mind if we went to ahead to explore information a few weeks ahead. There was also a sense of egalitarianism and reciprocity not only within the cohort, but also with tutors, who seemed to be learners too.

Understanding the conventions of the media used

We were both familiar with some conventions of the e-learning environment though would not necessarily adopt them (Christine commented that she would not know what she meant if she used a 'smiley'). Others were very new conventions, though adaptations of the familiar – for example, behaviour in Second Life such as turntaking in conversations, bumping into people and how to respond to strangers' suggestions. Finally, there were the norms and in-jokes of a developing group (Cutting, 2000) – made more difficult as some people's references came from technical sources unknown to us and others came from a range of theoretical perspectives. For example, while we understood the references to 'deep' approaches to learning, some others were bemused (and amused) by them – though others could refer to technical processes and perspectives that were alien to us (and which we have now forgotten).

Feeling out of control

There were more fascinating leads to follow up than there was time available – an inevitable outcome of such a widely experienced group of staff and students. Feelings of being out of control would arise when we were not able to access the site for a while or could not keep up with tasks because of work and other commitments. In such circumstances, we found we had to regain control by focusing on essential tasks, such as blogging and completing assignments. Both of us found that we had far more to say than the allotted word count for our assignments: a ‘normal’ case of feeling out of control but taking steps to restore the balance.

Effects of exposure of prior assumptions and experiences and challenges to these

Maggi: My assumption was that I would be challenged on this course and would enjoy the interaction. However, I had also assumed that as it was an MSc I wouldn't struggle too much! Yet my struggles were not with the pedagogy, the reading or the complexity of any of the content, but of the challenges to my identity as learner, teacher, writer and parent. Often the voices I displayed in the blog sounded different from my 'writing voice', I was almost 'authoring' myself differently. The assertiveness on the discussion board belied the reflective stance I tend to take when working in small groups. I felt I was developing a full voiced student identity that has been lurking in the wings (or even the Wind)

Christine: Some of my assumptions about both learning in general and my own ethical stances in particular have been challenged by consideration of computer games. I am starting to explore my own resistance to certain types of practice, even in play. For example, I am even contemplating the idea that it may be appropriate to shoot someone for a misplaced apostrophe – just virtually of course, and I still would not choose the violent route in a 'grammar' game for myself.

Relating to the literature

It has been interesting to relate all of the above to what we are reading both as learners and as academics, especially work on liminality, thresholds and identity (Meyer and Land, 2003; Waskul, 2005). Such catalysts have promoted shifts into liminal states resulting in liminal identities, which for most of the course have resulted in ‘chronic uncertainty’ about our selves and our relationships to the new environment. The state of liminality tends to be characterised by a stripping away of old identities, an oscillation between states and personal transformation. Liminal spaces are thus suspended states and serve as a transformative function, as someone moves from one state or position to another. Engaging with liminal spaces may involve choice but in the case of troublesome spaces they are often more likely to be ‘stuck places’ (Ellsworth, 1997). Yet this conception of stuck places would seem to imply that stuckness is a place one travels to – whereas being stuck or disjunction is

often a position one seems to find oneself in, often somewhat unexpectedly. There is little (if any) preparation and it may be because of this that disjunction is where people are before they reach a liminal space, prompted by a threshold concept or a new learning experience. Thus for us, having overcome the shock of the disjunction we find ourselves re-examining our position. Chronic uncertainty and liminal states should not necessarily be taken to be negative descriptions of where we are: the paper identifies an associated excitement and stimulation prompted by these conditions.

Lurking on the thresholds

Meyer and Land (2003) have argued for the notion of a 'threshold concept,' the idea of a portal that opened up a way of thinking that was previously inaccessible. This conceptualisation seems to resonate with the experiences that are emerging from the blogs. However, what is problematic, but also vital, about the notion of a threshold concept is that preliminal variation exists. Meyer and Land (2005) begin by suggesting that when students find particular concepts difficult they are in a state of liminality which tends to be characterised by a stripping away of old identities, an oscillation between states and personal transformation. Preliminal variation is a means of distinguishing between 'variation in students' 'tacit' understanding (or lack thereof) of a threshold concept' (Meyer and Land, 2004). This, they argue, means that it may be possible to understand why some students approach and manage the threshold concepts while others cannot. Yet it might not just be about students' ability to manage the threshold concept but also their reaction to it. For us, some of the thresholds themselves were *entrances to places* where we did not want to go – and some were *entrancing places* where we wanted to escape the more mundane tasks.

Avoiding engagement

Both of us are sufficiently experienced to ensure that we have done what we had to as students to get through the course, but there were aspects that we avoided. It has already been suggested that neither of us wanted to engage with the e-portfolio, but the reasons for that resistance were familiar to us from other personal development planning issues. (Resistance to PDP does, however, raise some interesting questions in relation to the fact that we are both quite keen bloggers.)

Again, we have already pointed out that neither of us wanted to engage with violent games, and this has brought out additional issues. Maggi reports not just having problems engaging with the games but also with the literature on games. The following extract throws an intriguing light on the use of the word 'game' – both in the unfamiliar and the familiar pedagogical contexts.

I have had so many frustrating attempts on Pacman and other games I have decided to try something else.... However, I have decided that I am not getting to grips with a lot of this not just cos I don't like the games but I don't understand not only people's fascination for them but also the literature. So I have done some searching and found some likely looking

journal articles – that will at least make the researcher identity a little happier. However, I realised today that I also need to think about games differently, something Hamish indicated in the introduction to the module. For example, Perkins discusses the notion of ‘underlying games’ and epistemic games.

In the process of avoiding engagement, we then might find our way back to more familiar territory and discourses...

Avoiding engagement in some activities because they seemed too hard and complex

It would seem that it might be possible to locate our different forms of disjunctions and silences in the following two ways:

A moment of conceptual puzzlement: here self-realisation that we were stuck and did not understand how to move on resulted in a sense of feeling paralyzed or fragmented by this realisation.

A cycle of stuckness: here we understood the needs to move away from a particular position of stuckness, but not knowing how or where to move to resulted in a constant cycle of stuckness which led to a return to the same stuck space repeatedly. When this occurred we tended to opt for silence or actually felt we became silent by being in this cycle

Sometimes moving on from one of the above positions would not take us far enough to have a voice in what the students in front were doing: for example, only getting on top of how to contribute to the wiki when all the excellent contributions were already there. Christine Sinclair also felt several steps behind in Second Life: avoiding the bigger tasks such as building, buying and selling and therefore being ‘invisible’ at some stages of the course, though her avatar Christine Sanders was actually pottering around in the shallows somewhere in Second Life and getting used to this new environment.

Over engaging

Second Life is probably the space that prompts the most different responses from us.

Maggi’s preference for Second Life over some of the other more controlled spaces led her to wonder whether she was over-engaging:

Yet what struck me was the juxtaposition of real life (RL) and Second Life (SL) and the extent to which one feels more ‘real’ in SL than in the online discussions – which I certainly seem to...

I went back into SL this morning, flew, took my clothes off, and found the ski resort. I think I am getting addicted. However, maybe it can be used pedagogically to teach students to ask questions, good questions, since this is something we are not great at helping students to learn. Not sure how I could do this but would be worth more thought I think...

As with avoiding engagement, thoughts about over-engagement are associated with a return to familiar ground and wondering how that can be integrated with the new ideas.

Implications

A number of implications emerge from the above findings. Each of us has been able to move on through our silent spaces to find ways of expressing ourselves as fledgling 'e-learners' and to integrate this new identity with our identities as teachers. Though we have still a long way to go, we have passed through some portals and can never return. A graphic example of this can be seen in our avatars: Christine Sanders and, especially, Second Wind have performed actions in Second Life that have led to their real life counterparts rethinking some of the things they do in their day-to-day practice in universities.

Though we cannot return to our former neophyte state, we do have a wealth of information about the journey towards and through those portals. This helps us to prepare for the next ones. We know that when we are stuck it is likely that we will lurk around the threshold – either by avoidance or over-engagement in related activity – and will only pass through when we are ready. We believe that this may be a necessary phase; nevertheless, it may still be useful to seek ways to ensure that this phase is reached and satisfactorily transcended.

Conclusions

This paper has proved to be an interesting collaboration for a variety of reasons. We found it both reassuring and illuminating to read each others' blogs about the same activity. Our experiences were liminal – arguably by definition because we were serious learners – but the boundaries, edges and thresholds we encountered were sometimes similar and sometimes different, as were our responses to them.

When we got stuck, we reacted to the silence in two distinctive ways – by avoiding or over-engaging. We believe that we have shown evidence that each of us made both responses, in different proportions and sometimes with different catalysts. We regard both avoidance and over-engagement as manifestations of 'lurking'. This is perhaps an extended definition, emphasising the 'prowling' aspect of lurking as well the 'not responding' aspect.

We have provided some frameworks from the literature to explain our reactions to our situation as well as our subsequent actions. As university teachers, we now have some increased insights into student responses that may be relevant not just for online liminality but also for dealing with stuckness in general. As researchers, we have some more questions about what our stories are revealing and how they are revealing them.

So wherever it is we are going, we are not there yet. The final word comes from the last blog of the first semester from Maggi (or is it Second) – with enthusiastic endorsement by the Christines:

So, my stances have moved all term, but my liminal identity is still liminal and I have had a great time.

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