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# Affordances and challenges of e-learning for professional learning and development

Dr Norbert Pachler  
Institute of Education,  
University of London

[www.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.ioe.ac.uk)

[www.wlecentre.ac.uk](http://www.wlecentre.ac.uk)



WLE Centre for Excellence  
Institute of Education  
University of London  
20 Bedford Way  
London WC1H 0AL

Tel +44 (0)20 7911 5531  
Fax +44 (0)7092 288 882  
Email [n.pachler@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:n.pachler@ioe.ac.uk)  
Web [www.wlecentre.ac.uk](http://www.wlecentre.ac.uk)

## About the Institute of Education, London

- independent, medium-size, specialist postgraduate college of the University of London
- education and related disciplines (social sciences & health sector)
- member of the Bloomsbury Colleges consortium
- three main streams of activity: teaching, (funded) research, consultancy
- two specialist centres focussing on R&D in the field of e-learning:
  - the [London Knowledge Lab](#): bringing together our expertise in the social sciences with computing science offered by Brikbeck
  - the [Centre for Excellence in Work-based Learning for Education Professionals](#) (WLE Centre): focussing on student experiences; multimodal approaches; m-learning

- one unit supporting pedagogical and didactic dimensions incl. course design: the [Learning Technologies Unit](#)
- currently around 25% of Institute provision is mixed mode or online
- Learning, Teaching (and Assessment) strategy in which approaches to e-learning are integrated

## Definition of professional *learning*:

an increase in the skills and knowledge base as well as the understanding of education practitioners in relation to pedagogical and didactic principles – as well as more subject epistemology-related matters – through mediated but self-directed engagement with peers, tutors and content

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## Definition of professional *development*:

the systematic maintenance, improvement and broadening of knowledge, skills and personal qualities for the execution of professional duties

## The Master of Teaching (MTeach):

- is a mixed-mode Masters degree programme
- foregrounds ‘higher level’ professional learning and a scholarly approach to teaching
- focuses on teacher agency through enquiry into personal professional practice and learning and that of peers
- emphasises educational research literacy
- is based on the notion of shared knowledge construction at a distance through computer-mediated communication supported by some face-to-face meetings

<http://www.ioe.ac.uk/mteach/>

## Distinctiveness of the MTeach:

- its pedagogy is based on discussion templates which engage learners in the construction of 'pedagogical' and practice-orientated texts
- the tasks require the recounting and interrogation of instances of professional practice
- it encourages personal observation on practice informed by a range of professional literature
- it fosters an online learning community characterised by a specific 'designed-in' 'culture of learning'

## ‘Designed-in’ culture of learning:

### *Four design principles:*

- Narrative principle
- Discourse principle
- Argumentation principle
- Intercultural principle

### *Key characteristic:*

- negotiation of meaning through peer discussion by which practitioners render professional phenomena meaningful

(Pachler and Daly, 2006a)

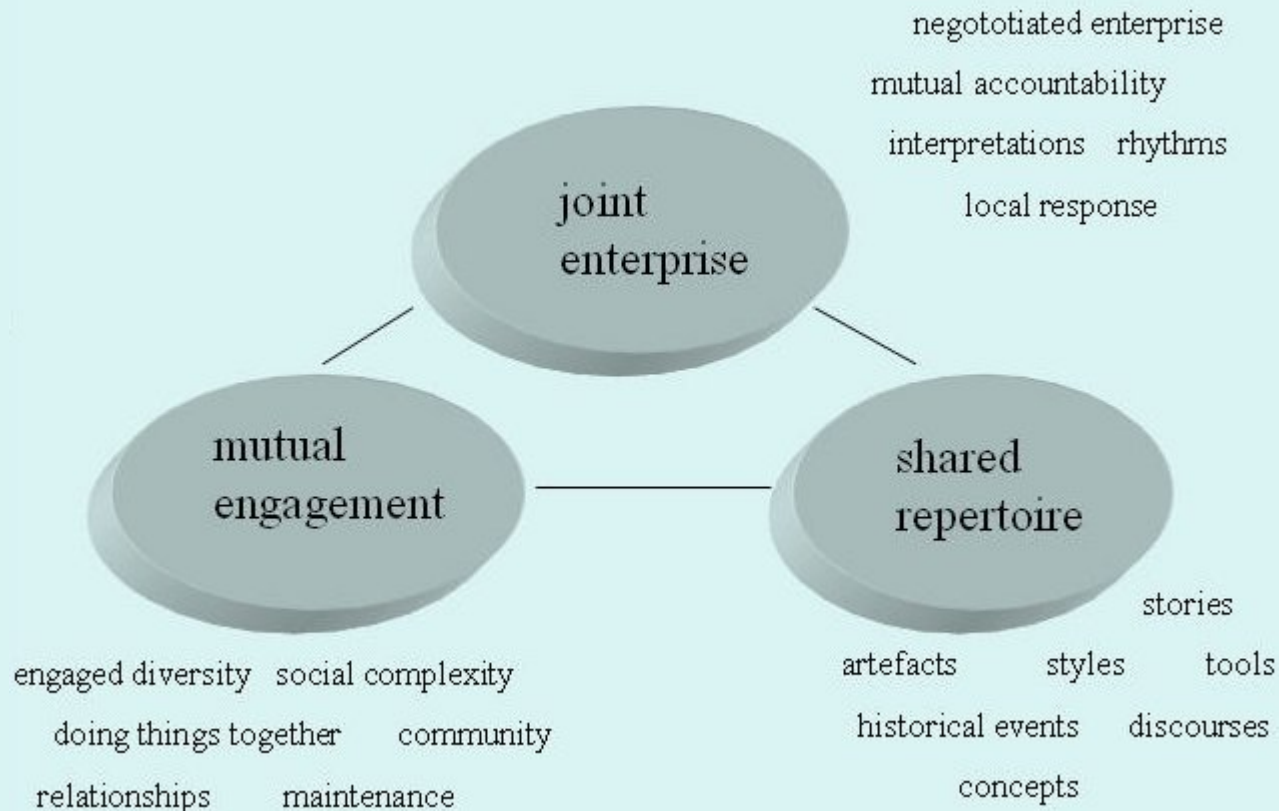
## Communities of Practice (CoP):

The course draws on Wenger's (1998) twin politics for learning within a CoP:

- *Participation*: “takes place through our engagement in action and interactions, but it embeds this engagement in culture and history”
- *Reification*: “we project our meanings into the world and then we perceive them as existing in the world, as having a reality of their own”

‘Talking *within* practice’ is the core learning activity.

# Wenger's 'dimensions of practice as the property of a community':



## Research focus:

- participants' adaptation to the online environment, in particular their perception of themselves as learners within an electronic tutor group
- data set for this paper: 30 minute interviews conducted by module tutor with 7 second-year participants (out of a group of 14) nearing completion of the course

## Online learning as an uncertain process:

- the transition from individual, primarily content-based learning practices, to collaborative, knowledge-making ones is an ‘uncertain process’ (Andriessen et al, 2003)
- There remain unresolved conflicts in terms of subjectivities and internal perceptions of self-responsibility for learning and engagement in the learning of peers. This makes online interaction ‘being laid bare’ for one person, while for another it is ‘opening yourself up’.

## An 'information age' learning orientation:

- our data suggests that those with most prior experience of CMC exhibit a strong 'information age' orientation
- a process of knowledge appropriation rather than knowledge construction prevails
- the notion of interaction is activity undertaken in order to conduct a form of free-market exchange in which knowledge is traded efficiently
- learning is conceptualised as 'capturing and centralising' knowledge

## A 'knowledge-age' learning orientation:

- those with little or no prior experience of CMC can be said to exhibit more of a 'knowledge-age' orientation
- they are more successful in fostering interdependent practices leading to professional change
- they display a growing ability to engage in meta-learning discourse
- the shifting locus of the learning between the individual and the group is conspicuous and conditioned by the asynchronous environment
- they are becoming more aware of how they are learning collaboratively in a CMC environment

## ‘Teaching’ texts:

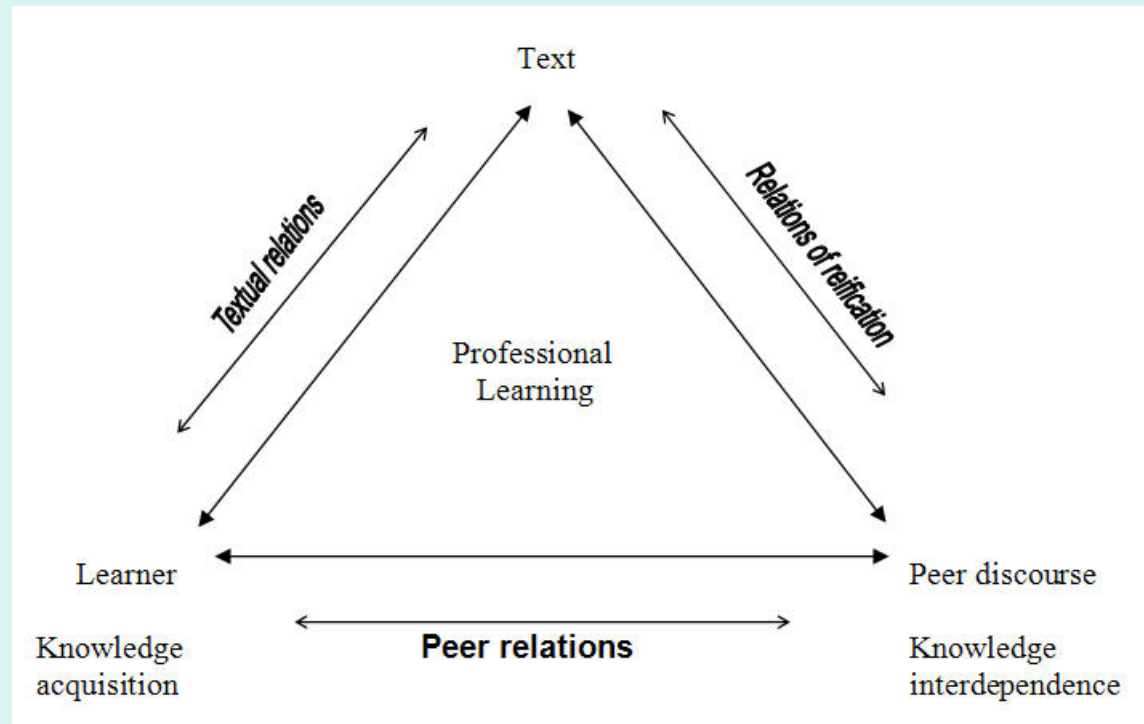
- provocative notion that for distance students the teacher is replaced by the ‘teaching text’ (Blake, 2000)
- implicit in this assertion is a shift in onus from the teacher to the student with the student’s written word being at a premium
- Blake’s asks ‘What does this student mean [by these words]? – we argue that what is meant is no simple matter: participants’ writing is characterised by (sub)conscious practices of performance and resistance
- textual representation of the (professional) self forms part of a complex process of self-disclosure by which the learning dynamic of the community is steered by participants

- the use of written text rather than the spoken word has interesting consequences for the quality of conversations
- the interaction mode (synchronous versus asynchronous) influences the nature of the written text
- the act of writing in online conferences may foster higher order thinking for reasons that have to do with the relationships between writing and cognition; written language is decontextualized, or de-coupled from the layers of information typically available in the physical context or through paralinguistic channels

(Lapadat, 2002)

# Online professional learning trajectories:

- the relations between the text, the individual and peer learners are complex



*Learner-text trajectory:* learners are positioned according to how they view text-reader-author relations

*Learner-peer discourse trajectory:* learners are positioned by the peer relations within the group, and their own orientation to knowledge acquisition and interdependence through interaction.

*Peer discourse-text trajectory:* learners are positioned by the extent to which they participate in group discourse which engages in processes of reification of professional phenomena

## Perspectives on learning:

*the intentional learner – individual-cognitive view:* through confronting personal construct systems and experiences learners become aware of and engage with underlying frameworks

*the learner as communicator – social-interactionist view:* learners develop through communication, collaboration and/or guided activities

*the learner as experimenter/researcher – experimental-participatory view:* learners gradually develop procedural/syntactic and declarative/substantive knowledge of teaching and learning and knowledge of some of the socio-cultural factors that constrain it

## Concluding remarks:

- all three perspectives operate to differing degrees with different members at any given time
- they result from the relationship between subjectivities and the discourse context of the electronic environment
- learning is seen as a process of joint knowledge creation which is neither 'here' (the site of professional learning) nor 'there' (the classroom/VLE)
- it places learners in an unfamiliar 'third place', i.e. the virtual environment that is co-created by the learners

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