Affective Encounters and Spatial Engagements: Pedagogies of Desire in e-Learning

Reem Al-Mahmood
Melbourne Graduate School of Education
University of Melbourne

How do students engage in e-learning environments? What are the affective encounters and spatial engagements of students in these environments? These questions are considered by viewing affectivity and spatial engagements in terms of hybridity of the subject-object (human-material) embrace to consider not only people but also the vitality of objects and their materiality. Two poststructuralist transdisciplinary practice-focused frameworks are used: 1) the material semiotic lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005; Law, 2008a, 2008b) which accents material agency, and 2) Non-Representational Theory (Thrift 2008) which draws on Deleuzean notions (Deleuze & Guattari 1988) to consider affectivity as "charged" (Navaro-Yashin, 2009) intensities. This paper draws on student data from a larger ethnographic study of four fully online postgraduate subjects at an Australian university to trace participant e-learning experiences. By exploring the salience of student affective encounters and spatial engagements through three contrasting vignettes, I open up questions to address 'pedagogies of desire' (Zembylas, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) to explore how subjectivities and desires are (per)formed in a *'more than human way'* and how places of (e-)learning are *"affectively charged"* (Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010, p. 336, original emphasis). These insights can open up new ways to (re)think e-learning design and pedagogy, in theory and in practice.

Keywords: Spatialities, spaces, place, engagement, affect, e-learning, Actor-Network Theory, Material Semiotics, Non-Representational Theory, Pedagogies of desire

Opening encounters

How do students engage in e-learning and e-teaching environments? What are the affective encounters and spatial engagements of learners in these environments? These questions are the focus of this paper drawing upon a larger ethnographic doctoral study exploring e-learning and e-teaching spatiality and identity intersections in an Australian higher education context. Understanding affective spatial engagements of various e-learning environments beyond design *in theory* demands exploring participant experiences in *actual practices* across various locales (Ellis & Goodyear, 2010). Much of the literature on e-learning tends to bypass the affective and emotion realms, tending towards more instrumental and measurement influenced study designs. The few studies dealing with affect and emotion in e-learning have tended to relegate these to the psychological realm (O'Regan, 2003), and more recently to the physiological (Shen, Wang & Shen, 2009). In contrast, this paper considers the affordances of viewing affectivity and emotion through the material semiotic lens of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) that takes in the materialising processes of the world, as well as the lens of Non-Representational Theory (Thrift 2008) to consider them as "charged" intensities (Navaro-Yashin, 2009), to move them beyond purely psychological states that locate them solely within an individual. By drawing on

ANT, which accents material agency where material objects, like human subjects, take on different enactments in different locales and practices, and by drawing on NRT, affective intensities and spatial engagements across various e-learning practices are 'traced'. By exploring the salience of these affective encounters and spatial engagements through their various sociomaterial practices (as hybrid arrangements of people, objects, texts, etc.), we can come to see how subjectivities and desires are (per)formed. Insights gleaned can inform educational design and pedagogy in theory and in practice. With this aim, firstly, the theoretical underpinnings and definitional ground of this study are discussed; followed by the study's design. Then, three vignettes are discussed; followed finally, by some implications for encouraging encounters in e-learning.

Definitional and framework encounters

The theories used in this paper are both poststructuralist combining the material semiotics of Actor-Network Theory (Latour, 2005; Law, 2004, 2008a, 2008b) with Non-Representational Theory (1997, 1999, 2008) that invokes the work of Deleuze (Deleuze & Guattari, 1988; Massumi, 2002a, 2002b; Thrift, 2006, 2008). Both are process-based ontologies that accent practice. ANT and NRT are both situated in a performative world idiom (as distinct from a representational idiom of a *world out there*) where the world *emerges in relation* with/to every*thing*; nothing exists independently of their relations. Both of these lenses 'perform' realities which see them as emergent in practices. Hence, their underpinnings are a performative relationality (Cooper 2005) where everything emerges *in-relations*. In addition, hybridity of the subject-object is embraced, and entities not only emerge through practices, but through arrangements of people, materials, spatialities, and so on. ANT's focus is on "How the materials of the world (social, technical, documentary, natural, human, animal) get themselves done" (Law, 2008b, p.632). However, ANT in its material semiotic emphasis misses the richness of affectivity and emotion. As Mutch (2002: 483) has it, "actor-network perspectives fail to escape … from the level of process"; and lacking an "ontology of depth" (Mutch 2002: 486), they fail to recognize "the relationship of persons with society" (Mutch 2002: 487). "ANT has a flat view of human agents, reducing them to effects and denying the embodied, emotional nature of human existence" (Mutch 2002: 487). NRT, in contrast, aims to 'capture' the affective and embrace human imagination and inventiveness, which can be 'lost' in ANT. NRT tips ANT's apparent flat ontology towards a more human-centred positioning whilst still accenting material practice. As Thrift (2008, p.276) comments, "I take the presence of objects to be particularly important because they provide new means of linkage … new folds, if you like". The strength of NRT seeks to consider the "more-than-human, more-than-textual, multisensual worlds" (Lorimer, 2005, p.83), where the focus is on life's "expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions" (Lorimer, 2005, p.84). ANT and NRT both *embrace the more than human* (Lorimer, 2005; Whatmore, 2006) and complement the other, allowing the material and human imagination to be accented, in their hybridity.

Consequently, taking on a performative relational worldview means that "identity may be conceived as an ongoing process of hybridity, in which one's sense of self is continuously made and remade" (Massey, 2005: 10). Subjectivities, spatialities and materialities emerge as a result of the relations between entities – material, spatial and human (Massey, 2005, p.10; Crang & Thrift 2000) – altogether hybrid. Subjectivities are not essentialised and seen as residing within an individual. Rather, we can talk of extending the boundaries of our skin (Haraway, 2006). Likewise from this worldview, space/place (Massey, 2005; Murdoch, 2006) become dynamic and emergent, rather than merely static bounded entities (e.g. Al-Mahmood, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Al-Mahmood et al., 2006; Burbules, 2004a, 2004b; Hubbard, Kitchin & Valentine, 2004; Kitchin, 1998).

Significantly then, how are affect and emotion addressed from this performative relational stance? The term emotion often involves interpreting how one feels about an experience (Zembylas, 2007b). Whilst there is "no stable definition of affect" (Thrift 2008, 175), Thrift (2008, p.116), suggests that affect "is not simply emotion, nor is it reducible to the affections or perceptions of an individual subject". He takes on a Deleuzean interpretation where "affects are not feelings, they are becomings" (Deleuze, 1995, p.137 cited in Thrift, 2008, p. 175) that go beyond "the inner world or interiority of the human subject" (Navaro-Yashin, 2009, p.12). Affect and emotion then are performative and relational rather than residing in individuals alone. In seeing affectivity and emotion through a sociomaterial lens, they extend beyond purely human subjectivities — embracing energies and sensations that are "discharged through objects and spaces" (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 12). They are intensities, sensations or energies that can be discharged through objects and spaces "making it possible to read many other things, such as space and the environment, as affective" (Navaro-Yashin 2009: 12) in line with Massumi's (2002a) focus on sensation and affectivity and embodiment. It is the realm of affective encounters and spatial engagements of e-learning that I aim to explore towards understanding *Pedagogies of Desire*

(Zembylas, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) that highlight how subjectivities and desires are (per)formed in a *'more than human way'* and how places of (e-)learning are *"affectively charged"* (Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010, p. 336, original emphasis). I aim to open up spaces for e-learning "sensescapes" (Büscher & Urry 2009) to explore how "being-in-place" (Malpas, 1999, 2008a, 2008b) and affectivity are (per)formed. Armed with these sensibilities, I outline the study's design next.

Methodology and method encounters

I have worked the "methodological frontiers" and have crossed boundaries (Brownlee & Irwin, 2011; Goodyear, 2011; Markauskaite, 2011) in the methodological choices (Markauskaite, Freebody & Irwin, 2011) adopted. I have drawn on transdisciplinary approaches from ANT and NRT, traversing the discipline boundaries of Human Geography, Education, Visuality, and Philosophy. Goodyear (2011) alludes to the valuable insights and contribution that ANT and NRT can potentially make to "educational research futures", as "ANT encourages us to open our minds to possible redistribution of work amongst humans, digital and physical actants" to address educational learning complexity (Goodyear, 2011, p. 263). He highlights the attraction "to the insights that flow from thinking about educational systems (a) in terms of relationships that are simultaneously material and semiotic and (b) as depending upon the ongoing 'performance' of their constituent elements" (Goodyear, 2011, p. 262, footnote 6). This requires "ecologies of interweaving physical, digital and human resources" (Goodyear, 2011, p. 258). My aim in choosing this small scale study is in line with Goodyear's (2011) prediction that educational research will move away from *golden standard* large scale studies and hypothesised studies towards smaller scale design studies to inform rich design patterns (Goodyear, 2005) for interpreting and producing effective (e-)learning environments (Goodyear, 2011, p. 260).

This study involved a multi-sited ethnography (Leander & McKim, 2003; Marcus, 1998) of four fully online postgraduate subjects in an Australian university. Ethnography was chosen to facilitate prolonged and immersive exploration of participant e-learning engagements. Physical ethnography (Marcus, 1998) and virtual ethnography (Hine, 2000, 2005) were used to gather and observe the minutiae of participants' everyday practices across physical and digital spaces. Participants were invited to participate in the study, and methods to deal with physical and digital (im)mobilities (Büscher & Urry's, 2009; Büscher, Urry & Witchger, 2011; Sheller & Urry, 2006) to capture various actors across physical and digital spaces were used. These methods included participant interviews, participant observation, photographic data, and participant reflections across physical and digital spaces over a period of 6-10 months. Data were collected from 24 participants — 19 online postgraduate learners, and 5 teaching staff (2 females and 3 males) with a range of ages and teaching experiences. Daily scheduled observation diaries of the online subject sites were kept, and participants were invited to keep reflections and provide images of their various learning locales. Various movements, or 'travels", as Büscher and Urry (2009, pp. 101-102) suggest of people, ideas, technologies, etc., were explored. A wealth of detailed data were amassed, and whilst the aim was to add to the world through ANT and NRT lenses, glimpses into human, spatial and artefact interactions were 'traced' (Markaskuite, 2011, p. 244), whilst attempting to 'capture' and '(re)present' the sensuous textures of the fleeting, the sensory, the affective, and the spatial ambiences. The three contrasting student vignettes chosen (a la Al-Mahmood, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Thrift, 2006) were based on detailed thematic analysis of face-to-face in-depth interviews/conversations (each ranging from 1.5-2 hours each), as well as on photographic data and student reflections.

Affective encounters and spatial engagements

In the three vignettes that follow, I explore (dis)connections, (dis)locations, and (dis)mantlings, tracing passions, desires, disconcertments of being *no-where*, *in-between*, *in transit, in hope, in anticipation*. I consider how spatialities and materialities (per)form e-learning as they hold/disrupt and (dis)connect various boundaries of physical and digital spaces. I explore (dis)engagements in terms of private/public, presence/absence, visibility/invisibility, and isolation/connectivity (Burbules, 2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2006b; Enriquez, 2009) to show the multiplicities of technological effects that *affect* bodies and subjectivities as borders and boundaries shift. Indeed, "We live in a world of compartments and borders which may be more fluid and elastic, easier to cross than in the past, but they are out there all the same, impacting upon the minutiae of our daily life practices, identities and affiliations"(Newman, 2006, p. 183).

Vignette 1 ~ (Dis)Connections: Sink or swim …?
I introduce, Lillian, an international Chinese student in her early twenties studying and living in Australia. She is a softly spoken, poetically expressive international student who has majored in English Literature. The descriptions that follow show how she conceives and *'does'* boundaries as a way to focus her thinking and e-

learning within the privacy of her home. The focusing "white wall" is a welcome aspect for her. Hers is an experience of how boundaries function as focusing and concentrating (Figure 1).
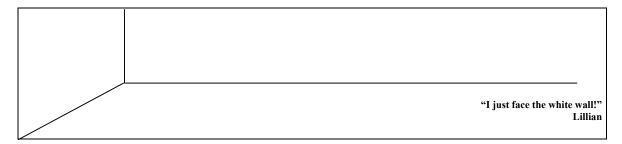

"I just face the white wall!"
Lillian

Figure 1. Connecting and Focusing

> I always studied in my room and always, my room is narrow, not narrow, my room is maybe 15 metres square …. and only a very simple room, just with a table, chair and a bed, something like, very simple and I put my table, for example, this is the room [draws this visually], and I only have a window there and my bed … and my table is at the corner of the wall because I thought that is good when I am working, I just face the white wall, not window, because … I like to look out of the window and not concentrate on my work.

The privacy of her home and its focusing aspect is productive for Lillian as she highlights her unease about taking her laptop to university to study in a public learning place as defocusing.

> …. sometimes I bring it [the laptop] to the campus … I'm that kind of person from my college time … I don't want to study in a public place. I mean, I don't know why. I just want to stay in my room and study in my room. So working in the public lab, I can't focus. I can't concentrate. I always feel other people they are waiting for the computer.

For Lillian, the online class is through her laptop that connects her with the lecturer as she says, "The classroom is only the laptop for me ― just the laptop".

> … I just feel there is … a line, a power line connecting me and Brian [the lecturer]. That's it. I sit at the other end of the line and he's sitting at the other end of the line. … I just check the mail box and if I found him [the lecturer online] [then] I copied and I saved every email from him …. because I think that's a kind of … learning material …

She is acutely aware of the "material politics" (Law & Mol, 2008) of how the Internet is changing how people experience and go about learning, saying:

> I feel all the communication is just … typing, and I click the Enter and Send, and that's a message. So I think computer[s] really [the] Internet and computer[s] really change the human world …. the behaviours and … peoples' thinking patterns … dramatically, totally, radically…

Typing, clicking and sending in the e-learning medium changes the sense of engagement; despite its efficiency, it creates a *feel of commercialism*. Here, we witness realities of efficiency coupled with realities of commercialisation abutting each other, as Lillian highlights below.

> I think that makes it more efficient …. The teacher can go out and leave and do his own business, but still he can teach and I'm also, I mean, efficient at doing this, and I type out and didn't go to the classroom and sit in [for] three hours … But also I think that makes peoples' interaction and communication less and less and so makes you feel other things are more commercial …

She further highlights the changes to the student experience, in spite of being potentially isolating and lonely, in developing independence and resilience commenting on a Judy Horacek cartoon of a lone person sitting outdoors under the stars sitting with her laptop looking at the screen of stars (as part of a warm up interview conversation activity).

> For me, this is firstly … loneliness. Yes? And this person is struggling by herself and without immediate help. The help is only through online and other help is as distant as the stars from other planets. So that's a kind of distant help that you kind of feel the touch the personal communication. So that's very lonely and the people should be strong enough so the person should encourage herself … should carry on and comfort herself. You're the only person in the planet … but I think other persons in other planets in other stars, they are also very lonely. Like this. So that's communication between lonely planets. So I think [the] Internet and computer just make every person like living in his own planet. Because you can get anything from the Internet, so that means [the] Internet is enough for you to get anything. Okay, that's adequate for you. So people needn't go outside to communicate with other people in this sense. But that also makes people isolated and lonely.

The sense of isolation is alleviated in the immediacy of synchronous online responses from her lecturer, when he is online, as she highlights.

> … I send my assignment to him [the lecturer] and he asks me to ask him whether he has corrected my assignment, okay so that's 2.00 in the morning and I say okay, I can send him an email on the day, so I send him the email and then quite surprisingly he returns [a reply] immediately, so I feel …. I feel oh, this man is very interesting … that is the first time I feel really quite personal, I mean not impersonal but just a person with characteristics, and then I just write back to him, I say "what a surprise, I didn't expect you [to be] still at the computer now", and he also sends me back an email and he said: "I am also surprised, a student needs to have sleep". Yeah, and I feel he is so lovely, and [at] that time I mean [it] shortened our distance so that is good.

Yet even more significantly for Lillian is the solace and company provided by her laptop computer, saying, "… [the] computer is just like a tool of learning but it is also like good company, when you are lonely … you just stay up very late, alone in your room and [the] computer is the only thing accompanying you".

So for Lillian, as a locally residing international student in Australia, the e-learning experience provides her with connection to her lecturer, and her bounded home helps to maintain her focus and concentration as well as her private personality preferences, albeit that she would be willing to participate in the online public space should her teacher ask it of her. Hers is a strong "isolated connectivity" (Enriquez, 2009).

> Yes. I will tell the teacher … and say, I'm a very self-conscious person and I will say I do feel there's always, I mean, how do you say that, I mean, I'm on the stage alone and so the teacher and other students will observe my behaviours on the stage. So if I didn't do well, I will feel very nervous because I will feel people notice that. Okay, so I hope I can feel safe in the surroundings and supported. So I think I do not say every person will speak out and bare their personalities and bare their feelings, but I will do that if the teacher asked me to do that. I want the teacher to understand me and then the teacher can interact with me and help me according to my introduction. That's it.

Lillian's study spaces have her studying skilfully, diligently, perseveringly, with dedication and commitment, mirroring the stereotype student behaviour of a newly arrived international ESL speaking student. Lillian uses the metaphor of water when she describes her experiences online. There is a sense of respect for the lecturer and that to learn is to practise skills, persevere, and "swim" so as, above all, "not sink". For Lillian, there is solace in the visibility of other peers and their struggles too. She is not alone. We see the perceived importance of the student-lecturer relationship in sustaining students.

> … my metaphor for [Bernie's subject] should be connected compared with [Barrie's subject]. In [Barrie's subject], it is just like I was swirling in a pool and I am struggling; I don't know how to swim … and then in [Bernie's subject] after [Barrie's subject] experience, I am a little bit more skillful about how to survive in the water but still sometimes [I] panic when there are waves, but sometimes when I look around and find the other peers, they are also struggling in the water, okay I feel not so nervous then, and I think, "okay, I won't die because this is only in a pool, and the teacher is just practising, making us practice, learn by practising, so I won't really die", but yes, still you can say some students, they swim very well and very fast, and I am just beginning to learn how to swim and … just not sink.

I ponder Lillian's evocative metaphor of water, and swimming and how an online lecturer might know that a student is drowning or unable to swim well or quickly enough in an online world? What cues can they pick up in a purely online medium? What anchors can they provide? And how are these translated online, across cultures, and geographic spaces, and especially for those students who may not have English as a first language?

Vignette 2 ~ (Dis)Locations: Encaged and exasperated …?

In this vignette, I discuss one of the haunting lingering impressions of a 23 year old 'digital native' (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b, 2009), a Chinese international student, Koko, interviewing her face-to-face in her room in her shared household. Her online experience was extremely isolating and her comments were tinged with exasperation (missed in the mere textual translations of her words). I've assembled interview comments to illustrate her metaphor. Online simply does *not do* here; nor does it address Koko's need for embodied engagement and the salience of lecturer and student physical presence (McWilliam & Taylor, 1998). Her words are hauntingly striking when she says:

> They just give you a computer in a cage, that's not enough. You always live with a computer, *it's not real*! They provide you with a computer in the cage, but the computer is just a box, the computer tells you [about] the blue sky, the green grass, the computer provides you with the picture of that, but *it's not real*! *It's not real*! So it's just like the lecturer through the online course, they give you the material, they answer your questions, but they do not solve the problem, so *it's not real* …" (original emphasis)

> I don't want to use the prison (laughter) because prison is a little bit serious, [it's] just like a cage. You can see all things, you can see, you can hear, you can find yourself … you're just like a tiger, which is in a cage, which lives in a cage; you can find all the beautiful sky; you want to go outside; you want to touch them with your hand, but at last you are just waiting for them [online lecturers] to give you something. And sometimes they won't give you enough things you really want. You have full energy, but you are living in a cage …

I'm reminded of Rilke's (1984, p. 25) poem, "The Panther", "His vision, from the constantly passing bars,/has grown so weary that it cannot hold anything else./ It seems to him there are a thousand bars;/and behind the bars, no world./ As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,/ the movement of his powerful soft strides/ is like a ritual dance around a center/ in which a mighty will stands paralyzed…". And yet for this online student, unlike Rilke's tormented panther, Koko's will *was* mobilised. She sought institutional places of libraries and wired learning centres to connect with others to sustain her in the e-subject and to excel at it, despite her exasperations. Koko seeks other actor-networks of humans, materials, and spaces. She finds these by relocating her online study by taking her laptop to the university library campus to be present with other university students to connect her with *real* people to find a way to live through the online experience and move beyond the encaged feeling she gets from the LMS (Learning Management System) space in her little room (Figure 2). The vibrant university library spaces and the flurry of noisy flexible library learning hubs which sustain her connection and reduce her sense of isolation become vital actors in sustaining her e-learning.

However, during library closure when she is at home, she resorts to Marty — a teddy bear — to reduce her isolation and the solitariness of doing the online subject, suggesting that he keeps her company when she's "studying all alone at night" — a surrogate companion of sorts perhaps, albeit non-human. This is not so different to Haraway's (2003, 2008) works on companion species where "becoming with" is "a practice of becoming worldly" (Haraway 2008: 3), albeit in Koko's case "*becoming with*" a teddy bear (an inanimate sensuous object).

In figure 2, I collage one of her rescue artefacts in the photographs. She asks me to take digital still images of her room as she places her teddy bear, Marty, in various positions around her bedroom/study amongst her other vital materials.

Figure 2. Marty with the Laptop!

I have mused over Marty, this teddy bear and what to do with him; I do not want to place him under erasure since he is so integral in Koko's account, for his mediating role is in anchoring her to a pseudo-human

companion when she studies alone online at night in a foreign city. And what of the other objects here – the flags on her wall, a map of the world and various other sustaining artefacts, mugs, laptop, and …? Perhaps Marty, helps *secure* her in the online learning world in which she felt "caged" more than I could have thought possible.

Vignette 3 ~ (Dis)Mantlings: (Sacred) Rituals …?
I highlight how e-learning and e-teaching replicate *formalised rituals* of *traditional* academe. In some e-learning spaces various lecturers and students enact positions of "being the *good* student" or "performing *the student*" role in response to a lecturer *performing a teacher role*. For some, partaking in online question-answer interactions is seen as ritualised *mechanical performances* of *going through the motions*.

I juxtapose Paul's various identity expressions and affective spatial encounters and impressions in the different e-learning spaces of private e-mail interactions with his lecturer and the public online subject forum with his peers and lecturer in Table 1.

Table 1. Juxtaposing email and LMS forum spaces

Emails — "I'm jumping through hoops!"

"I can't even remember his [lecturer's] name
I felt a bit like I was 18 years old
and back at university
and trying to guess the right things to say
and really having no idea what I was talking about
and what I was meant to be saying
and what would meet with the lecturer's approval.

It felt very much like a performance that I was involved in.

That I was having to send this weekly email
that would be judged as suitable or not suitable
and I felt often like
if I guessed the right answers
then I'll get a tick.
And, if I got a couple of responses back
in a theoretical, de-personalised way
that I thought were brusque,
it put me off the whole experience.

It felt like I was doing this
because I had to
and because I had to get a pass
to get to the thesis
but it wasn't actually particularly
helping me with anything.

It felt like I was jumping
through some hoops
because the university demanded it.
Yes, being a novice
and being in someone else's territory
that wasn't my own
and that, you know …
maybe I was a bit of a fraud by being there
because I was just desperately trying to work out what was
expected of me
and not really knowing.
It would have been better
to have more of the experience
of other students.

I was constantly trying to work out
what was going to be good enough
and how much I would have to do.
And I was getting back
these responses that were,
I know … as a teacher myself
I was aware of the lecturer of the subject
kind of reading through it at a hundred miles an hour
thinking,
"Oh, I better comment on four points,
this one, this one,
this one, that one.
Okay, I've said something to him
and sent it back."

You know, I felt like
I was performing for him
and he was doing the teacher role for me
of doing sort of the four responses per text back,
so there wasn't any sense of mentoring
or any sort of real guidance.

Forums — "I'm 'being held' somewhat!"

"Even where there was the forum,
it still felt like
I have to produce a certain amount of text,
get it there on the website,
make sure it's not less than everybody else's,
make sure it's reasonably coherent.
I didn't feel like
I was particularly interacting
by doing that;
I felt a bit like I was performing.

But the notes that we had
were I thought produced
by someone
who was mindful of communicating
in an accessible, human
sort of a manner
so that they talked through the issues
in a very engaging
and real
and conversational way …

I felt like
it was actually assisting me
and developing my own thinking
about my research.

There was first person pronouns used
and it was someone
talking to me
about my experience of research
and someone warning me,
"You might experience this,
you might experience that"…
And I got some very good email support
from the lecturer
and I also got
some very good telephone support from him.

And when you asked me about the forum
And who I was on it
I thought it was
a very interesting question.
The forum
was an interesting sort of thing
because I was writing to other people who were
presumably professionals
and postgraduate students
so, yeah, there was a bit of
"this is my professional environment."

And there was some
status and pride
to be protected
in talking about that.
Interesting.

I think I realise,
and I hadn't thought about this before,
but I guess what I was doing
in writing those forum entries
each time was being fairly
careful

Occasionally he would write back and say, "No, this is not, bold in capitals, what the text says". And I'd just think, "Stuff it, I don't care what the text says anyway I just want to get my thesis done", So … It felt detached and it felt somewhat authoritarian." Paul	to show that I was competent and articulate and thoughtful and that this was my domain that I was working in and I have quite a bit of expertise about this and you know, I'm a teacher and I'm a professional. So, yeah, there was that element of performance … and I felt that Bernie was quite respectful of our experience and knowledge ….. so nourishing is the word that comes to mind." Paul

It is perhaps paradoxical that despite the private individualised one-to-one email interactions between Paul and his lecturer — this only served to intensify his *connected-isolation* rather than connectedness. He was connected, yet isolated — the relationship via email seeming "formulaic", configuring him to play "the good student". Issues of authenticity and trust prevail for some in hypertext worlds (Bayne, 2005, 2006a, 2006b; Bayne & Land, 2000; Kreber, 2010; Land & Bayne, 2005a, 2005b, 2006, 2008).

This contrasts with suggestions that email provides a *hyper*-intensification of connection and intimacy — a "hyper-real", where relationships are intensified in the absence of-face-to-face interactions (Milne, 2003) to provide an intensified "presence-absence" (Enriquez, 2009). A continuum of impersonal to hyperpersonal in CMC is possible (Walther, 1996). Yet in the online public discussion forum, in the presence of other online students as well as the lecturer, Paul felt somewhat "held" whilst being *careful* to present more of his professional identity (rather than his student self). Paul's identity shaping and projecting is mediated through the medium type here — private email learning spaces versus public online LMS forums (further significant actors).

When asking Paul about his perception of the e-learning medium, his response extends his earlier comments. "I don't actually know that I have a sense of being in a space when I am in the virtual world. I don't really. … that I am working at the time? I find it hard to find an answer to that question I would have to say. I think I probably, I mean I think the computer for me is … yes I don't know. I don't know if I can answer that …". Put simply, there is no sense of place, because for Paul there is no sense of "holding the class" through the online lecturer's presence, or of a "relation with" the teacher, or invitation to "rest" in the online learning space. "I tend to feel that there is something that can be lacking in the online delivery that's very important in a … classroom and to do with the presence of the teacher", he says. The online class does not maintain a sense of "entering" a learning space, a notion used frequently by Paul, where there is a sense of boundary or threshold, of going into a learning space/place "to be held" and to be in an "energetic space". His words remind us of the rituals of entry, "And so I really like the idea of going into a classroom".

In describing his physical learning spaces, he says:

> Attached are a few thoughts on the sad corner of the house I refer to as my study. … it's not a pure study, it's also the way to the laundry and the way out to the back door and where the pet lizard is kept and where some of the kitchen stuff is kept, so it's just … it's off the kitchen …. It sits in the back room of my house which kind of doubles as a study ….

Paul commenting on the perception of the online subject says:

> … it was the over here, separated from everything else that is going on in my life and my work, and everything else, is this little nuisance that sits on the computer that has to be got through …"

Paul elaborates in an email exchange about his study:

> … The space in which I work is located at the back of the house. It is essentially a thoroughfare — the door behind the desk in the photo leads into the laundry. The space also opens onto the kitchen, the toilet and the back yard. It is, in a word, unsatisfactory — too much noise, constant traffic, no privacy and insufficient space, a product of too many people living in too small a house ….
>
> … It is quite ironic that I should bang on about the sacredness of learning space, when my own 'refuge' is so beleaguered — or maybe it's no coincidence at all …

Figure 3. Paul's sad corner of the house

Paul provides some very rich descriptions of his learning experiences and of his physical and digital learning worlds. The profound effect of his martial arts training and embodied experiences of ritual and respect have influenced his own teaching philosophy — expectations which he carries with him, as a student into the online class environment. However, the lack of an online student-teacher relationship for him, and the lack of rituals and embodied practices, renders the online learning experience as diminished and *lacking*. Paul connects or translates his martial arts views of the teacher-student relationship expectations to the online environment, but finds it significantly lacking, for there are no spaces to be "held", to be "contained", so the e-learning environment never reaches this ideal. His sense of being in a "place" is absent in the e-learning spaces. The contrast with his physical space seems to create this yearning perhaps for the ideal. His need is for embodied online relational teacher presence to create a *sacred learning-teaching place*. For Paul, the online space never becomes a learning *place*. Arguably, Paul remains feeling extremely isolated and alone during the online subjects. And reflecting on Paul's desire to be "held" and "contained" in a respectful, restful, relational way, I wonder how can we translate teacher presence in e-learning spaces such that they might become "sacred learning places"? From Paul's perspective, the impossibility of achieving this is one that concerns embodiment in its fullest sense, saying:

> … there is potentially some schizoid dynamic going on in partaking of the virtual world .... If I do go in there, it's, as I said, compartmentalising things, that I can sort of put a bit of my intellect and maybe a tiny amount of my emotion and my everything else in there, but I am consciously splitting off that part there and putting it there and holding a great deal of myself separate. … I believe the most effective teaching-learning interaction is one that engages the whole person — body, mind and spirit. And I don't know how that gets involved in a virtual process. Maybe it does, but I can't envisage it.

Desiring encounters

I have juxtaposed these vignettes to highlight the affective and spatial realms of participant pedagogical experiences (Zembylas, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c) and their (e-)learning impacts (Zembylas, 2007c; Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005). Through these vignettes, we glimpse a multitude of participant desires along with various nuanced subjectivities that emerge. This forms a 'pedagogy of desire' that mobilises the "creative, transgressive and pleasurable forces within teaching and learning environments" (Zembylas, 2007c, p. 331). This enables "a new view on affect in education as a *landscape of becoming*" (Zembylas, 2007c, p. 331, original emphasis). In these vignettes, participants, materials and spaces configure *radical* selves (Zembylas, 2007c, p. 331). Here we see that desire, subjectivity and pedagogy are relational – they are inextricably linked and co-shape the other. Zembylas (2007c, p. 338) affirms this highlighting that "Desire produces pedagogy as it produces subjects …. A pedagogy of desire is therefore not based on a notion of desire as being a state, position, or feeling towards teaching and learning practices, but it is a pedagogy of the subject and the relation between subjects and objects and artefacts".

The material embrace of the subject-object hybridity in the vignettes highlights the material politics of practices – the *politics of things* (Fenwick, 2010) – where people are not placed "above materials (as the creator or user) but among materials" (Sørenson's, 2009, p.2). Hybridity dismantles the boundaries of humans as set up "in opposition to things" (Dolwick, 2009: 35) to act "'on' things" (Dolwick, 2009, p. 35, original emphasis) to

consider how humans act "with, through, or in response" to things (Dolwick, 2009, p. 35). There is a vibrant materiality (Bennett, 2010) and vitality of objects (Knorr-Cetina, 1997; Pels, Hetherington & Vandenberghe, 2002; Turkle, 2007, 2008a, 2008b) and spaces that is highlighted in these vignettes. These all configure e-learning spaces as "*affectively charged places of learning*" (Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010, p. 336, original emphasis). We might then need to consider how and in what way we might make university e-learning spaces and designs "affectively malleable" (Leander, Phillips & Taylor, 2010, p. 341) to encourage *engaging* encounters for participant desires. Insights into these spatial engagements and affective encounters may well inform language design patterns (Goodyear, 2005; Goodyear & Retalis, 2010).

Encouraging encounters

How might we as universities, lecturers, and designers then ensure that all students have access to engaging and pleasurable e-learning experiences? This study highlights that e-learning has multiple enactments, and that not all students *connect* or *engage* (Prensky, 2005) in the same way in e-learning environments. What is striking in these vignettes is that despite student-centred learning mantras, there is centrality of the teacher/lecturer role and presence. This is not only pertinent for the two Chinese students, but also for the local Australian student. Standard ritual practices of traditional academe — when/if they are replicable online — can provide reassurance and sustenance to facilitate e-learning as a welcoming and familiar space (in an *e-classroom*). Every*thing* (from learning, to engagement, to first impressions online) is held in delicate balance — from the nuance and texture of a word to the timing of responses; everything is judged, interpreted and waited for by the students — indeed, *the human matters through the machine*.

Moving the student-teacher relationship to standardised commercial online LMS text-dominated platforms that attempt to replicate *traditional* university rituals can be problematic in that they can be (de)stabilising experiences. Through the LMS, the university inevitably becomes *(hyper)textualised*. We need to find creative ways to imbue e-learning 'environments' with the liveliness of space (Massey, 2005, p. 189) in creating more vibrant platforms that engage and entice students in terms of spatial encounters. For our educational designers, this might mean not only creating replicable traditional classroom spaces, in secure places of enclosure, but also to create opportunities for more exploratory and dynamic open spaces that move beyond current standardised LMS platform designs. How might we provide online environments that allow for public and private spaces, for *sacred* rituals of entry beyond passwords, towards open, inspiring and exploratory e-learning spaces? Indeed, these "less familiar and less stable environments" (Hannon, 2009: 428) of LMSs could provide new pedagogies and paradigm shifts (McLoughlin & Lee, 2008) that might risk encouraging radical transformations.

In addition, within the LMS spaces, how might we create opportunities for welcoming international students living in the host cities of the e-learning university, and indeed all students? We need to think about not only how we use the digital spaces, but also how we might integrate them with existing physical university spaces. Altogether, connectivity and engagement can be common mantras (and myths) that influence social justice and access issues in e-learning environments (Zembylas & Vrasidas, 2005; Vrasidas, Zembylas & Glass, 2009). This impels us to consider the complexities of spatialities and how they influence learning. *Ultimately, online and offline practices are mutually imbricated*, so we need ways to move beyond thinking of the e-learning medium in binary terms of a physical/digital divide so that we might engage online students with multiple university spaces. It may insightful to consider the language taxonomies that our online students use to describe their actual e-learning experiences of the online learning spaces and those that describe their ideal e-learning environment. For Paul, it was about "*entering* a space" and "going *in to* a space", and yet the waiting and visibility/exposure for Koko merely created for her a sense of "being watched", "being fed" and feeling encaged within the boundaries of the LMS. Yet, for Lillian, the e-learning space was a "sink or swim" space, and a place to learn with others, with all the connotations of fluidity, panic, survival and so on.

Tracing student experiences and analysing them can certainly (trans)form and contribute to how we might (re)think our educational design platforms and pedagogical practices. Altogether, we need to open up spaces for understanding *spatial and affective encounters and engagements based* on our students' experiences. Using the metaphors of these students, I have shown how different practices emerge — fragilities unfold — where material, spatial, and human *matter*ings are (per)formed — sacred spaces are sought, found, made, and lost. How might universities facilitate *holdings*, *swimmings*, and spaces for students *lost at sea* online — beyond online *lifelines*? For the fates of *those lost — online/offline, beyond lines* — seeking buoyancy — *"so as not to sink and learn to swim"* in Lillian's words — is what lingers in precarious balance.

Let us aim to move differently to embrace the *more than* — beyond human/material divides, and beyond

online/offline divides to embrace 'pedagogies of desire' that can transform (e-)learning.

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Author contact details:
Reem Al-Mahmood r.al-mahmood@pgrad.unimelb.edu.au / r.almahmood@latrobe.edu.au