Body awareness as the connecting skin in disembodied flexible learning contexts

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Abstract

A lack of discussion and debate within current discourses of flexible learning, particularly disembodied contexts are rendering invisible changing practices within teaching and learning processes. This paper focuses on experiences coordinating a group of 30 NSW Department of Education and Training school assistant trainees returning to accredited, formal study within disembodied teaching and learning contexts.

Data emerged from professional and personal journals and course teacher interviews that highlighted the importance of the role of the teacher in disembodied contexts. In the absence of the bodies of other learners added pressure is put on the establishment and maintaining of the teacher/learner relationship. The study also highlighted the importance of the physical bodies of teachers and learners in enabling connections that established teaching and learning partnerships between teachers, learners, other learners and the learning context. What emerged was the need to attain an awareness of ‘self’ and self need to operate bodily in the teaching and learning spaces of absent bodies.

Introduction

Embodied teaching and learning contexts enable group learning processes to develop connections between peers and teachers that benefit both learning and teaching. Disembodied contexts, without embodied peer interaction, tend to place emphasis on the teacher as a focus of contact, relationship building and connection for learners. This places enormous pressures on teachers and/or coordinators to build relationships with individual learners often in environments of large learner numbers, time and distance constraints and without the benefits of embodied communication. How can we find ways to operate bodily in spaces of disembodiment? How can an awareness of body and embodiment be situated in the disembodied contexts of Flexible Learning for the benefit of learners and teachers and learning and teaching processes?

Flexible Learning, as I am using the term, refers to any combination of multiple mode or hybrid delivery of teaching and learning. It implies a degree of control by learners over the place and time of learning, and in some instances the pace of learning.

There is conflict, confusion and a collision of discourses that currently exists for many teachers and learners involved in Flexible Learning contexts. There are diverse and conflicting conceptualisations of the terms flexible learning and flexible delivery and the associated changing practices of teaching and learning. There are diverse and conflicting
expectations of learners, teachers, educational managers, industry employers and regulatory bodies within changing teaching and learning contexts.

We are operating within these conflicting and contradictory discourses not just at a local and national level, but increasingly at a global level. They are discourses that seek to make invisible the distinct role of the teacher and to absent the bodies of teachers and learners from the teaching-learning transaction. Within the new way/s of teaching and learning, change is accepted as inevitable without adequate discussion and debate; questioning is silenced or trivialised, encouraging conformity in thinking and action; and there is increased dependence on operational systems of compliance with overarching scrutiny and governance (Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan & Somerville forthcoming).

Flexible Learning often means a shift in control from teachers to learners and therefore in teachers’ and learners’ roles which need to be re-examined and reconceived within the teaching and learning process. There is a struggle for power for learners and teachers, not necessarily in opposition to each other, but a paradoxical struggle between learners’ and teachers’ needs, teachers’ accountability, institutional constraints and external governance. The lack of discussion and debate within current discourses of Flexible Learning, particularly disembodied contexts, create a smoke screen that renders invisible changing practices of teaching and learning.

Bodily separation

One of the things that Flexible Learning promotes as does Distance Education and Open Learning is the physical absence of learners from a large percentage of compulsory face to face attendance, affecting an absence of whole body contact between learners and teachers and other learners. While an increase in Flexible Learning opportunities is offering greater access to award status vocational education and training, the disembodiment of many Flexible Learning contexts can in fact reinforce isolation, particularly in rural contexts where physical separation and isolation can in fact reinforce isolation, particularly in rural contexts where physical separation and isolation are major factors in shaping perceptions of isolation (Butler & Wintram 1991:7). There is a need therefore for teachers and learners to understand the changes to teaching and learning processes and practices that occur within Flexible Learning contexts (Kirkpatrick & Bell 1998:30).

Interaction between teachers and learners and other learners is especially affected by the bodily separation of those involved in teaching and learning processes. Much of the way we communicate with others is through and with our bodies. Without body to body communication there are more opportunities for misunderstandings to occur; for both teachers and learners to lose connection with teaching and learning processes; and for the development of a reliance on assumptions, by both teachers and learners, which affects stereotyping, and discrimination. Disembodied communication can also rely heavily on the written word as a communication medium. This effectively discriminates against learners without well developed reading and writing skills and independent learning skills. Bodily separation means that communication is often not ongoing, relationships are difficult to develop or tend to take longer to establish than within face to face contexts and connections are not made. Many learners believe they are meant to learn in isolation. The silences of both learners and teachers in these instances become deafening.

Conversely, the absence of bodies can facilitate an anonymity that can benefit both teachers and learners. The pressures of body to body contact are reduced or non existent, with
anonymity creating a confidence and level of participation that may not be present in face to face teaching and learning contexts.

In face to face classes teachers accommodate underdeveloped learning to learn skills by being constantly available to learners through their bodily presence. Teachers engage in constant communication, assumptions are given the opportunity to be broken and learners can pick up clues and cues about learning. Often the development towards independent learning is an implicit and ongoing process. Within Flexible Learning contexts teachers may be inadvertently leaving it up to learners to develop these skills in an ad hoc and isolated manner as they endeavour to give learners control over the learning process. Personal control for learners needs to have a focus on being in control of their personal learning situation, being empowered, rather than being in control of the entire teaching-learning transaction (Garland 1994:47).

As well, within Flexible Learning contexts learners often tend to be at different stages in a course, with rolling, ongoing enrolments and self paced learning encouraged to accommodate trainees and employers. This means that teachers are challenged to respond to a range of complexities outside the realm of traditional face to face contexts. Concurrently time has become a commodity, precious and rare, often to be traded for efficiencies (Davies et al forthcoming), while paradoxically Flexible Learning often encourages an aura of timelessness.

The study

The study focused on experiences coordinating a group of 30 NSW Department of Education and Training (DET) school assistant trainees returning to accredited, formal study within disembodied teaching and learning contexts. My connection with this group was maintained over a three year period from 2000 to 2003. The main areas of interest were the place and value of social connectedness in learning and teaching when learners and teachers are bodily separated from each other.

The traineeship program involved women who were already employed with DET NSW as school assistants, completing a Certificate III in Education Support – School Assistant. This certificate was divided into five strands, Administration, Hospitality, Library, Science and Teachers Aide Special for assistants whose main work was in Special Units. The criteria for the traineeship were that the trainees had to be working at least 18 hours per week on an ongoing basis and not have completed previous studies at a level higher than Certificate II. This program was coordinated and delivered from Parkes TAFE Campus in the central west of NSW, with trainees spread over the western half of the state from Lithgow in the east, to Lightning Ridge in the north, Broken Hill in the west and Cowra in the south.

Flexible Learning in the context of the traineeship program was a multiple mode delivery, with print based distance education materials, online modules, workplace assessment, recognition of prior learning and experience and face to face study in local TAFE campuses where and when relevant. There was an opportunity to meet on only two occasions through Saturday workshops of which only a small number of women, approximately six, were able to attend. Teacher/learner contact in this course was largely through written feedback on assessment tasks, telephone contact, usually learner initiated, and email for those who had access in terms of time and place. Overall learners did not avail themselves of opportunities
for electronic group contact, though attempts were made to establish email contact groups. Nor did they attend face to face tutorial sessions at local TAFE campuses except for one woman. The reasons put forward for not utilising peer interaction opportunities were lack of time, distance and lack of access to Internet facilities. Many women had the internet at home but felt that this interfered with family time. All had official access to school workplace internet facilities but cited time, work pressures and the shared nature of the facility as reasons for not accessing the internet in the workplace.

Methodology and analysis

My involvement with this group was documented in the form of professional work journals and personal journals of learner contact. I also conducted multiple semi structured interviews with other teachers who were involved with this group and some of the learners. Some of the journal writing occurred at the time of the self-other interaction, in the minutes immediately following a face to face meeting, an email or a phone call from a trainee. Other entries were written in a different time as they were recalled at the end of a day or week or a month, often in a different place and in a different space. These differences in context do impact on recall and how it is interpreted and written, but make the data situated rather than unreal or unauthentic.

I haven’t called IR. I have two messages on my desk saying that she called looking for me. I haven’t got the answers she wants. I am not going to be able to satisfy her. I continue to ignore her. KC is another one I need to contact. I haven’t heard from her for ages. She doesn’t contact me, I don’t contact her. It is so easy for time to get away, to push the issues aside, to tell yourself that everything is going OK. But deep down you know it isn’t and the guilt rises like burning bile. (Example of personal journal writing June 2001)

When I first started analysing the data I was concerned that the role of the teacher seemed to be too important for the learning success of learners. This went against what I thought I understood and believed about independent learning, that the learner should be fully self directed and almost seek autonomy in separated and disembodied teaching and learning contexts. However in the absence of the bodies of other learners, in Flexible Learning contexts the teacher can become a focal point for learner interaction. Without ongoing face to face opportunities to interact and build relationships with other learners, emphasis is placed on building relationships with teachers. Teachers have responsibility for validating and assessing learning, so in the isolated environments of many Flexible Learning contexts learners view interaction with teachers to be of primary importance.

It’s important to get on with the teacher. You talk to them not just about the work that you are having trouble with, but about the course, you know, stuff you may need to be sure of, like assessments. (Learner interview 21.02.00)

Many questions arose. Was the need for teacher contact and interaction stronger in formal accredited learning because of the emphasis on the product rather then the process? Because the process, in practice, is largely learner directed in Flexible Learning contexts without face to face classes, what is the importance of learner maturity and/or independence in the need
for teacher and/or peer interaction? Are Flexible Learning contexts making assumptions about learners being capable of independent learning when this may not be so? Have I and other teachers fully understood and embraced our roles as managers and overseers of learning? Am I making learners find out for themselves without showing them how? What about learners who may be unwilling to expose their lack of knowledge in knowing how to learn?

From initial data categories, such as types of teacher/learner contact and why the contact was initiated, recurrent themes emerged that were often difficult to identify and label. They were both explicit and implicit. They were often interrelated. They were related to change, place, body, relationships, gender, validation, and embodiment. The themes seemed to revolve around three central concepts: connection, roles and empowerment with the visible/invisible thread of body and embodiment forming a skin to hold the parts together.

Flexible delivery is a challenge because we are body-less. But it is interesting because people tend to fill in the blanks. One of the students rang me for an extension and she said that she was looking forward to seeing me at the workshop because she had built up a picture in her mind of what I looked like from the comments I put on her assignments. And I must admit, I too grab onto physical things about students. Like there is this woman who has beautiful handwriting and so she has become ‘the woman with the beautiful handwriting’ to me ... in the absence of the body you are tempted to fill in the blanks. And that is very important in how you view students, like making assumptions.  (Teacher interview 01.07.02)

Body awareness, body well being, feelings, emotions, body terminology and body references emerged from the journal writings, in self other interactions and from interview transcriptions. What emerged was that my body and body space, and the bodies of learners and other teachers significantly impacted on all aspects of professional practice and on reflections on practice.

Further analysis centred thinking on body awareness and the physical separation of the bodies of teachers and learners in disembodied contexts and the impact this has on teaching and learning processes. What also emerged was the importance of making connections in teaching and learning; connections that established teaching and learning partnerships between teachers, learners, other learners and the learning content. Learners want to be connected to someone, to a body, ‘who helps it make sense’ (Somerville, Browne, Davies, Gannon & Honan 2003:132). Connections imply mutual benefit and a move towards balancing and/or equalising power relationships within teaching and learning processes. In the study connection seemed to be bound up with body awareness and embodied contact, with learners and teachers being able to physically connect with self and other(s), with being acknowledged as taking up bodily space in time and place.

The face to face contact I had the other day at the school was just brilliant. Even though I was there for a completely non associated matter the woman could see that I was from TAFE because of my badge. She didn’t at first see my name and she said ‘Oh you are from TAFE? Oh you might be able to help me?’ It was grabbing on to somebody.
And was it even a physical grabbing on?
Yes. She did move closer to me and I said ‘I am MJ’ and she said ‘You’re the one I want to talk to!’ And we were able to talk face to face. And where she hadn’t
produced anything (assignments), within a few days there was work coming in! It was so important for her to visualise me. So some sort of initial contact is important so that people have got as close a connection as is possible when they are doing flexible delivery. That’s important.
(Teacher interview 13.06.02)

Implications

Connection has to be felt from and in the body for connection to be made. There needs to be something tangible, palpable that is recognised by and experienced in and through the body. This is in contrast to the post-modern abstraction of the body (O’Loughlin 1998:278) and more recent moves to make the body redundant and invisible within flexible teaching and learning practices. In the current consumerist society the body is regarded as essentially passive, with a reliance on disembodied lifestyles that promote work done by machines over manual labour, and the dominance of the written word over embodied communication (Leder 1990:92). The body is looked upon as unnecessary and problematic (McWilliam 1999:128), but the body has a role as agent, as producer (O’Loughlin 1998:295).

While we need to find ways for learners to be in bodily connection with each other and the teacher, Michelson (1999:143) says that factors like AIDS and SARS are further developing a discourse of bodily separation from other bodies, that gloves and masks are forming physical barriers to body to body contact. This makes it all the more important to acknowledge the primacy of the body in teaching and learning and find ways to embody learning experiences within Flexible Learning contexts as the body is a necessary component to accessing information about the world and to act on knowledge gained (Michelson 1999:141).

Praxis is at the heart of adult education (Weatherley, Ashcroft, Collins, Evans, Kenny, Locke & Lam 1997:10), with the role of interaction in learning of primary importance (Hillman, Willis & Gunawardena 1994:18). Without interaction teaching is in danger of becoming a passing on of information (Hillman et al. 1994:18), a one way transfer of knowledge. Praxis implies not just an exchange of knowledge but also a making of knowledge, the making of a collective knowledge by those involved in the teaching-learning transaction. Because the making of knowledge involves people and people have bodies, the process can never be free of desire, power, race, class and gender ‘struggles and inequalities’ (Threadgold 1995:46) even in disembodied contexts.
This means, in adult teaching and learning processes, being aware of and acknowledging the ‘irreducible’ nature of body (Foucault 1980 in Somerville et al 2003) and incorporating ways to give body space not just in teaching and learning processes generally, but in the undefined spaces of disembodied teaching contexts.

Current discourses of Flexible Learning fail to adequately name largely disembodied, separate and absent spaces, preferring instead to advocate open space to be filled through access for all, particularly targeting traditionally marginalised learners such as women, those isolated by distance, rural and second chance learners. The discourses of Flexible Learning fail to adequately name the dangers of disembodiment and a somewhat unitary (Knights 1995:226), ‘one size fits all’ perspective to teaching and learning processes. At the same time the discourses advocate opportunities for more individualised approaches to teaching and learning without adequately discussing the nature of these individualised approaches.
In Flexible Learning contexts the focus may need to be on learner/teacher interaction rather than on developing independent learning skills through an emphasis on study skills; not pushing learners away and shifting responsibility for learning onto learners (Cummings 1998:248). Developing and sustaining interaction between teachers and learners tends to facilitate the development of learner confidence and a move towards self direction and learner independence. However, as adults move towards independence, dependency needs are still retained, for approval, for assistance, guidance and support and for interdependence (Garland 1994:52). We need to be very aware of these issues within Flexible Learning contexts and find ways to support learners, especially through teacher/learner interaction, despite being bodily separated.

The key may be in realising that learners need to be treated as if they are learning individually rather than independently (Garland 1994:45), which again provides problems for teaching staff in terms of larger class sizes, time, energy and commitment to treat learners within Flexible Learning contexts as say twenty individuals and not one class of twenty, especially when learners are at differing stages in their course of study.

Learners need to develop a sense of identity as a learner, they need to be encouraged to legitimise themselves as learners and create the space needed for this additional self within their existing life roles. Learners need to be able to name themselves as learners. The substance of this naming is their lived embodied experience of the learning process (Hartley 2002:240).

There are big changes in this type of teaching compared to face to face. I think there are very different sensitivities that are needed, different skills that are needed. Perhaps we need to look at better ways to support students, like teleconferencing, videoconferencing, developing tapes, making sure you make initial phone contact, so they can at least put a voice to you. I find that initial phone call very important, you get them started verbally, it starts the relationship, the teacher and learner roles. (Teacher interview 13.06.02)

With the role of teacher losing distinction and becoming blurred in Flexible Learning discourses there needs to be an emphasis on developing and maintaining student support systems within disembodied contexts. Learner support systems need recognition, planning, development and implementation. This study points to the need for explicit learner support systems that provide opportunities for embodied interaction between teachers and learners and other learners to be developed and ready for implementation before courses are programmed to be delivered. Educational administrators need to recognise and acknowledge this need with appropriate resources and a more accurate recognition of teachers’ time. While current discourses acknowledge the importance of such support mechanisms, the finance poor and frenzied ad hoc climate of the current open training market does not encourage time and resources being made available at the ground level of practice for such support systems. Disembodying learning and teaching can encourage an ‘out of sight out of mind’ mentality for both teachers and learners, with motivation and empowerment affected. This is largely because teachers currently tend to be the prime organisers of communication networks and teacher time and workload factors work against establishing adequate learner support systems.

There is also the need for a central point of contact for both learners and course teachers, a course coordinator, to administer learner progress throughout a course. Where at all possible
this should be a person who presents a physical body, or if distance makes this inappropriate then at the very least a voice, with whom to build relationships and connections.

Conclusion

How teachers view teaching and learning within Flexible Learning contexts will largely determine learner interaction and independence (Garrison 1993:14). If teachers are left in isolation in the disembodied contexts of Flexible Learning with teachers and learners invisible, then teaching and learning processes are also invisible. Increased scrutiny and accountability within the VET sector is tending to mean that what is acknowledged as evidence of teaching and learning is the teaching and learning process reduced to markings on sheets of paper. The processes of the teaching-learning transaction are still invisible. There is a need to make visible teaching and learning processes, showing the importance of body awareness and embodied connection. The body should not be regarded as problematic and/or unimportant, therefore easy to ignore and separate. There is a need to negotiate space for the bodily self within the disembodied contexts of Flexible Learning.

Body awareness incorporates an acknowledgement that care of the self incorporates care of the other(s) and the relationship is dynamic and variable. There is a need to attain an awareness of ‘self’ and self need to operate bodily in the teaching and learning spaces of absent bodies. Connection is bound up with embodied contact, with learners and teachers being able to physically connect with self and others, with being acknowledged as taking up bodily space in time and place. This means, in adult teaching and learning processes, being aware of and acknowledging the irreducible nature of body and incorporating ways to give body space not just in teaching and learning processes generally, but in the undefined spaces of disembodied Flexible Learning contexts.

The connection that is needed for effective teaching and learning depends on individual needs and is a dynamic concept. Connection does not necessarily have to involve the body of other(s), but it more likely to be enacted when the bodies of self and other(s) are in contact. Connection does however involve the body of self. Connection is about locating and naming a bodily space through and with the body.

References


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