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The Temporal Integration of Connected Study into a Structured Life

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Abstract

From the point at which a learner commits to undertaking a course of study, and conceivably some time before, that learner holds an intention to study. This paper offers a theory which explains how that intention to study is strengthened or weakened as a course of study progresses. It suggests that it is much less a matter of learners deciding to persist with or depart from a course of study and much more a matter of continuing upon a course of action embarked upon - of maintaining an intention - by its temporal integration into the structure of their daily lives. The theory of temporal integration explains the process enabling learners to engage in the learning experience and how for some students, the intention to learn is weakened to the extent that they leave the course, most often by default.

Introduction

The paper commences with an explanation of the main concern of *connected learners* and, before presenting the core category of *temporal integration*, will introduce the related categories of *connected learning* and connected learner and their respective sub-categories of *time design* and *personal commitment structures*. It will also detail the properties (and their dimensions) of the category, connected learner which includes *personal competencies*, *value of study* and *satisfaction with study*. A brief overview of the temporal integration process, its three stages of juggling, engaging and evaluating and its feedback loop, 'the propensity to study', will be presented next. Different connected learners experience the temporal integration process in different ways and are distinguished by their personal commitment structures, personal competencies, value of study and *cost of failure*. Using these distinctions, four main types of connected learner can be discerned; juggler, struggler, fade-away and leaver. Since the temporal integration process is experienced differently by each, the temporal integration process is presented in detail first as experienced by jugglers, followed by the differing experiences of strugglers, fade-aways and leavers.

The Main Concern

The main concern of the adult connected distance learner is to fit study into his or her life on an ongoing basis. Distance learning is taken on in addition to existing commitments and inevitably life intervenes and study gets in the way. The problem is that the learning materials do not go away. The 24/7 availability of the learning environment accessible from increasingly diverse locations and the *persistence* of learning materials means that lectures are always there to be attended and past discussions are waiting to be 'overheard'. The difference between the traditional distance learner and the online learner is the mode of delivery i.e. the Post Office or the Internet. The difference between the online learner and the connected learner is pedagogy. Where collaboration is built into the learning design then learners must communicate. This brings with it, its own special strains on a learner's diary; the more intense the pattern of communication, the greater the strain.

The problem of fitting study into a learner's life is achieved, more or less successfully, through the basic social psychological process of '*temporal integration*'. This is the process by which the structure points of the time design of a connected learning opportunity are combined into the personal commitment structure of the connected learner. Thus two related categories are of import to this theory; the connected learning opportunity and the connected learner, as are their respective sub-categories of time design and personal commitment structure.

Connected Learning

The studying process occurs under certain conditions which are; the '*technology*' used, the '*language*' of the course, the '*knowledge domain*' of the course, the particular mix of personal commitment structures of the learners of the course and the '*time design*' of the course. The time design comprises *structure points* such as *start points* (e.g. start of course or assessment period), *end points* (e.g. end of course or assessment period), *assessment points* (hand in dates, exam dates), *organising points* (start of week, end of week) and *emergent connection points* (of learners achieved through for example, asynchronous postings, synchronous meetings).

The Connected Learner

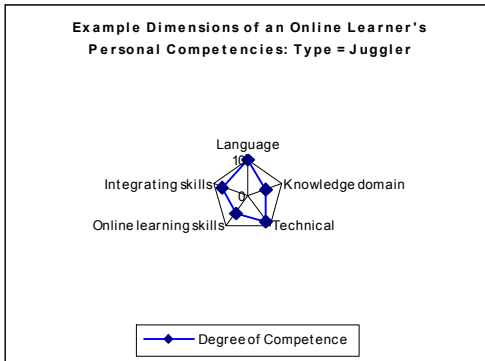
Personal Commitment Structure

Prior to entering into a course of study there are typically four main strands to a learner's life: work, family, social and self. Each of these strands contains structure points which may be more or less fixed e.g. times to pick up the children from ballet, school or football; times to arrive at work and depart from work; times to be at choir practice or community meetings. The combined structure points from the intersection of all those strands form a unique structural condition which is the learner's 'personal commitment structure'. In undertaking a course of online study the learner will expand his/her personal commitment structure to include a fifth strand, of 'connected study'. For connected learners, temporal integration is thus the process of combining or integrating the structure points of their online study course into their existing personal commitment structures' enabling them to engage with and take part in the process of studying.

Personal Competencies

A competent online learner will need to have or to develop the core competencies and skills which will enable them to manage the structural conditions and process the main concern viz; *personal competencies* in the *technology* of the online course, the *language* of the course, the *knowledge domain* of the course, *online learning skills* and *integrating skills*. The particular mix of skills of any one learner if graphed would illustrate the shape – the dimensions (Strauss & Glaser, 1970, p. 12) of that learner's personal competencies. Figure 1 illustrates one of many possible combinations of the dimensions of personal competence of one type of learner.

Figure 1: Example dimensions of an online learner's personal competencies.



Temporal Integration

The 'temporal integration' of 'connected study' into a 'structured life' is the dynamic and iterative process of 'juggling', 'engaging' and 'evaluating'. Juggling is about taking, finding and making time in order to do the work of the course – to engage in study. Engaging is about complying with the course instructions and tussling with the issues of the knowledge domain. It is about taking in information by reading materials, listening to audio or video presentations and making sense of what is being perceived. It is not about the act of expressing through online chat, writing or posting. Engaging is thus the psychological aspect of studying as distinct from the behavioural aspect of studying. Evaluating is about assessing the value of study in terms of whether what is being learnt is useful or relevant, assessing the costs of integration and weighing the one against the other. The outcome of the evaluation stage is an intention regarding how much effort will be put in future juggling and engaging.

The Value of Study or 'What's in it for me?'

Each connected learner will have identified a greater or lesser '*need for learning*' expressed most usually as a need to develop competence for professional or work related reasons. Whilst for most learners, the principle need appears to be the learner's wish to possess professional competence, some focus on validation of competence through certification. Only a very few individuals identify a purely personal, primary need for self-

development and amongst the most committed learners are those individuals with an altruistic need to contribute to his/her society. A connected learner will also have initial expectations that the chosen course of study will satisfy his/her need for learning, and during the course, will continuously evaluate the degree to which the course is perceived to be satisfying this need asking: What's in it for me? Is what I am being asked to do relevant, useful, valuable, of interest, now or in the future? The need for learning and the degree to which studying is perceived to *satisfy the need for learning* determine the '*value of study*' to the learner.

The Cost of Integration or 'Is it worth it?'

Each learner joining an online course will hold, consciously or unconsciously, expectations as to how the course of study will be organised. Severe tension can arise for those learners where a mismatch of expectations occur particularly where the course design expects the learner to flex his or her activities to the course timing and the learner expects to be able to flex the course to his/her life timing. The 'juggling' and 'evaluating' stages of 'temporal integration' cut across all the strands of a learner's life. However, where the learner 'engages' with the course in 'doing' study; the process of 'temporal integration', intersects specifically with the process of 'studying' at the point of engagement where 'engaging' is the psychological aspect of the behaviour of 'doing' the work of studying. The consequences of 'engaging' in 'studying' – to whatever degree – are that work is consumed, competencies are developed and time is used. To the degree that more time is used than can be comfortably accommodated by the Personal Commitment Structure, tension arises between a learner's current commitments, which the learner experiences as a state of being. This is '*Time Tension*' and which may be experienced either positively or negatively. Extreme cases of time tension result in a state of '*time tyranny*' which is endured because either the value of study or the negative consequences of failure and likely future hardships are too high.

The question '*what's in it for me?*' is followed by '*is it worth it?*' The answer is expressed in the learner's intention to continue with study, i.e. his or her propensity to study and thus impacts on the energies expended on future juggling and engaging efforts.

Propensity to Study

The relationships between and amongst the categories discussed above combine to impact upon the learner's '*propensity to study*'. In a little more detail, the propensity to study can be viewed as a function of the 'value of study as a means of satisfying the learner's need for learning' (what's in it for me?) less the '*cost of integration*' (is it worth it?). The cost of integration being a function of the personal commitment structure, personal competencies and the cost of failure where the cost of failure may be counted in terms of reduced feelings of self worth, lost opportunities and/or as a financial cost paid by the learner. Describing the relationships results in a set of propositions as follows and paves the way for the identification of types of learners:

1. Where the value of study is high, the propensity to study will be high.

(a) Where the Personal Commitment Structure is also fully committed, there is likely to be a cost of integration. Personal competence co-varies with the Personal Commitment Structure to affect the level of pain experienced

- Where personal competence is also high, the cost of integration is likely to be tolerable and may be problematic (juggler)
- Where personal competence is low, the cost of integration is likely to be problematic (struggler)
- Where personal competence is low and the cost of failure is high, the cost of integration is likely to be hard to tolerate (struggler)

(b) Where the Personal Commitment Structure is not fully committed, the cost of integration is likely to be tolerable except:

- Where the cost of failure is high, the cost of integrating is likely to be problematic (juggler/struggler)

2. Where the value of study is low, the propensity to study will be low (fade-away) except where the cost of failure is high; the propensity to study will be high. Thus also

(a) Where the personal commitment structure is full and

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- personal competence is high, the cost of integration is likely to be problematic (juggler)
- personal competence is low, the cost of integration is likely to be hard to tolerate (struggler)

(b) Where the personal commitment structure is not fully committed and

- personal competence is high, the cost of integration is likely to be tolerable (juggler)
- personal competence is low, the cost of integration is likely to be tolerable and may be problematic (struggler)

These relationships can be expressed as an algorithm thus:

Propensity to Study = {[Value of Study + (Cost of Failure x (Cost of Failure/Value of Study))] - [Personal Competence Structure - (Personal Competence Structure x Personal Competencies)]} where Value of Study = Need for learning x Degree to which study satisfies learning.

$$\text{I.e. } P = \{[V + (F \times (F/V))] - [S - (S \times C)]\}$$

$$V = N \times D$$

Where

P = propensity to study

V = value of study

F = cost of failure

S = personal commitment structure

C = personal competencies

N = need for learning

D = degree to which learning satisfies need for learning

The cost of failure has little impact where the value of study is high and much greater impact where the value of study is low. Two further propositions are thus:

- The value of study and the cost of failure are the motivators for learners to engage in study or to disengage from study,

- the cost of integration is only a consequence of integration, and whilst it does not drive people to make a conscious decision to leave a course it may lead learners to re-evaluate the need for learning relative to other commitments and to commence on a downward cycle of reducing compliance and to fade away from the course.

A Typology of Learners

A type is defined by the level of tension of the personal commitment structure in combination with level of personal competencies, the value of study and where relevant the cost of failure. There are four main types of adult online learners, jugglers who value study highly, have high levels of personal competencies and have full personal commitment structures; strugglers who also value study highly and have full personal commitment structures but have low levels of personal competencies; fade-aways who consistently fail to integrate study into their personal commitment structures and attribute a low value to study and leavers who are principally defined by a step change in their personal commitment structures. There follows an explanation of how each type processes – or fails to process - the problem of fitting study into their busy lives.

Jugglers

Juggling across all strands

Jugglers are the successful learners who exhibit strategic behaviours prior to entering into a course of study; they *restructure* their lives, *plan* and *timetable* study so that when the course starts, there is already space for learning in their lives. Jugglers value study highly, have exacting commitments to work and or family and often also have social commitments. Whilst jugglers may not hold all of the core competencies associated with being an online learner, they will during the course of study, develop them. In restructuring their timetables, jugglers may *negotiate* time for studying from their employers or from their families, perhaps agreeing a day a week from work to study or agreeing a redistribution of family duties with a spouse. They may *take time* from themselves by routinely *extending-the-day*, getting up or early or going to bed late in order to study.

Learners juggle so that they can ‘fit in’ everything that they need to accomplish across all the strands of their lives. They

juggle at an operational level (months, weeks, days) and at an implementation level (hours and minutes). For jugglers, a plan or a timetable is the starting point and the elements of the plan are successfully re-organised as necessary, in response to triggers received from their personal commitment structures. At an operational level, the trigger may be a period of travelling on business, a daughter's dental appointment, an extra rehearsal, a holiday. At this level, there is time to enable the trigger to be incorporated into a schedule. At the implementation level triggers are always unexpected such as missing the train home, a child-minder failing to arrive, a friend needing help, becoming unwell. Learners juggle and re-organise but under these conditions, studying is the victim of the re-organisation and is *squeezed out*. In order to squeeze studying back in again, the learner might make *opportunistic use of time*, engaging in studying whilst waiting an airport lounge or travelling on public transport or may chose to extend-the-day. If the learner is unable to retrieve lost time quickly then s/he is unable to complete sufficient work and falls behind. *Catch up* strategies are discussed below. Where this happens routinely the juggler may turn into a 'struggler'

Juggling within the studying strand

The aim of juggling is to find time in order to study; success means that the learner is poised to comply with course requirements and to engage in study. At an operational level, the time design is the primary source of triggers. Time design is latent in an educational opportunity. Work is required to be completed, readings read, postings written, assessments handed in. Each task will take an amount of time and course work is usually organised by units of time. For example a course may organise its work in units of one week with the beginning and end of each week forming the Organisation Points. In the same way, Assessment Points will mark the start and end of assessment periods, within which period the work of the assessment must be completed. An exam is another example of an Assessment Point, preceded by a revision period marked by an Organisation Point.

Jugglers pace their work, completing on time. The structure points are known and jugglers *scope* the work estimating what needs to be done by when and *prioritise* and plan their activities accordingly. Variations in time designs conspire to thwart. For

example, the learner who juggles out study to holiday with family may complete the required readings but may not be permitted to make postings ahead of time and is either forced into catch-up or is excluded from the activity. Where a poor time design requires excessive amounts of work, all learners will be challenged and jugglers, rather than over-committing themselves, will consciously resort to a '*partial withdrawal*' strategy prioritising tasks and excluding some.

The single most important variation in time design which causes learners the most problems is the '*connection design*' i.e. is the work designed to be carried out solo or in collaboration with other learners? Can the work be done at any time (solo) or is it required to be done at the same time as others (synchronously) or at similar times to others (asynchronously)?

Solo design causes little problem, an example of which might be a course teaching learners how to use a particular piece of software. Work can be completed at any time and may or may not be marked with a final assessment point or by an end point when access to the course is withdrawn. However when collaborative work is required, learners are constrained by being obliged to connect with one another either within a period of time or at the same time. The tighter the structure of the time design – the more organisation, assessment and connection points there are – the less the learner is able to be flexible, compromising the learner's ability to integrate, making it harder to complete the work on time. The greater the number of people involved in the collaboration, the worse the problem of organisation and synchronisation, the greater the time wasted, compounding problems of integration. Learners expecting the course to flex to them will experience the greatest dissonance under this design.

The main issue for same time collaborations will be the particular mix of the personal commitment structures of learners of the course. The greater the differences between the commitment patterns of learners, the harder it is for them to *time-match*. Time imperialism is rife. Learners in time zones to the west of the main group find it harder to time match and are often excluded from synchronous meetings, as are shift workers where the norm of the group is daytime employment. One learner from the West Indies wrote:

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We are 4 or 5 hours depending on the time of year, behind the UK and this causes major headaches in relation to the Virtual Classes. ALL the classes are either held when I am sleeping or when I am at work. This means I am always either late or don't attend many VCs..... [in one course] we were placed into Virtual Groups. In my group there were 3 guys from the UK and 2 of us from the West Indies. Of course, we met very sparingly and I don't think we were able to maximise the learning of being in a group.

The vignette in Text Box 1 shows a group of jugglers and a struggler (Bill) driven by an approaching assessment point trying to arrange a synchronous meeting during a synchronous meeting. The struggler is effectively excluded by the needs of the other group members, though the process is so subtle it is hardly noticed by the other group members, who seem to have no appreciation of Bill's circumstances.

Text Box 1 Vignette: Time Imperialism and Time Matching

Bill enters the room Thursday 8.08 p.m.

Bill: apologies for late arrival, problems with v.slow connection

Carl: that people learn when they NEED to learn and lonely what they NEED to learn at the time for their own reasons

Carl: Look at us with deadlines

Bill: Must leave for work in five-ten minutes,

Amy: Can't we work on this on Saturday?

Bill: let me check.....

Carl: Yes Bill, I'm here for the duration - perhaps we should piece together something for PD and reconvene at 9 pm?

Amy: does 12am on Saturday mean first or last thing on Saturday?

Bill: sorry Amy, midnight Saturday.

Amy: Could we meet with Bill on Saturday (not cup final times?)

Carl: Can we meet again on Sat am Bill?

Amy: About 10 am?

Carl: sounds fine

Bill: see you at 10am sat bye.

Denise: Is 11.00 too late?

--- Bill leaves the room Thursday 8.36 p.m.

Carl: should we reconvene at 10am Sat for all of us then?

Denise: Edward and I need to go to the wood yard

Amy: I have to take my daughter to dance class between 11.15 and 12.15 so 12.30 would be fine too

Carl: I can fit in with the rest of you

Denise: 12.30 would be wonderful; do we need to email Bill?

Carl: Bill's gone, and he says 10

Carl: yes ok email him

Amy: I'll log on at 10am as well and let him know if he hasn't read the email

Bill enters the room Saturday 10:00am

Amy left the room Saturday 10:03am

Bill enters the room Saturday 10:03am

Amy enters the room 10:04am

Amy: Hi Bill - we rearranged the time to 1230 as Denise couldn't make 10am

Amy: Can you make it then?

Bill: Hi, sorry that's way past my bedtime!

Amy: Have you been working nights?

Bill: Yes - been up all night

Under these conditions there is little that the excluded learner can do to resolve the situation other than remonstrate with the course designers requesting that groups be designed consciously and with awareness of the mix of the personal

commitment structures of the learners.

The problems of similar-time design are less severe than those of same-time design since there is greater latitude regarding the timings of connections. Extremes of differences between time zones can cause patterns of interactions to cluster around the postings of the individuals within time zones merely because the timings work for them. A momentum forms and carries the interactions such that it is hard for those in other time zones to join in. The discussion has passed whilst the others slept.

Depending on the pedagogic design of work, learners may be dependent on one another or interdependent. The dependent are vulnerable to the work patterns of others. For example the Juggler who has to summarise the week's discussion postings, needs postings to be made in a timely manner and can be resentful of those who post at the last minute since it upsets the juggler's ability to plan and integrate. Contrast this with the experiences of those who posted late, who were working in a different country having a working week which was organised around different points to that around which the time design was organised – and which caused these learners to be the last to post and thus to miss out on the comments of others.

Thus there are times when the juggler's integration skills and juggling strategies are severely limited and the juggler unable to successfully respond to the triggers emanating from the time design. Under these circumstances the negative consequences of exclusion, resentment and time tension are experienced and absorbed. Successful integration is maintaining a new and sustainable equilibrium in the expanded personal commitment structure.

Engaging

Engaging is to do with taking information in and tussling with the issues. As an implementation level activity, it is also about using the core competencies of an online learner to defend the time won for studying by being *focused*, *disciplined* and independently solving their own problems, finding their own '*answers now*'. One of the consequences of complying and engaging in studying is that time is used. Implicitly or explicitly the 'time design' will incorporate an estimate of how much time that studying will take. As the learner complies, things happen to

waste time or to cause the learner to *take more time*. Specifically there are triggers from the structural conditions; the online connection is lost removing access to the learning environment, the server is off-line for maintenance, the reading uses language that is too dense, a new concept is used that is not understood, a child wakes, a door bell rings, a colleague interrupts. Different combinations of triggers from the different parts of a learner's life conspire to waste a learner's time or to take the learner more time than estimated or planned. To each of these triggers, a competence may mitigate the time wasted or taken. Knowing how to re-install the broadband access software, re-ordering tasks such that offline work is completed whilst the server is offline, organising support from family members and colleagues to protect the learner from distractions. Technology can *save time* in providing diagnostic software, translation programs or enabling instant recourse to answers online. A learner may be able to avoid wasting time through being technically competent but have poor online learning skills such that s/he is distracted by interesting but off-topic links or a visiting neighbour. The personal commitment structure - including the time design of the course - and personal competencies can co-vary within themselves and between each other to cause or mitigate time loss. Jugglers develop or possess the core competencies which enable them to manage the triggers received from their personal commitment structures to defend the time won for learning. The consequences of engaging in studying are that time is used, work is achieved, time tension is experienced and competencies developed to whatever degree. The learner will also be forming views on the degree to which this activity is satisfying his/her need for learning.

Evaluation

During the Evaluation stage, the learner assesses the value of work in terms of whether it is useful or relevant resulting in an intention to study. This is not a linear process of actions more an omnipresent state of mind. Whilst jugglers are busy, they are also competent and manage to keep all the balls in the air without suffering unduly. They have a strong need for learning, and thus a high propensity to study which means that studying as an activity will receive a high priority during the juggling stage and jugglers will try hard to find, make or take time to work. For all the while that the work is considered useful or

relevant, jugglers succeed and find great satisfaction in their accomplishments. The conditions under which a juggler may change abruptly into a leaver or turns gradually into a fade-away are discussed in a later section.

Strugglers

Strugglers face the same issues as jugglers plus a few more of their own. They value study highly, have jobs, social commitments and are likely to have families but crucially will, at least initially, also have lower levels of competence in one or more of the core competencies of an online learner. This is not to criticise the learner since the purpose of study is to develop competence both in the knowledge domain and in the new skills required to enable that learning in an online environment. At its simplest, lower levels of competence means that studying takes longer to accomplish thus what principally distinguishes jugglers and strugglers is the consequent pain of integration and the degree of time tension that strugglers experience.

Strugglers notice a simultaneous lack of structure and a surfeit of structure. Strugglers bemoan the absence of structure found in the face-to-face learning environment – requiring the learner's presence at a stipulated time and place notwithstanding that this is the reason why they are unable to undertake face-to-face study. But whilst jugglers recreate the structure for themselves, many strugglers do not. This may be due in part, to the fact that those strugglers expect the course to flex to their lives and commitments and thus do not see the need to restructure their lives in order to make space for learning. Instead, they rely on their spare time and their ability to make, find or take time. This makes them much more vulnerable to triggers coming from their commitment structures and a good solution for strugglers is *routinisation* such that found time becomes routinely available. For the main part, however, strugglers are in a permanent state of 'catch-up' and disequilibria.

Strugglers then are over-committed. They have more to accomplish in the time available to them than they can comfortably achieve. Strugglers juggle in the same way that jugglers juggle - they find, make and take time. Strugglers engage and do the work of the course but are unable to accomplish all of the work. For those who lack competence only

in technology and/or online learning skills, the problems caused by triggers from the environment, e.g. malfunctioning software or a plethora of postings, will diminish as competence develops over time. For those who only lack competence in the knowledge domain, the issues that mean that the struggler takes more time to accomplish work than the juggler, will again, over time, diminish. Developing competence in these areas is likely to enable the struggler to grow into a juggler.

It is those learners whose native tongue is different to the language of the course who suffer most. Gregory writes:

In my situation and with my language background and non-daily use of English literature, of course it takes much more time to read, incorporate English texts. I translated the texts, made abstracts in [my language] and this took several hours.

Thus there is an extra step of preparation to enable the learner to engage with the work and tussle with the issues. The 'doing' of work also takes more time: Sebina writes "I can say half I want and it takes me twice the time".

Couple this with a high need for learning and the consequences of integration become severe. Gregory wrote:

Reading back my [journals] the time aspect was dominant present, already from week 1: This awful, horrible, frustrating, discouraging fear of failure provoking time aspect was always mentioned somehow in most of my [journals]. Most of the time or weeks, I had the feeling of not keeping up, running behind, emotional fatigue and pushing myself to contribute, even at two or three o'clock at night sometimes..... I survived this time terror' with the focus on the learning outcome "**how not to** design/coach a (online) course".

Gillie wrote:

But I know in those text was a lot of useful information for me and for my country. Further months after it, I will be start my first experience like online teacher so that will very important for

me. Onde day I even cry!.... I was very tired and stressed so I cry. I almost can't to leave, I was very busywe soffred!

For these people competence in the language of the course improves but never sufficiently to alleviate the time tension. Since the propensity to study remains high, the negative consequences are cumulative and the tyranny of study is endured.

Active displacement of study

Where jugglers usually engage, strugglers may displace - though the active displacement of study can be carried out by both jugglers and strugglers - in response to triggers from their personal commitment structures. At an implementation level some strugglers struggle because of the routine and active displacement of study where some other commitment(s) becomes genuinely more important. This commitment is juggled in and study squeezed out. Jugglers are generally able to reorganise commitments and enable study to be juggled back in again. Strugglers, unable to negotiate the support that they need from their personal commitment structures, are often unable to do this.

Sometimes the absence may be prolonged. The *persistence* of materials means that the work does not disappear with time – the videoed lecture is still available to be watched, a myriad of postings have appeared and have to be navigated. Overwhelmed students ask for a way in. The tutor may offer a catch up strategy tailored to the individual; otherwise other learners point the way. Since it requires too much time to fully catch-up, a partial withdrawal from the work of the course is effected where some work is prioritised, engaged with and completed and other work is displaced and left undone.

Fade-aways: Evaluation and the Reducing Value of Study:

A reduction in the value of study as a means of satisfying the learner's needs is brought about either by a step change in the personal commitment structure of the learner such that the relative importance of the need for learning reduces as some other need increases, or; that this particular course of study is disappointing and not meeting the learner's needs as a means of

satisfying his/her need for learning. Or both.

Learners juggle, engage and evaluate the value of learning. Whilst the need for learning remains the same, where the work completed is judged less useful or relevant, the value of study as a means of satisfying the need for learning falls. Where the cost of failure is high, the propensity to study is maintained. If the cost of failure is low, the propensity to study will fall and the degree of time tension, which will be tolerated in order to integrate study into the learner's personal commitment structure, will also reduce. The negative consequences of integration are fed back into the evaluation reducing further the value of study as a means of satisfying the need for learning and hence also reducing the learner's propensity to study. Under these circumstances the juggler will be proactive and effect a withdrawal strategy. The struggler however, will fade away by default. A reducing propensity to study means that less effort is put into juggling study 'in' and for every organisational period (e.g. week) that this happens more work is left undone with no intention to catch-up. There is thus reducing compliance where work is passively squeezed out of the learner's schedule and the learner just gently fades away from the course. Fade-aways are not therefore decisive, they merely keep failing to integrate until an assessment point or an end point eventually prompts a temporary withdrawal from a course where the learner requests a study break or an extension. Eventually, however, the temporary withdrawal turns into permanent withdrawal as the fade-away slips into becoming a leaver.

Where the value of study falls, a high cost of failure will maintain the struggler's propensity to study and the cost of integration will be severe where the personal commitment structure is full and personal competence low and may also be problematic where the personal commitment structure is less full. Under these circumstances the struggler struggles on.

Leavers

Leavers decide to stop. This is a strategic decision and is usually the consequence of an unplanned and step change in the learner's personal commitment structure which causes a re-ordering of priorities and commitments and the abrupt transformation of the juggler or struggler into a leaver. The loss of a job for example, or the debilitating illness of the learner or of

a close family member can render the need for learning irrelevant. Planned step changes in the personal commitment structure can also be a time of great risk, for instance the birth of a baby or taking a new job. Where step changes are planned however, there is also opportunity for re-structuring and may even turn the struggler into a juggler.

Summary

In this paper, I have looked at the highly personal nature of the decision to persist or depart and identified the major factors that contribute to that decision. These are the learner's need for learning, the degree to which the learning opportunity satisfies the learner's need for learning – which together determine the value of study - the learner's personal commitment structure, the learner's personal competencies and where the value of study is low, the cost of failure to the learner. Together these determine the learner's propensity to study. I have also identified a typology of learners comprising jugglers, strugglers, fade-aways and leavers and explained how the different types experience the process of temporal integration of connected study into a structured life.

The literature on online distance learning makes clear that there are problems with the design and implementation of distance learning courses (e.g. Hara & Kling, 2000; V. McGivney, 2004; Pierrakeas, Xenos, Panagiotakopoulos, & Vergidis, 2004). It is not clear however what the problem is. Or what the solutions might be. This study theorises that from the perspective of the connected learner, the problem is to do with time and how a learner might make best use of time given the competing demands for attention from various strands of a learner's life. This theory suggests that whatever a learner is asked to do must be relevant and useful and worth the considerable upheaval that is caused to the learner – and to others in the learner's sphere – when the learner engages with study. It theorises about what conspires to make life worse or better for learners as they engage. Many of the issues were known about but the large number and seemingly unrelated nature of the issues meant that the complexity could not be well understood. The power of this theory is in its encapsulation of the main concern of learners, its theorising about the interrelationships between the issues and how these interrelationships determine a learners propensity to engage. It

is this power that confirms the choice of the Grounded Theory method as an appropriate one for this research study. The opportunity for this theory now is to inform designing for persistence.

Methodological Notes

The primary data for this study came from online interviews with 32 adult online distance learners plus 3 campus-based online learners from 9 different countries, 23 of whom had studied on the same 20 week course and 9 of whom had studied on courses planned to run over 2 or more years. Five interviews were held with individuals using chat software; four were held face-to-face and the remainder were conducted using email. All courses were run from British Universities; 32 of the participants took part in learning opportunities based on a pedagogic design of collaboration. All participants had either first degrees or professional qualifications. Further data was collected from observations made whilst tutoring on postgraduate courses over a period of 45 weeks on three x 3 week online courses and three x 12 week online courses plus supervising four online projects students from 3 different countries; 2 for 3 months each and 2 for 15 months each. Secondary data was collected from the literature. Secondary data was collected from the literature; for example, Kember (1995; Kember, 1999); Kember, Ying, Wan & Yung (2005); Simpson (2003), Pierrakeas et al (2004), Shin & Kim (1999), Dupin-Bryant (2004), Lim (2001).

Endnotes

1. From this point on, a distinction is made between the 'online learner' who does not engage with a collaborative learning opportunity and the 'connected' learner who does.

2. A competent online learner will be disciplined, focused, be able to cherry pick postings, type, be independent in finding an 'answer now' and where required have online group working skills.

3. The property is satisfaction (with study as a means of satisfying need for learning) having a dimension of degree, i.e. high degree of satisfaction – low degree or no satisfaction.

4. At the margins of type the balance between the personal commitment structure and level of personal competencies

change. E.g. the juggler-on-the-margin will have a less full personal commitment structure and lower levels of personal competencies than other jugglers. And the struggler-on-the-margin will have higher levels of personal competence and a less full personal commitment structure than other strugglers.

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