

Online Learning and the Education Encounter in a Neo-Liberal University: A Case Study

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Abstract

Online education is an increasingly important element of contemporary higher education, but many argue its potential has not been fully realised. Attempts to analyse the limits on educators' uptake or effective implementation of online education emphasise individual and institutional adaptation to technology, at the expense of understanding the context of its introduction and use. In contrast, we apply Biesta's (2006) and Connell's (2013) conceptualisation of the education encounter as a tool for analysing educators' engagement with online education technologies. We argue that educators' uses of these technologies must be contextualised within the ideologies and practices of neo-liberal universities. Educators' sometimes tentative uptake of online education reflects their attempts to manage the ideals of the education encounter with new managerialist demands. We conclude that understanding how and why educators use online education necessitates accounting for the importance of relationships between educators and students, and educators and their institutions.

Keywords: education encounter, higher education, neo-liberalism, new managerialism, online learning

1. Introduction

Online learning has become a central element of contemporary universities. It is often promoted as student-centred and consistent with dominant constructivist theories of pedagogy (Tait & Mills, 2001). It is positioned as democratic, opening higher education to groups whose access to university learning has traditionally been curtailed (Willems, 2011). It is also championed as being both efficient and "consumer-focused" (Field, 1995). However, commentators frequently claim that the great technical and pedagogical potential of online education has not been realised (Waycott, Bennett, Kennedy, Delgarno, & Gray, 2010; Zemsky & Massy, 2004): there is a "digital disconnect between the enthusiastic rhetoric and rather more mundane reality of university ICT use" (Selwyn, 2007, p. 84). While some studies argue that educators' choices and abilities often limit the implementation of online learning pedagogies and technologies (Edwards, Perry, & Janzen, 2011; Jelfs, Richardson, & Price, 2009; Keller, 2005; Simmons, Niño-Young, & Bradley, 2005; Lewis & Abdul-Hamid, 2006), others present a strong qualification to this claim: viz., that understanding the potential and uses of online learning technologies, practices and pedagogies requires an analysis of the context of their implementation (Palmer, 2011; Selwyn, 2007; Torrisi-Steele & Drew, 2013). In this paper we aim to contribute to this second strand of work by examining how institutional context influences academics' choices in relation to online education, and how their decision making is also informed by their concerns about their relationships with students in online contexts.

In the following paper we present our analysis of focus group discussions with 24 academics and professional staff who worked with online education (broadly defined in this paper as computer-assisted and web-based technologies, pedagogies and practices) as a case study of how educators manage the intersection of online education with the new managerialism that is a core feature of neo-liberal universities. We find that educators organise their teaching to respond to the demands of their institution and in so doing, are unable to implement online education in ways that build the kinds of relationships with students that are necessary to pursue meaningful and challenging education. We argue that in contrast to an individualised framing of educators' online education practices, our participants' tentative uptake of the potentialities of online education can be understood as a response to the tension between the ideals of the education encounter (Biesta, 2006; Connell,

2013) and the logic of neo-liberalism imposed through new managerialism. Our findings lead us to conclude that online education is as much a question of relationships as it is a question of technology, pedagogy and practice, and its use requires resistance against practices that undermine the relationship between educators and students.

Through this paper we are furthering the project of “broadening the academic ‘technological imagination’” (Selwyn, 2010, p. 66), by illustrating Selwyn’s proposition that to use online education is necessarily to engage with “power, control, conflict and resistance” (Selwyn, 2010, p. 68). We are not dismissing the idea of online education as a new managerialist conspiracy: there are many initiatives that promise and achieve improvements and innovations in education. But the possibilities of online education cannot be de-contextualised from how teaching and learning occurs in “‘real world’ educational settings” (Selwyn, 2010, p. 66).

2. The Neo-Liberal Context of Online Education

Over the past three decades, neo-liberalism has reshaped the value and practice of higher education. In this context, economic imperatives become the organising logic of the relationships between individuals, government, private enterprise and society, and the market becomes the key site for distributing goods and services (Connell, 2013). Universities, in common with other institutions previously valued as essential public goods, have been transformed as part of the market. Education is reconceptualised as no different from any other good or service, to be provided and delivered through market mechanisms (Peters & McDonough, 2008), and creating consumer-provider relationships (Naidoo & Williams, 2014). Costs are shifted from government to individuals, in keeping with the belief that education is an investment by individuals in their own economic future (Connell, 2013). According to this logic, the value of higher education resides in its commodification rather than in its contribution to common social and economic goods.

Neo-liberalism is context specific. In Australia in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, governments and universities implemented strategies to increase the efficiencies of the higher education market. This process continues today and includes reducing public spending on higher education in real terms, expanding higher education into new markets (including the vocational education sector), re-introducing student fees, de-regulating and privatising the sector, increasing competition for students, funding and status, imposing an audit culture, and casualising and de-unionising the workforce (Gamble, 2001; Hay, 1999; Watson, Buchanan, Campbell, & Briggs, 2003).

On the ground, neo-liberalism has been implemented through new managerialism (Davies, 2003; Selwyn, 2007). New managerialism shifts power from academics to auditors and managers who may not be conversant with a specific discipline but who apply a set of practices that are conceptualised as largely interchangeable across disciplines, sectors and industries (Rose, 1999). New managerialist strategies have the potential to produce “docile neo-liberal subjects who are tightly governed and at the same time, ideally, successful entrepreneurs” (Davies, Gottsche, & Bansel, 2006, p. 307). Academics are individualised and responsibilised (Davies & Bansel, 2010). They are encouraged to accept that under asserted conditions of scarcity, workers must “produce (ever) more with less and less” (Davies et al., 2006, p. 306), and that a failure to meet institutional objectives reflects an individual’s failings, rather than the logic of higher education systems (Davies et al., 2006). These practices result in professional and personal vulnerability and loss of trust between academics and management. As we highlight in this paper, they can also have profound effects on relations between academics and their students.

The practices and technologies of online education can align with neo-liberal logic. A discourse of democratising education can hide the ambiguities of online education, which can simultaneously increase socially disadvantaged groups’ access to higher education, respond to the student-consumer’s expectation of more online modes of learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013), enable universities to penetrate into underdeveloped or inaccessible local and international markets and maximise efficiencies in teaching through the affordances of replication and scaling without associated staffing and infra-structure costs (Sappey, 2005). Sappey’s (2005, p. 497) comment on flexible education generally is applicable to online education in particular: it is a “pedagogy and a marketing strategy as well as a form of work organisation”.

3. The Education Encounter

The education encounter, specifically as conceptualised by Biesta (2006) and Connell (2013), provides an alternative framing of the work of higher education, one that highlights the problematic impacts of neo-liberalism on relationships between educators and students. Contrasting with neo-liberal understandings of higher education as a commodity, the education encounter is complex social labour (Connell, 2013) undertaken as educators and students engage with ideas that are intellectually and personally challenging (Biesta, 2006; Connell, 2013). In place of an emphasis on developing human capital, facilitating social reproduction or responding to market demands, the education encounter positions relationships as a central concern of education

(Biesta, 2013). Authors such as Roland Martin (2013) and Barnett (2013) suggest that such encounters are dialogues between educators and students, with the possibility that the worldview of each can be changed through these relationships. Given the relational and transformative basis of the education encounter, it cannot be standardised or replicated across contexts.

In the education encounter the work of educating and learning is “social, relational, and therefore incalculable (and immeasurable)” (Ford, 2013, p. 301). An educator does not transmit knowledge; they build relationships between themselves and the learner (Connell, 2013), and the learner and their social world (Biesta, 2006). For Biesta (2006), this gives rise to the three core components of education encounters. The first is a relationship of trust between the educator and the student, not a relationship of accountability and audit between the educator and institution (Biesta, 2006). This trust is necessary because risk is a part of education encounters, arising out of the unpredictable processes of education: there is the risk that a person may learn things they did not want to learn or did not imagine (Biesta, 2006, p. 25). The second component is transcendental violence, because education “interferes with the sovereignty of the subject by asking difficult questions and creating difficult encounters” (Biesta, 2006, p. 29). The third component is educators’ responsibility to their students’ subjectivities, to support them in becoming “a unique, singular being” (Biesta, 2006, p. 30). Given these components, the education encounter can be both difficult and rewarding.

The education encounter suggests the value of critically considering the interaction of online education technologies and practices, relationships between educators and students, and institutional administration and management practices. This is particularly so given Biesta’s (2006) emphasis on educators’ responsibility to create spaces that facilitate education encounters (see also Ford, 2013). Biesta (2006) and Ford (2013) discuss the impact of physical space, but the point can be extended to the social space of online education that can limit and standardise patterns and outcomes of interaction. In the following section, we use the education encounter as a tool to centre educators’ engagement with online education not as a question of technological skills and imagination but as a reflexive and strategic response to the work and education challenges embedded in neo-liberal universities.

4. Research Approach

4.1 Research Context

In Section 5, we present the results of a case study of the use of, and resistance to, online education amongst educators working across six disciplines in a single university. In recent years, the university had given increasing emphasis to long standing online education methods and practices, though it was struggling to articulate a clear vision of policy in this respect. The use of online education was particularly emphasised institutionally as a means of delivering “distance” or “off-campus” education. At the time of our study the institution was undergoing extensive restructuring, on-going casualisation of teaching staff, an increase in the intensity and reach of new managerialism, and an increased emphasis on competition for students. Thus, participants were working within a local permutation of national and global neo-liberal and new managerial processes, and in essential characteristics the institution did not differ markedly from other Australian universities (Connell, 2013; Davies, 2003, 2005).

Given the alignment between this institution and the characteristics of contemporary Australian universities more generally, we present the findings as the outcomes of a critical case study (Flyvberg, 2006). We are not suggesting that our participants’ experiences would be directly replicable at other sites, nor are we claiming generalizability; neither of these are necessarily the aim of case studies (Flyvberg, 2006; Harland, 2014). Rather, we have used this site as a means of illustrating (Siggelkow, 2007) the tensions between educators’ valuing of the education encounter and the demands of a neo-liberal institution, as these are manifest through educators’ use of online education.

4.2 Focus Group Method

We conducted three focus groups that explored the online education practices of academic and professional staff at one Australian university. The focus groups canvassed the experiences, challenges, and benefits of online education practices, the institutional supports and resources, strategies for making online education technologies and practices more effective, and future plans for using online education. A shared involvement in online education encouraged participants to open up to others in the group, and diverse experiences encouraged participants to reflect critically upon their own and others’ understandings and practices (Kreuger, 1998). These dynamics enabled us to capture both differences and similarities in our sample more effectively than could be achieved through individual interviews (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

We used purposive sampling to recruit twenty-four educators—academics and support staff—to participate in one of three focus groups. Academic staff included contract and permanent staff, early career, mid-career and senior academics, working in the social sciences, humanities, health sciences, business, and education. Professional staff worked across social sciences, humanities, and health sciences advising and supporting academics in their use of online education. In this paper, we identify participants with a participant number, institutional role (academic or professional staff) and, for academics, their discipline and whether they were teaching students as part of a professional course.

We adopted a modified inductive analytic approach. Each focus group was recorded and transcribed. We analysed the transcripts thematically, initially identifying patterns of alignment and divergence of practice and interpretation, and then re-categorising and interpreting the initial codes in conjunction with a reading of the literature. As part of the analytic process we mapped the points of agreement and disagreement in the discussions, as a means of identifying points of commonality and difference amongst the group.

Our thematic analysis reflected our focus on content in focus group research. Our approach contrasts with a socially oriented approach that emphasises and analyses group dynamics in the knowledge that emerges through interactions (Morgan, 2010). We have used focus groups as a forum for participants to share their existing ideas about a topic; people may change their mind or develop new understandings, but we are not aiming in this paper to capture the negotiation and creation of knowledge through focus group interactions (Morgan, 2010).

Before we present our findings we wish to alert readers to the different terms participants used to describe their experiences. The institution had a history of off-campus (within the university most commonly described as distance education) paper-based offerings that were translated into online offerings as technology evolved. Given this history, some participants conflated the terminology so “online education” and “distance” refer to the same technologies and practices in this context, i.e., dependent on online technology for the presentation of materials and communication with students. Conversely, “internal” refers to face-to-face contact with students, with online technologies secondary or absent. Within the group there was no standardised delivery of materials or managing students’ participation in online education. Approaches varied across institutional units, from individualised and ad hoc to standardised and compulsory implementation. Participants also worked with different models, from a “lite” version in which face to face lectures were recorded and posted on line, to technologically sophisticated and pedagogically informed offerings. Thus, our focus groups reflected the diversity of practices and understandings evident in this institution—and institutions across the higher education sector.

5. Findings

In the following sub-sections we present the two major themes emerging from our data. In sub-section 5.1 we analyse participants’ accounts of the institutional context shaping their use of online education technologies, with a focus on the new managerialism that constrains the possibilities of adaptation, implementation and exploitation of online education technologies. In sub-section 5.2 we discuss the second theme: the micro-level of interaction, specifically the challenges and possibilities of using online education technologies to facilitate the education encounter.

5.1 Managing Managerialism: Educating Online in the Institutional Context

When discussing the context of their work, participants described a suite of new managerialist strategies that limited their autonomy to use online education technologies in ways that might facilitate the education encounter. They often critiqued these practices but as rational—or perhaps “docile” (Davies et al., 2006, p. 307)—neo-liberal actors their work practices limited their investment of time, energy and intellect in online education.

5.1.1 Autonomy and Choice in Using Online Education

Participants’ choices were shaped by new managerialism, albeit in distinct ways across disciplines. Those working in Social Sciences and Humanities tended to describe online education as an individual choice whilst those teaching into professional programs experienced online education as an institutional mandate. Participant 4, an academic working in the Humanities (non-professional course) described himself as having the power to determine how he would teach:

I took a decision some time ago to deliver everything I do [in] parallel distance mode. So if I’m offering an internal unit, it’s being offered as a distance unit as well. So I guess that my comments should be understood in that context; that I pretty much make or break the decision.

Participant 4 presented himself as the sole authority on if and how he used online education. His claim of control over key tasks suggested that new managerialism was not always experienced as a direct imposition on academic

autonomy. By contrast, for those educators working in professional courses, the impact of new managerialism tended to be explicit and direct. These participants were required to adopt online education practices irrespective of their professional judgement about appropriateness and effectiveness. Participant 5 (Social Sciences academic, professional course) had built an international reputation as a researcher and practitioner in her field but had no say in if, and little control over how, she would teach in online education mode:

I've been doing this stuff for fifteen years, I'm finally comfortable about how I work as an academic and an educator and, you know, someone who's got the pedagogical content stuff right ...and then suddenly to be thrown in that zone of no choice about how I might want to relate [to students].

Participant 5 taught a set of skills that in her experience and pedagogical approach could only be effectively learned through interaction and her own role modelling. She felt that her judgement that online education could not facilitate rigorous and meaningful learning was unlooked for and unacknowledged.

Irrespective of whether online education was chosen or imposed, academic participants were aware that online education was linked to a key neo-liberal aim in higher education: increasing student enrolments and the university's market share (Connell, 2013). Participant 4 (Humanities, academic, non-professional course), presented himself as an autonomous decision maker but contextualised his decisions in student expectations and the drive for greater student numbers:

...it's not driven by policy within [the discipline], it's driven by an acknowledgment of the larger context of the students' sort of expectations and also just a strategic decision to try and grow load.

Similarly, Participant 6 (Social Sciences academic, non-professional course) described himself as having:

...a lot of interest in doing that [increasing his use of online education], it's a really useful opportunity for [the university], I guess, to reach out and grow load and have more students enrolled in units than before.

Participants understood that their institution valued online education as a commodity. They did not necessarily agree with this approach, but their decisions were informed by its implications. All were working in organisational units where teaching was the primary source of income, and student numbers, not pedagogy, were the primary drivers of institutional interest in on-line education. However, participants' use of online education was tempered by other neo-liberal and new managerialist expectations, notably demands for efficiencies and the quantification and standardization of work practices.

5.1.2 Institutional Misrecognition of Online Education

Participants reported pressure to maximise the perceived efficiencies of online education technologies. They believed institutional managers and policy makers promoted online education primarily because it reduced the time, personnel and infrastructure costs of teaching. Participants believed managers saw online teaching as cheap and quick, and a way of limiting investment in teaching.

Participants working in disciplines that did not impose an expectation of online education were more likely to experience the limitations of "working in an institutional environment which I find doesn't organise sufficiently to address these teaching issues" (Participant 3, Humanities academic, non-professional course). However, some of those working in contexts in which online education had been systematically and compulsorily embedded in teaching practice also described limited institutional investment in online technologies:

I know what I can do because that's probably where all my time has been spent, trying to work with very, very limited tools to try and achieve the kinds of things, pedagogically I would like to, and then just come into a brick wall at some point, and then just going well actually, there's going to have to be a compromise, because actually I'm a researcher, I'm not a full time teacher of this stuff (Participant 5, Social Sciences academic, professional course).

Participant 5 claimed a high level of technical and pedagogical competency in building online learning spaces but in a strategy similar to every other academic participant, limited her attempts to further develop the possibilities of those spaces in order to meet other institutional and professional demands. These decisions highlight the limits of individual efforts, creativity, and technical skill in the context of institutional practices that undermined the possibilities of more technologically and pedagogically advanced or appropriate online education practices.

The tensions between the possibilities of online education and educators' need to strategically engage with new managerial expectations were particularly evident in participants' time management. Participants saw their experience of work—research, administration and community engagement as well as teaching—reinterpreted

through the calculative practices that are important managerial techniques in neo-liberal universities (Larner & Heron, 2005). In the following exchange, educators described online education as requiring more work and more time than the institution recognised:

I guess my experience is the [institutionally held] idea that, well, especially if you are doing internal [face to face delivery] anyway, distance doesn't take any more time (Participant 1, Social Sciences academic, non-professional).

It just supervenes on the internal stuff (Participant 2, Humanities academic, non-professional).

Participants experienced this institutional misrecognition of the time, pedagogy and creativity necessary for effective online education most pointedly when these expectations were translated through workload calculators. Workload calculators quantified research outputs and teaching work to judge the performance of individual staff and allocate resources: "my entire experience with the institution, has been, if you are doing it online or distance, it's going to be easier for you, your workload will reduce. That can't be further from the truth" (Participant 4, Humanities academic, non-professional course). The following exchange about facilitating compulsory online discussions illustrates the rarely acknowledged disjuncture between the practical and pedagogical requirements of online education and the calculation of its time costs:

We had like, 2,000 posts online... (Participant 8, Social Sciences academic, professional)

Wouldn't that be time consuming for you? (Participant 9, Social Sciences and Humanities, professional staff)

Oh god, yes. (Participant 8)

Silly question. (Participant 9)

There is the hidden workload of doing online hybrid, because you've got the workload you would normally have in class ...and then there's also the dynamic of online with monitoring that, and then the other part of the hidden workload, I would say is when things go wrong and there's all the problem solving. And so that can take hundreds of hours, literally take hundreds and hundreds of hours to do, that will never, ever be counted in workload, so that's a tricky dynamic in terms of workload as well. (Participant 8)

Participant 8 was describing the mixed blessings of successfully building pedagogically informed and carefully developed online learning experiences. She worked in a discipline that had adopted online education to increase both enrolments and students' access to units. The educators had attempted to build spaces that facilitated a mutual engagement and recognition of student subjectivities (Bietsa, 2006). Despite their careful planning, some educators described a series of unforeseen problems and interactional work that could not be effectively captured in a workload model that standardised and calculated teaching by attributing a set number of hours to a defined set of tasks. Many elements of their work were rendered invisible, and the formal expression of their teaching did not align with their lived experience.

5.1.3 Responding to Institutional Misrecognition of Online Education

The misrecognition of the time needed for online education intersected with the drive towards quantifying research outputs—another key new managerial tool in higher education (Larner & Heron, 2005)—to define and discourage "inefficient" teaching. It did so through the distribution of resources and rewards. This led to the "the great dilemma. It's the greatest tension I think" (Participant 7, Social sciences academic, professional course): how to balance acknowledging and responding to students' learning with other academic responsibilities. Like all of the academic participants, Participant 6 (Social Sciences academic, non-professional) contextualised teaching within co-existing and often seemingly contradicting imperatives:

My view of teaching always has been, I have to see it in the context of other things I need to do as an academic, particularly research and community engagement, so I'm always conscious when I'm thinking about pedagogy, that I don't think about it in isolation from the other things that are part of my job description.

The tensions were particularly pointed when academics considered the implications of spending time on teaching instead of research. In the following exchange, academics described the "elephants in the room" of research and teaching—the two core work commitments of most of the academic participants:

...but for me, to be promoted, to feel secure, I know I've got to research. So any extra time that's spent on teaching is time that could be spent on publishing. And I know that we care about teaching but the university essentially cares at the moment about research outputs. (Participant 1, Social Sciences

academic, non-professional course)

Yeah, that's sort of the elephant in the room with this whole conversation... (Participant 10, Social Sciences academic, non-professional course)

[and later in the discussion]

I think, you know, 'Am I spending too much time with my students?' ...Our Faculty is, if you look at its income structure, over 90% of its income comes from teaching. ...The elephants are all pulling in different directions. [One] elephant says, 'Research, and offload as much as possible onto your colleagues', then the other elephant is saying 'Then you can all cut your own throats if we all play that game'. (Participant 2, Humanities academic, non-professional)

For the academics in this study, the calculative practices central to new managerialism created tensions between their different types of work. The institutional quantification of their work defined the "right" amount of time to spend on a task. These calculations might be explicitly discussed only once a year in performance management processes, but the calculations informed their daily management of work.

In the preceding discussion, we have highlighted the importance of context when discussing the potential of online education. There were varying levels of technical skill, pedagogical knowledge, and commitment amongst the study participants and our aim has not been to justify individual approaches to online education, nor to simply give voice to complaints about the stresses of academic life. The people participating in the study recognised teaching as an important component of their work but as Selwyn (2007, 2010) reminds us, online education is shaped by context. This context is primarily discussed in terms of its impact upon academics but in sub-section 5.2 we highlight the ways it limits the possibilities of the education encounter. The education encounter is predicated on the autonomy of educators and learners (Connell, 2013), and the agency to create meaningful social spaces for learning (Bietsa, 2006; Ford, 2013). When educators are required to "do more with less" (Davies, 2005) and perform a set of quantified academic practices (Ball, 2012), creating meaningful and sustained relationships is constrained.

5.2 Creating Education Encounters: Educator and Student Interactions in Online Education

The education encounter grows out of a relationship between educators and learners, one characterised by mutual engagement, respect and care (Bietsa, 2006; Connell, 2013). Most of the participants in this study felt this type of relationship was absent or at best, intermittent in their online teaching. Educators regretted this absence but in light of the context described in sub-section 5.1, felt they were limited in their ability to change it.

5.2.1 (Not) "Knowing" Student Subjectivities Through Online Education Technologies

Participants working in disciplines with defined cohorts and clear expectations about students' learning practices and contexts reported a greater knowledge of their students, albeit as a cohort not as individuals. This was most evident in the health sciences. Participant 11 (Health Sciences, professional staff) describes designing online education for

...postgraduate students where they are completely online and as a condition of that course they have to be working. So we can make a lot of assumptions about their patterns and tailor the workload around them. So all their online discussions are based around the work they are doing and they're worded in a way that can be interesting to the whole cohort.

Educators working in such contexts were less concerned about "knowing" students and gaining insights into how they engaged with the online materials. They used online technologies to manage teaching materials and structure student learning in ways that reflected the normative professional skills and experience of students in the cohort.

In contrast, academics in the Humanities and Social Sciences placed greater emphasis on the challenges of building relationships with individual students. Many described "ghost students"—those students who were present as institutional entities but absent from reciprocal communication: "they're on paper, they're never there in body, I don't know where they go" (Participant 3, Humanities academic, non-professional course). Statistics (for example, learning analytics, assessing competencies, the number of discussion boards posts, site visits and downloads) were the data by which educators "knew" students. The following exchange highlights the way academics synthesised these data into a picture of "the online education student":

Do other people, at the end of the unit, actually analyse the actual usage patterns of your students through the tracking data? (Participant 2, Humanities academic, non-professional course)

I do. (Participant 1, Social Sciences academic, non-professional course)

It's very frightening. (Participant 2)

...early on it was quite shocking really because we have 40 something students in our distance cohort who were technically meant to be listening to my lecture recordings, which was only a 50 minute recording, so not too strenuous, and they weren't. (Participant 12, Social Sciences academic, non-professional course)

Educators recognised that the available data offered only partial information about students' learning. They captured patterns of students' technology use but generated few insights into students' subjectivities and interpretation of the materials presented. Many academics were discomforted by the implications of this form of "knowing", experiencing it as managing and monitoring students, so that "... it seems like a lot of discussion around here is often about surveillance and group management and how do we get people to turn up" (Participant 1, Social Sciences academic, non-professional course). The ideals of reciprocity and mutual trust receded as academics responded to, and managed, students' learning as it was quantified and standardised through online learning analytics.

Academics described the desire for, and absence of, "understanding where students are and where they are coming from, and I don't know that we have a great deal of information about what students are doing with the material" (Participant 3, Humanities academic, non-professional course). As a result, "it feels like that next level of understanding why, and the nuance, is kind of missing from our working environment at the moment" (Participant 1, Social Sciences academic, non-professional course). Responsiveness to students' subjectivities is an important element of education encounters (Biesta, 2006) but the educators in our study felt they had limited opportunities to know and acknowledge their students as individual learners.

In the absence of knowledge of and engagement with students, educators used anecdote, personal experience and statistics to construct and respond to two types of imagined "online education student". Participants defined both with reference to their orientation to learning. The first type was a rational actor, who sought maximum results for minimum effort:

It might be very rational, you know, sort of a resource poor student environment, when they're trying to, you know, allocate their finite resources of time, you know, life: it's busy. So if I'm not paternalistic I just say, your choice, here is an open field, go to town. (Participant 4, Humanities academic, non-professional course)

In these contexts, educators interpreted learning activities as primarily transactional, where students exchanged a performance of engagement for marks:

They seem to have a lot more success when it [discussion board participation] is given some level of a mark. There's some minimal obligation to participate. When it's laid out very clearly with a due date and the number of words, they have a much higher success rate of people participating. (Participant 15, Health Sciences, professional staff)

Participants described a second type of student: the disengaged student. Irrespective of the costs and benefits of intellectual engagement, this student was uninterested in learning and engaging with their teacher and fellow students. Participant 6 (Social Sciences academic, non-professional course) summarised this orientation as "The rise of the anti-social student".

But I think the problem we certainly get in our [disciplinary units], we don't have that luxury, a lot of our distance students aren't experienced or working or mature, and they just tend to be on-campus students that either can't be bothered attending the classes or have a timetable clash (Participant 11, Health Sciences, support staff).

Because we spoke with educators, we do not know whether the perceptions presented here align with students' experiences and orientations. However, participants felt there were limited possibilities of an education encounter. When students seem disengaged, the elements of reciprocity and mutuality that underpin the education encounter (Connell, 2013) are experienced as absent, and educators are also unable to recognise and respond to students as "unique, singular being[s]" (Biesta, 2006, p. 30).

5.2.2 Absent Relationships of Trust

Participant 8's (Social Sciences academic, professional course) comments point to the way in which an educator's responses to standardised data can reflect and possibly also contribute to the erosion of trust and goodwill, at odds with mutuality and respect.

Pollyanna thought, I might just drop an email to each of those students where they just don't seem to

have been in at all or not for very long, just to check how things were going and to remind them that it was needed to access all their materials. (Participant 8)

Was that a bad move? (Participant 14, Social Sciences, support staff)

It was a very bad move, because the students said 'What, you can monitor me? You can monitor my participation? And this is terrifying now, because I'm so scared now'. So it created that kind of, who's watching kind of thing. It's become like folklore, in amongst the [discipline] students, in that [I] hunt people online... (Participant 8)

Participant 2 described trying a similar approach, with similar responses.

So first we rang all these students up and said, 'Hi, I notice you haven't logged on, can we help?' And they hated that. (Participant 2, Humanities academic, non-professional course)

Did they? (Participant 10, Social Sciences academic, non-professional course)

They hated it. The lecturer ringing you, and that's where the surveillance thing comes in, you're just at home, it's horrible. (Participant 2)

Yeah, 'Leave me alone' (Participant 10)

Yeah, 'Hi I'm your lecturer'. (Participant 2)

Yeah, 'I just want to stay in my bedroom and hide'. (Participant 10)

Participants believed that students interpreted attempts to use system data to re-engage or support them as surveillance rather than care. They experienced students' reinterpretations of their attempts to build caring relationships with individuals as indicators of an absence of trust and respect for students' autonomy to enter or withdraw from the social context of their learning. These absences also undermined education encounters, because participants could not support students to engage in the complex and sometimes confronting and risky experiences of education (Biesta, 2006; Connell, 2013).

Educators experienced absent or compromised relationships as barriers to the "complex social labour" (Connell, 2013, p. 105) of education. Participant 7 (Social Sciences, academic, professional course) taught on sensitive issues:

With actually engaging the students about the topics, one of my concerns this year has been that in my unit I cover some issues, which some people find confronting. ...and so what I've lost is that spontaneity of people in the lecture theatre responding, and I might pick that up and say, you know, 'Mary, I notice that you were shaking your head about that, do you want to make a comment?'. So I miss that [in online education].

Participant 7's teaching challenged the religious and moral beliefs of some of her students, in ways that aligned with Biesta's (2006) account of the disruptive power and purpose of education. With the move to online education, interactions with her students were limited and she was not able to acknowledge and respond to the subjectivities of her students in the ways necessitated by the education encounter.

Our earlier discussion of the context of online education becomes particularly relevant when considering participants' concerns. The relational challenges to the education encounter might be mitigated, if not ended, through educators committing more time, creativity, energy or exciting technologies to their online teaching practices. But these are limited resources that educators apportion across the fields of academic work. Managing managerialism can claim the time and resources necessary to build the relationships and social spaces that facilitate education encounters.

6. Conclusions

In writing about online education we have reflected on our decision to emphasise the challenges and barriers to its use in facilitating education encounters. This emphasis has come at the expense of a fuller account of the potential and excitement of online education and educators' enjoyment in building and extending their creative, education and teaching skills. However, our analysis reflects the dominant themes of the focus group discussions: educators often appreciated teaching and working with online education technologies, but they emphasised constraint rather than opportunity.

Critiquing online education does not in itself entail a rejection of the technologies, pedagogies and practices associated with it. But it does demand an approach that positions the possibilities of online education within its institutional and broader social contexts. Our findings suggest that the relationship implications of online education are particularly important for educators. When education is conceptualised and valued as a reciprocal,

trusting, and challenging relationship between individuals, then the limits of online education, as it is currently implemented in this context at least, are thrown into relief.

We agree with Selwyn (2007) that there needs to be a re-definition of the potential value of online education. There are two dominant themes in the literature: online education is efficient, modern, and rational; and online education is dehumanising or alienating. Neither, Selwyn argues, can lay the groundwork for an “enhanced, emancipatory, and enlightening form of higher education provision” (Selwyn, 2007, p. 90). We suggest that understanding online education requires a shift in focus away from the possibilities of technology per se in favour of centring the value and tenor of the relationship between educators and students, and what supports it.

Rethinking the use and effectiveness of online education requires critically engaging with the neo-liberal project in higher education. Davies (2003) notes this is risky work. The dominance and self-referencing logic of neo-liberal discourses presents the current structure and practice of higher education as both “natural and inevitable” (Davies, 2003, p. 93). When universities are governed with reference to “formulae, incentives, targets and plans” (Considine & Marginson, 2000, p. 9), there is little conceptual space for critique that does not pursue greater efficiency, market share or profit. Critique outside of these parameters positions the speaker as unaware of the aims and work of the institution, or speaking out of “sheer cussedness” (Davies, 2003, p. 93). This re-framing of criticism of the institution is buttressed by the dominant re-conceptualisation of academic work. Critique may have been valued in the past as an element of academic work, but at present it is, at best, marginal to what is defined as core academic business (Davies, 2003).

The risky work of critique continues to be undertaken. Neo-liberalism has re-shaped higher education but it has not erased alternative values and practices of education. As Connell (2013, p. 11) states, “Commitments to knowledge, and to principles of justice and equality, are still found widely, however much they struggle for institutional presence”. Valuing the education encounter can itself be read as risky: an act of resistance to neo-liberalism (Harley & Natalier, 2013). It can position an educator as inefficient, naïve or undermining the best interests of the institution. It can have material effects, limiting an educators’ ability to meet institutionally required and rewarded publication and grant metrics. In a modest way, facilitating the education encounter can become a radical act.

The vulnerability of individuals who argue for change can be mitigated through a more systematic and communal challenging of neo-liberalism and new managerialism. We need to reconfigure the relationship between educators and their institutions, which in turn are shaped by institutions’ relationships with the market and the state. There is no blueprint for this process of change. The combined effects of de-unionisation and casualisation have eroded the possibility and impacts of collective resistance within institutions and across higher education. However, Davies et al. (2006) are optimistic that “small, local and co-extensive critiques” have the potential to break the neo-liberal regime, although, ultimately it will take collective and individual imagination to recreate the university as a place that facilitates and values the education encounter.

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